

# *The Case for Compromise: Arnold Bennett's Imperial Palace*

JOHN M. MUNRO

ONE of the most frequently voiced charges against Arnold Bennett is that of commercial opportunism. Bennett, so the familiar story runs, wanted to write great literature, but in pursuing this goal found that the time and energy involved were incommensurate with the financial returns. Consequently, he gave up all attempts to secure an honourable place in the history of the English novel, contenting himself with providing the public with what it wanted, hoping to secure an honourable place in his bank manager's ledger instead. Bennett, so it is said, sold out to Mammon, compromising his artistic integrity in favour of commercial gain.

There is, of course, some substance to this charge, for throughout his career Bennett did reveal a willingness to compromise. As a young man he appears to have established the pattern his literary career would take, when he had contributions accepted almost simultaneously by *Tit Bits* and *The Yellow Book*. From that time until his death, Bennett seems to have shuffled uneasily between philistinism and aestheticism, endeavouring to satisfy readers who wished merely to be entertained, as well as those who demanded more substantial literary fare; striving to line his pockets by turning out novels of immediate, popular appeal, yet eager to win critical recognition as a great novelist; anxious to be regarded as public hero, yet hopeful of the more discriminating approval of literary historians. It is said that after the relatively cool reception of *The Old Wives' Tale*, probably Bennett's greatest novel, and almost certainly the one over which he laboured most mightily, he decided that art was all very well, but unless it sold it was a somewhat overrated commodity. Thereafter, he concentrated on giving his public what it wanted. If novels written

under these terms could also rank as significant literary achievements, so much the better.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, as his letters to Andre Gide reveal, though he could be a sensitive and acute critic, he was also a determined Sybarite. When Gide asked Bennett to visit him in France so they could talk literature together, Bennett declined, preferring the climate-controlled luxury of his yacht to the more heated discussions under the direction of Paul Desjardins at the Abbaye Pontigny. The result was another compromise: Bennett's literary views were made known to Gide through correspondence.<sup>2</sup>

In his novels, too, compromise is represented as being a tolerably honest solution to one's problems. In *Clayhanger*, for example, Edwin has early ambitions to become an architect; he is also aware of social injustice. As the years pass and he realizes that he will never be able to satisfy his architectural ambitions, he does not rail against Fate, but slips contentedly into his father's role as head of a small printing establishment, satisfying his thwarted aesthetic ambitions by adding to the business the sale of good books, and solacing his social conscience by paying his employees wages something above the usual rate. A willingness to compromise is also the most notable trait of Derry, 'the Card', one of Bennett's most characteristic creations, a cheerful philistine whose creative urge finds expression as an entrepreneur, a man who is neither poet nor man of action, but a compromise between the two.

In spite of the evidence, however, we should not jump to the conclusions that Bennett was a weak-willed opportunist, a man without a conscience, careless of his integrity as a writer, anxious only for financial gain. On the contrary Bennett seems to have felt that compromise was the only true way, a point of view which he was at pains to justify in his last novel, *Imperial Palace*.

The writing of this work was not undertaken lightly. As early as 1924 Bennett had gathered material for it on a conducted tour of the Savoy Hotel, and many of his observations were

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Walter Allen, *Arnold Bennett*, 1948.

<sup>2</sup> *Correspondence Andre Gide-Arnold Bennett: Vingt ans d'amitié littéraire, 1911-1931*, ed. Linette F. Brugmans, Geneva, 1965.

incorporated in the finished work.<sup>1</sup> In 1927 he confided in a letter to his nephew that he planned to write a 'big' book about hotels,<sup>2</sup> and, appropriately, thought out parts of it in the epical vastness of Westminster Abbey.<sup>3</sup> The novel was really begun, however, on 25 September 1929, at a time when Bennett was under considerable emotional and financial stress, and in failing health.<sup>4</sup> It is perhaps some indication of what the *Imperial Palace* meant to him when we recall that it was under these difficult circumstances the novel was written, being completed shortly before his death.

