Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve

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ONE of the many disputes, public, private, or entirely personal, from which W. B. Yeats made his poetry was that with Thomas Mann. Mann had written, "In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms"; and Yeats attached the remark to the poem he wrote in reply:

> How can I, that girl standing there,
> My attention fix
> On Roman or on Russian
> Or on Spanish politics?

The poem has received little comment: it needs no exegesis; and when comment has been made, it has been more to do with the poet as lascivious old man than about the poem as argument. But the argument is important, especially to our reading of literature from newly independent — though often of course historically enormously old — countries. Mann's dictum is more often heard, especially in those parts of the world such as North America where the social sciences proliferate, each intent on using literature as evidence of something else. Such a use, while it may help to elevate the social sciences, diminishes literature — all literature, not just the poem, play or novel so used; so that when such critics write of Chinua Achebe's West African novels as great, we are beggared of language with which to describe Joseph Conrad's. Or if Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* is thought of as simply another blow struck on behalf of political man, our attention is distracted from its organisation as a novel, the sensibility that informs it, and the moral intelligence that controls that sensibility.

It is a short novel, so we read it quickly. Ah, yes, we say, if we are inattentive or social scientists, the novel is about the destruction of the traditional way of life in an Indian village by a tannery. *Ergo*: traditional rural values, which to minds still reared on what they imagine Rousseau wrote, are destroyed by those of industrial capitalism. Industrial capitalism, being western in its origins, is white; thus the novel is about the white man's exploitation of the non-white. At this point, the novel having served its function as evidence of the coming revolution, rhetoric takes command.

But to ask what the novel is about is a good place to begin; for we are then talking of the story, and our concern is thus with the novel as literature. An Indian peasant woman, plain but intelligent, appears as a child, marries, bears children, grows old, and prepares for death. In such a simple story, the plot — the causality that articulates the story — is provided by nature itself. She marries a poor man because that is usually the fate of ill-favoured women who are themselves poor. She bears children because that is the fate of being a woman; she grows old because that is the fate of being human. Life flourishes and dies, flourishes and dies; change is the only absolute. This fact is neither shallow nor profound, but simply a fact. It is also the condition in which qualities acquire meaning.

Once we are aware of this fact: that life is circular, not linear, we are in a position to understand the organisation of the novel. The novel does not begin with the narrator's childhood, despite our summary of the story as though it did. It begins with Ruckmani, the narrator, as an old woman recalling during the day the experiences of night:

> Sometimes at night I think that my husband is with me again, coming *gently* through the mists, and we are *tranquil* together. Then morning comes, the wavering grey turns to gold, there is a stirring within me as the sleepers awake, and he *softly* departs. (p. 7; my italics).

The emphasis is on time; and as we read on we notice the emphasis is sustained. Eighteen of the novel's thirty chapters contain in their first sentence a reference to time, to days, nights, years, seasons, to the festivals that mark the seasons. In the first sentence of each of the other twelve chapters, there is a reference to journeys; which is to say, to movement in time. This is not evidence of forgetfulness or of an impoverished imagination, but of the author's constancy of concern which our summary of the story indicates, and which the novel's last page confirms. Ruckmani returns, alone, to the family which, on the first page, stirs her to wakefulness.

But something more is going on in the first paragraph; it can be defined by our attending to the italicised adverbs of manner. "Gently," "tranquil," "softly": in terms of organisation they are being used to establish both mood and character. The narrator is speaking of the dawn, a time of calm, when "The morning steals upon the night, Melting the darkness." The narrator is also an old woman, now most alive when asleep with the memory of her dead husband; to whom day means the time when others awake. In retrospect, the description is seemly: it conforms not only to our imaginings, if we are young, and to our recollections, if we are old, but is also justified by the narrator's experience as it is explored in the novel. Yet if we carefully read the last page to which the first acts as postscript, we find this:

> There was a silence, I struggled to say what had to be said.
> 'Do not talk about it,' he said *tenderly*, 'unless you must.'
> 'It was a *gentle* passing,' I said. 'I will tell you later.'

The narrator as an old woman is trying to tell her son, to whose care she has returned, of the manner of his father's death. As readers, we know that he died in the rain on a muddy bank after doing some of the lowliest work possible, picking stones in a quarry, to which poverty has driven both him and his wife. In social terms his death

was wretched; but in personal terms, it was as he had lived, gentle. The author also ascribes this quality to his son, who answered "tenderly"; and hearing the echo, we are made aware that from what we have called the fact, the condition of life, a quality has acquired meaning: the son has inherited his father's gentleness. Or to express it more abstractly, environment — which is the matrix in which the protagonists live their drama — is no more powerful than heredity. Thus, like the first, the second paragraph of the first page acquires new meaning:

> Puli is with me because I tempted him, out of my desperation I lured him away from his soil to mine. Yet I have no fears now: what is done is done, there can be no repining.

When we first read this, we are lulled into a state of acquiescence: *c'est la vie* . . . The commonplace, "what is done is done" augurs a facile fatalism of the kind, for instance, that we find in Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*: man is born, suffers, and dies. But when we have read the novel's last page, we realise that man also lives, and can live well, despite the odds of circumstance; and this is a cause for celebration, as much as circumstance is for desperation. There can be "no repining" because there is no need for it.

What Markandaya, then, is forcing us to do is to contemplate the opposites: environment and heredity, for instance; or to look at the same information from opposite viewpoints. This accounts for the shape of her novel. Since Thomas Mann's time the habit has been called irony, a "looking-both-ways" as he called it; but it is of course at the heart of German, Greek and Hindu philosophy, any Idealist philosophy in fact. For the Materialist, one lives — for the State, the Future, or the Welfare of the World; and one can live efficiently or inefficiently. The State, the Future, or the World will judge. The idea of living well can be entertained only by the Idealist, who, seeing external reality before his eyes, can yet say it does not determine his values, though it may refine, sustain, con-

firm or confound them. Truth and goodness, like beauty are in the eye of the beholder.

An understanding of this is essential to our appreciation of *Nectar in a Sieve.* Without it we may respond, but we will not understand the nature of our response, to do which is the task of the literary critic. When, for instance, we first read the third paragraph, we are shocked: "But I am comforted most when I look at his hands. He has no fingers, only stubs. . . ." Is this not an example of that complacency usually described, out of a profound ignorance, or a careful editing, of history, as bourgeois? Here is an old woman finding comfort at the sight of a small boy because he has no hands! Such callousness leaves us dry-mouthed. Nor does what follow mute our shock:

> . . . since what has been taken can never be given back, but they are clean and sound. Where the sores were, there is now pink puckered flesh; his limbs are untouched. Kenny and Selvam between them have kept my promise to him.

There is not even an adjective to persuade us to suspend judgement; while the commonplace, "What has been taken can never be given back," angers us because again it displays that easy acquiescence to what is called Fate. Not till much later do we realise that Puli, having suffered from leprosy, is indeed lucky to have at least "stubs" left. He is not dead, or even hopelessly crippled, only because he, out of *his* desperation, allowed Ruckmani, out of hers, to tempt him. His injuries, though still a cause for sorrow, are also a cause for joy, in the same way that the divinity of the sacrificial god is established only through his sacrifice, or that the wisdom of Socrates was confirmed only in the manner of his death. This kind of irony acquires its apotheosis when Ruckmani and Nathan, her husband, meet Puli for the first time. They are destitute strangers in the town Puli knows as only a scavenger can: " 'Lead on,' Nathan said. 'We are in your hands.' " Thus, we are moved via paronomasia into metaphor, a quality that Ruckmani's much earlier mention of "soil" now shares.

Puli's soil is barren, whereas hers is not. Puli, as she says, "the child I clung to who was not mine, and he no longer a child," having kept his promise to help her and her husband, is alive and well because her actual son, Selvam, and his friend, Kenny, a doctor, have kept her promise to Puli. Thus not only are qualities like gentleness inherited, but honour too; or, in the poet William Empson's memorable line, they have learnt "a style from a despair."

The narrator is aware of this; Kenny, the white doctor, denies it: "There is no grandeur in want — or in endurance." (p. 115) He elaborates on it when speaking to her:

> 'Acquiescent imbeciles,' he said scornfully, 'do you think spiritual grace comes from being in want, or from suffering? What thoughts have you when your belly is empty or your body sick? Tell me they are noble ones and I will call you a liar.'
>
> 'Yet our priests fast, and inflict on themselves severe punishments, and we are taught to bear our sorrows in silence, and all this so that the soul may be cleansed.'
>
> He struck his forehead. 'My God!' he cried. 'I do not understand you. I never will. Go, before I too am entangled in your philosophies.' (p. 116)

This would appear to be the voice of impatient, scientific enlightenment condemning the blind obscurantism of a faith that demeans. It would also seem to preclude a dialogue between the two beliefs; certainly Ruckmani's attempt at reply is cut short and she is finally told to go. But as readers, we are aware of an irony here, for the life of suffering which the doctor condemns is the one he has himself chosen. By rejecting, for whatever reasons, the comforts of practising medicine in the town for the rigours of rural doctoring, he announces himself as already entangled in the philosophies he scorns. To express the irony in more traditional terms, we see again the ancient conflict between Vishnu, the conservative principle of the universe, the preserver of values, and Siva, the destroying, but at the same time the generative principle. We are allowed this insight because, as readers, we share the author's

Brahminic position. From the careful placing, we are able to create the pattern.