Unfortunately most critics seem to have felt that *Imperial Palace* was hardly worth the effort. Walter Allen has referred to it as a 'gigantic epic of dullness',<sup>5</sup> and even the more usually tolerant Lafourcade wonders whether 'the theme was worth so much labour, so much industry, so much talent'.<sup>6</sup> J. G. Hepburn, however, is more kindly disposed towards it, but even he seems to feel its quality falls short of that of the novels of the five towns.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, though so much in the novel seems to bear out Virginia Woolf's famous criticism of Bennett, that he was a novelist who paid too much attention 'to the fabric of things',<sup>8</sup> the *Imperial Palace* is considerably more than a sprawling documentary designed to give prestige to the catering trade. It is perhaps true that the novel's plot, concerning a spoilt rich girl's passion for the manager of a luxury hotel, and her eventual rejection in favour of a lower middle-class working girl, has a novelettish, fairy-tale quality about it; it may also be true the details of hotel management, which Bennett found so fascinating, do not appeal to most readers in quite the same way; and it is perhaps also true that the multitude of characters which Bennett created, whose commonplace lives and misfortunes provide a backdrop for the main triangular love affair, are largely lifeless or

<sup>1</sup> Arnold Bennett, *Journals*, ed. Frank Swinnerton, Melbourne, London, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1954, pp. 360-2.

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Bennett, *Letters to His Nephew*, 1936, p. 187.

<sup>3</sup> Reginald Pound, *Arnold Bennett*, 1953, p. 294.

<sup>4</sup> Arnold Bennett, *Journals*, p. 492.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Allen, *Arnold Bennett*, 1948, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> Georges Lafourcade, *Arnold Bennett: A Study*, 1939, p. 287.

<sup>7</sup> J. G. Hepburn, *The Art of Arnold Bennett*, Bloomington, Indiana, 1963, pp.

153-4.

<sup>8</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown', *The Common Reader*, 1925.

uninteresting. Nevertheless, though one would hesitate to call *Imperial Palace* a great novel, it is by no means insignificant, and when considered in relation to Bennett's life and his attitude to art, its importance is crucial.

In *Paris Nights* Bennett described a Swiss luxury hotel seen against the background of the Alps in these terms:

I saw it in the mass, rising in an immense, irregular rectangle out of a floor of snow and a background of pines and firs. Its details had vanished. What I saw was not a series of parts, but the whole hotel, as one organism and entity. Only its eight floors were indicated by illuminated windows, and behind these windows I seemed to have a mysterious sense of its lifts continually ascending and descending. The apparition was impressive, poetic, almost overwhelming. It was of a piece with the mountains. It had simplicity, serenity, grandeur. It was indisputedly and movingly beautiful.

Significantly, the luxury hotel achieves its grandeur through the control of one element by another. Though the luxury hotel is in itself aesthetically pleasing, it is nonetheless based on 'strictly utilitarian principles — and rightly':

Even when the grand hotel blossoms into rich ornamentation, the aim is not beauty, but the attracting of clients. And the practical conditions, the shackles of utility, in which the architecture of hotels has to evolve, are extremely severe and galling. In the end this will probably lead to a finer form of beauty than would otherwise have been achieved.

Hence, the grand hotel is the 'simple result of an unaffected human activity, which had endeavoured to achieve an honest utilitarian end, and while succeeding, had succeeded also in giving pleasure to a mind representative of the twenty-third century'.<sup>1</sup> For Bennett, the characteristic beauty of the luxury hotel arises from the necessity of making aesthetics serve utilitarian ends; it is a magnificent compromise between art and life.

What Bennett had to say about luxury hotels in general is reflected in his description of one hotel in particular, the Imperial Palace. Like all hotels it is a compromise between a home and a temporary lodging, an image of both fixity and permanence. It exudes an atmosphere of peace and tranquility, but this superficial serenity is the product of the unremitting toil of a great number of people, whose industry must be constantly supervised

<sup>1</sup> Arnold Bennett, *Paris Nights*, 1913, pp. 219-20.

and kept under control. In the luxury hotel no sin is more heinous than obtrusive behaviour, especially on the part of the employees. Nothing must be allowed to ruffle the surface calm. Thus, when an unfortunate incident occurs involving a 'misunderstanding' about a fur deposited in the ladies' cloakroom, which results in Miss Brury, the ground floor housekeeper having a fit of hysterics, she is immediately dismissed, although there was provocation enough to justify her behaviour.<sup>1</sup> In creating a scene, she had sinned against one of the cardinal rules of the hotel. Decorum, control, restraint, are essential to the smooth operation of the Imperial Palace, and those who work there must learn to adjust their personalities and private lives accordingly. Just as hotel architecture must conform to 'practical conditions, the shackles of utility', so must the employees of luxury hotels submit to similar restrictions.

The necessity of adjustment is similarly suggested in the action of the novel, for Evelyn Orcham's rejection of Gracie Savott in favour of Violet Powler is the narrative equivalent of hotel architecture having to submit to the 'shackles of utility'. Of the two women, Gracie is certainly the more striking, but her personality and behaviour are beyond control. Gracie is law unto no one but herself. When Evelyn first meets her, she has exhausted the pleasure to be derived from car-racing, and she is avid for new and more thrilling sensations. She is attracted to Evelyn, and persuades him to take her to the Smithfield meat market. There, amid the gore and slab-like carcasses, Gracie responds immediately to that 'rude, primeval, clean, tonic microcosm where work was fierce and impassioned', and moments later we learn what we have already suspected, that Gracie has 'loved with violence more than once, but never wisely' (p. 22). At a later stage in the novel she enthuses wildly over the atmosphere of the Prince of Wales's Feathers, a pub near Westminster Bridge, which she describes as 'rather a jolly place: strange, exotic, romantic' (p. 67) and later still, when she and Evelyn are enjoying their illicit love affair in Paris, she runs a whole gamut of moods, ignoring convention and observing only the dictates of her compulsive and highly idiosyncratic personality (pp. 463-73).

<sup>1</sup> Arnold Bennett, *Imperial Palace*, 1930, pp. 47-8. All subsequent references to *Imperial Palace* are to this edition.

Gracie, however, is not simply an unthinking hedonist, compulsively gathering her rosebuds where she may. On the contrary, she has a coherent, personal philosophy, which she explains to Evelyn during the intermission of a concert they attend together in Paris. It is based, she affirms, on Troward's theory of the 'divine creative mind', and then she continues:

If the divine creative mind is infinite, we are it. You and me and all those people there. And these chairs we are it. You and me, and all those people there. And these chairs and the lights from the chandelier. Everything. No getting away from it. You know, the electrons, whirling around. Of course they aren't the purest form of the divine mind, I mean the first original form. But some finer kind of electrons are — that our electrons are made of. Must be. And they're everywhere and they're all the same and all perfect and all working together, doing evolution. God isn't imperfect. If you try hard and keep on trying you realize them. I can realize them now and then for half a minute. Then I can't, and then I have to begin and try again. But that half minute!

As Evelyn listens to the music he too experiences the condition Gracie has described:

The whole vast concourse of material flesh in infinite gradations began to melt, to refine itself, to rarefy itself, into these spiritual electrons of which Gracie had spoken, glistening, scintillating, coruscating, as they whirled, immaterial at last, on their unfathomable errands in pursuance of the divine supreme plan. Individuality ceased; he was not he; Gracie was not she; nobody in the auditorium was anybody. All were merged into a single, impersonal, shining, shimmering integrity of primal mind. Evolution had reversed, and at incredible speed swung back through aeons into the causal eternity before the World moved upon the waters and before even the waters were.

But then the trio ends, and Time resumes. 'Material flesh was formed,' and 'individualities separated themselves' (pp. 395-7).

In Evelyn's eyes Gracie's philosophy is dangerous, and perhaps destructive, for in not adapting to the circumstances of conventional existence, she is working against progress. Under her influence evolution reverses at 'incredible speed', back to a time 'before the Word moved upon the waters, and before even the waters were' (p. 397). Her quest is towards the still point at the centre of the whirlpool: 'Be still,' she insists, quoting from the Psalms (73), an admonition which puzzles Gracie's father, whose characteristic philosophy of 'dog eat dog', the survival of the

fittest, is described in chapter xxiv. It puzzles Evelyn too, which is hardly surprising, for both he and Mr Savott believe in progress. The hotel merger, which is one of Evelyn's major ambitions, is progress, and his job is to push evolution forward, not backward (p. 154). Gracie's 'half minute' of eternity may be intoxicating; her visionary ecstasy may even be essential to the truly great artist — Gracie does in fact become a writer whose genius lies in the perceptive illumination of isolated impressions (pp. 428–9) — but how is this related to everyday experience? Bennett does not answer this question, but in having Evelyn reject Gracie in favour of Violet, he implies that Gracie's philosophy is to say the least, inadequate.

Gracie is a woman who, to quote from Yeats's essay, 'The Autumn of the Body' (1898), engages in an 'ever more arduous search for an almost disembodied ecstasy'.<sup>1</sup> But just as Yeats came to recognize that this kind of activity led to loss of 'delight in the whole man — blood, imagination, intellect running together', as he noted in 'Discoveries' (1906),<sup>2</sup> Bennett also realized. Yeats's remedy was to posit as an ideal the 'mingling of contraries', but, as we have seen, Bennett's impulse was to seek not reconciliation but compromise. Consequently, though Violet is in some respects a person in whom the antinomies of experience are united, her special harmony is the result of restraint and control.

Evelyn 'discovers' her working in the laundry, where she is a humane and capable supervisor. Good at her work, she also has time for amateur dramatics; she has 'sturdy ankles, largish feet like those of a classical sculpture' and muscular shoulders. Yet, when transplanted to the more sophisticated world of the hotel, she uses make-up with skill, dresses with taste, and is altogether feminine; her accent is, says Bennett, neither West End nor East End (p. 61). Later, aware of her increasing interest in Evelyn, and having received some encouragement from him, she refuses to be carried away and manages to avoid neglecting her work. Though woman enough to indulge herself in her newly-found happiness, she is still aware of the fact that she is an employee of the Imperial Hotel:

<sup>1</sup> W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions*, 19, p. 194.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 266.

'Not tonight,' she said to the desk. 'Tomorrow morning early. I really couldn't tonight. Shall I ever be able to take my things off and get into bed? I'm done in for ever. And I shall never have a moment's peace again.' But she was saturated with a hardly tolerable bliss. Through the terrifying felicity shot the thought: 'I must find time to go up to Shaftesbury Avenue — tomorrow. Something's bound to want altering, and you never know how long they'll take over it.' (pp. 608-9)

Thus, in spite of certain similarities, Violet differs from Yeats's ideal in precisely the same way Byzantium differs from the luxury hotel. Whereas Yeats had insisted on a kind of perfection where, to quote from his poem 'Among School Children', the body 'is not bruised to pleasure soul, / Nor beauty born out of its own despair, / Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil,' Violet's virtue rests on the fact that she is able to subdue the woman in her so as to fulfil her professional responsibilities. She is still mindful of 'the shackles of utility'.<sup>1</sup>

Violet is undoubtedly the thematic centre of the novel, but it is Evelyn around whom the narrative revolves. Evelyn is the focus of our attention, and it is in his development that we are primarily interested. When we meet him he is a taciturn, somewhat desiccated image of systematic perfection. He is forbidding, not much given to the exchange of pleasantries, ruthless in his way, a little inhuman in his manifest dedication to the efficient management of his hotel. When an accident occurs, which jars the smooth functioning of his magnificent, well-oiled machine, such as the incident involving Miss Brury and the fur, he reacts to the situation with the dispassionateness of a well-trained mechanic, simply replacing the malfunctioning part. 'The panjandrum,' as Evelyn's employees call him, is respected; he inspires devotion, but hardly affection. Previously married to an attractive but neurotic wife, he had conducted himself with dignity and restraint during their short time together, but had not, one feels, displayed much tenderness. He is a good employer, certainly humane, but aloof. Against this seemingly impregnable fortress of decorum and efficiency Gracie attacks with all the considerable forces at

<sup>1</sup> This characteristic is further emphasized at the end of the novel when Violet opposes Evelyn's plan to take over a Queen Anne house near the hotel and transform it into offices. 'I do *like* the house,' she says to Evelyn, 'but it isn't *offices*,' the house is aesthetically pleasing, but quite unsuited to the purpose which Evelyn proposes for it.

her command, overwhelms Evelyn briefly, but is eventually defeated. Gracie's enthusiastic immoderation may hold enchantment for a time — and she does succeed in arousing Evelyn's long-dormant emotions — but her charms are valuable only for their own sake.

Unlike Violet, whose attractiveness has the utilitarian effect of calming people's nerves and inspiring affection, which ensures the smooth functioning of the hotel, the effect of Gracie is quite otherwise. With her Evelyn experiences frustration and irritability, and on her account he is unable to pursue his business interests as effectively as he might, even ignoring them completely for a time. While Evelyn and Gracie are together in Paris, she is able to give herself up wholly to the pleasures of the moment, careless of the passage of time and the restraints of conventional society. For a brief moment Evelyn too escapes from the world, and 'merges into a single, impersonal, shining, shimmering integrity of primal mind', but inevitably 'time resumes', duty calls, and he returns to London to resume his role of hotel manager once more.

It is characteristic that the campaign for the repeal of the licensing laws should be the means of securing his return. Evelyn looks upon this reform not as an encouragement to intemperance but as a necessary step in providing more efficient service in the catering business (pp. 328-9). He refuses to ponder the problem whether or not the repeal is morally justifiable, just as he refuses to pass judgement on the ethical justification of luxury hotels. The question whether the luxury hotel is the 'lackey of capitalism, catering to the parasitism and corruption of the modern aristocracy of wealth' is left unanswered. Evelyn 'didn't know. He couldn't decide. He knew merely that he was going straight on,' consoling himself with the notion that 'there's a lot of things in this world you'll never get the hang of. And only idiots try' (p. 630).

In short, Evelyn's attitude to life is conditioned by his belief that the mysteries of the universe are impenetrable, and rather than attempt to solve them, one should simply carry on, performing the duties relevant to one's place in society as effectively as one can. For better or for worse, one is judged in terms of one's usefulness in catering to the tastes and demands of the

society in which one lives. Adaptation to environment is the key to success. Just as Darwin in his *Origin of Species* had affirmed that survival is granted only to those organisms which are able to come to terms with the circumstances in which they are forced to live, Bennett in *Imperial Palace* propounds a similar view. Furthermore, just as Darwin deduced that this kind of natural selection must inevitably bring about the 'improvement' of organisms, improvement which, he added, was always in relation to the conditions of life, so Bennett also believes: consider his description of the grand hotel in *Paris Nights*. Evelyn, a living organism who has successfully adjusted to his environment, is thus an important agent in the evolutionary process.

The theory of evolution has considerable relevance not only to *Imperial Palace*, but to Bennett's literary career as well. In 1897, Bennett noted in his *Journals* that:

The novelist of contemporary manners needs to be saturated with a sense of the picturesque in modern things. Walking down Edith Grove this afternoon I observed the vague, mysterious beauty of the vista of houses and bare trees melting imperceptibly into a distance of grey fog. And then, in King's Road, the figures of tradesmen at shop doors, or children romping or stealing along mournfully, of men and women each totally different from every other and all serious, wrapt up in their own thoughts and ends — these seemed curiously strange and novel and wonderful. Every sense, even the commonest, is wonderful, if only one can detach oneself, casting off all memory of use and custom, and behold it (as it were) for the first time, in its right authentic colours; without making comparisons. The novelist should cherish and burnish this faculty of seeing crudely, simply, artlessly, ignorantly; of seeing like a baby or a lunatic, who lives each moment by itself and tarnishes the present by no remembrance of the past.

That is to say, it is the contemporary writer's business to write impressionist novels like Gracie's.

Two years later, however, Bennett's conception of the novelist's task had changed, for he notes in his *Journals* for 1899 that his 'desire is to depict the deeper meaning beauty while abiding by the envelope of facts'. In other words, he now seems to feel that it is insufficient for the novelist to project a highly individualized, personal vision of reality — to see like 'a baby or a lunatic' — he must also take into consideration the 'facts', the outward circumstances of reality. By implication it appears that Bennett has changed his views as to the general status and

function of the artist. The artist, he seems to be saying, is not the isolated visionary surveying mankind from the seclusion of an ivory tower; he is a man speaking to men, living in society, and talking about familiar things which men will readily understand. He must come to terms with his environment, and write books which will appeal to the reading public as a whole. For the reader to ask whether literature written under such circumstances is likely to be noble or edifying is, in terms of the theory of evolution, as irrelevant as the biologist enquiring whether a particular organism is aesthetically pleasing. According to Bennett, the question one should ask of literature, is whether it is adapted to its environment, for only under such circumstances is it likely to survive. Furthermore, not only does adaptation imply survival. As Bennett's description of the luxury hotel in *Paris Nights* suggests, it is also a condition out of which true beauty is likely to evolve. Gracie provides enchantment for a time, but it is Violet, attractive in her own right, but also useful in terms of the society in which she lives, whose beauty is the more enduring and ultimately, therefore, more profound.

The necessity, indeed the nobility, of compromise is also one of the major themes of Bennett's handbook for writers, *The Author's Craft* (1914). In discussing the proper role of the artist in relation to his public he considers the whole question of popularity, and asks:

Ought [the writer] to limit himself to a mere desire for popularity, or ought he actually to do something, or to refrain from doing something, to the special end of obtaining popularity? Ought he to say: 'I shall write exactly what and how I like, without any regard for the public; I shall consider nothing but my own individuality and powers; I shall be guided solely by my own personal conception of what the public ought to like'? Or ought he to say: 'Let me examine this public, and let me see whether some compromise between us is not possible'?<sup>1</sup>

The answer Bennett gives is, of course, that the writer should seek a compromise: 'An artist who demands appreciation from the public on his own terms, and on none but his own terms, is either a god or a conceited and impractical fool' . . . 'There are two sides to every bargain, including the artistic. The most fertile and the most powerful artists are the readiest to recognize this,

<sup>1</sup> Arnold Bennett, *The Author's Craft*, p. 108.

because their sense of proportion, which is the sense of order, is well developed.' Consequently, 'the sagacious artist, while respecting himself, will respect the idiosyncrasies of his public,' and will reveal that 'mere cleverness of adaptability which most first-class artists have exhibited'.<sup>1</sup>

Adaptability, the ability to compromise with the world, is the lesson of *Imperial Palace*; it is also the guiding principle of Bennett's career as a novelist. It is unlikely that such an aesthetic credo will appeal to many modern readers, and certainly, accustomed as we are to the prevailing Romantic notion of the artist as outsider, the isolated visionary shouting his message from the top of Parnassus, Bennett's idea of the novelist's role seems outmoded, ignoble or eccentric. Nevertheless, there are signs that his view may yet become popular.

Writing in a recent issue of the *ADE Bulletin*, a journal published by the American Association of Departments of English, Professor Bruce Harkness warned that the public will demand an increasingly larger share in the administration of American colleges and universities, and will become increasingly impatient with the ivory tower mentality of many university professors, demanding that they be held accountable for their behaviour when it appears to be at variance with what the public considers to be its best interests.<sup>2</sup> If, indeed, this is to be the pattern of the future, Bennett's philosophy of compromise may yet find more sympathetic ears, and *Imperial Palace* might even become required reading for all American university teachers, replacing such popular, liberal gospels of non-conformism as J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and John Updike's *Rabbit Run*. After all, as Bennett himself said, '“the earth is the earth, and the world the world, and men men”', and we have to make the best of it'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112-14.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Harkness, 'The Chairman and the Dean', *ADE Bulletin*, 19, October 1968, 13-23.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Bennett, *The Author's Craft*, p. 112.