It is subtle. As we have said, the story is about time, which means change; but as the narrator tells us, this in itself is not new:

> Change I had known before, and it had been gradual. My father had been a headman once, a person of consequence in our village: I had lived to see him relinquish this importance, but the alteration was so slow that we hardly knew when it came. I had seen both my parents sink into old age and death, and here too there was no violence. (p. 29)

Such change partakes of the inevitability, but gradual inevitability of the seasons; and this abiding quality of change is sustained in the novel through the comparison, which acts metaphorically:

> While the sun shines on you and the fields are green and beautiful to the eye, and your husband sees beauty in you which no one has seen before, and you have a good store of grain laid away for hard times, a roof over you and a sweet stirring in your body, what more can a woman ask for? (p. 12)

Later, in a barren year which has seen two of her sons die, Ruckmani expresses her doubts to Nathan about the family's ability even to harvest a good crop:

> 'You will see,' he said with confidence. 'We will find our strength. One look at the swelling grain will be enough to renew our vigour.'
>
> Indeed, it did our hearts good to see the paddy ripen. We watched it as a dog watches a bone, jealously, lest it be snatched away; or as a mother her child, with pride and affection. And most of all with fear. (p. 97)

The narrator is using the circumstances of experience as the source of her metaphor; and for her it remains a metaphor. The object is more important than the thing with which it is compared. The crop is more important than the child, for instance. Though it would seem to those who buy their food in a store that the land and its crops are the servants of men, to those who farm, it is they who serve the land: "The sowing of seed disciplines the body, and

the sprouting of the seed uplifts the spirit . . ." (p. 107). Mother and child are the crop's servants, as are the dog and its bone of a dead beast; for without the crop's good favour none will be fed. Thus the wholeness of the interdependent world of the narrator's experience is established. As readers, we can observe the reality of language mirror this other ordered hierarchical experience; for if the metaphor lived too abundantly, drawing attention to itself, it would devour, unripe, the object it is meant to serve. Thus the author has to maintain a balance between the character of her narrator and the expectations of the reader. She does this as we have seen by allowing language to become metaphorical, but this is only possible because she establishes in all their detail those circumstances from which the narrator's metaphors are drawn. Thus, as well as children that inherit their parents' fruitful gentleness, there are those barren years when first Ruckmani and then her daughter fail to conceive. A second way in which this balance is maintained is through metaphor becoming symbol, which, like the novel's irony, we can appreciate only after we have completed our reading. To return to the first page again, we read, "One by one they have come out into the early morning sunshine, my son, my daughter, and Puli." In terms of experience this is what has happened: night has departed, the family awakes. Metaphorically, the sunshine of the day brings the warmth of hope. Symbolically, the children follow their parents as day follows night. The seasons, which are the condition of the narrator's experience, become the determinant of the reader's response. The violence of social change is matched by the seasonal.

But the author creates a still closer dependence; for the more violent the seasons, the faster comes social change. When harvests are bad, from flood or drought, rural families can the more easily and ruthlessly be driven to work in a tannery. This done, the owners of the tannery can the more readily buy up the land that peasant farmers have

been forced to leave, confirming its barrenness in the concrete that they spread over it. The hides on which it depends for its continuing bitter success now belong to human beings. All of this the author implies in language at once precise and metaphorical.

Yet if the tannery, traditional Indian symbol of social baseness, is also the symbol of twentieth century industrial rapacity, the hospital, "spruce and white," is the symbol of its piety. Its existence is justified not by historical accuracy — which is the concern of the historian — but by moral insight: "not only money has built it but men's hopes and pity." (p. 7) The author's conviction appears to be that where there is hope, such as Kenny's, there is also money; and, too, where there is money, there can also be hope; for without money, men will die. Consequently we recognise the reason for so much emphasis in the novel on how much things and services cost, are worth, and will fetch if sold. By asserting this through such detail, the author rejects the argument of primitive mystics who expect the East to turn stone into bread only so that its death should live up to their expectations. The result of such a conviction, comparable with Defoe's in *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *Moll Flanders,* is that the novel's Indian village world is firm throughout:

> . . . once or twice when I saw the thickness of the
> pumpkin vines I wondered nervously what might lie
> concealed there; and then I would take up knife
> and shovel to clear away the tangle; but when I
> drew near and saw the broad glossy leaves and curling
> green tendrils I could not bring myself to do it;
> and now I am glad I did not, for that same vine
> yielded to me richly, pumpkin after pumpkin of a
> size and colour that I never saw elsewhere. (p. 20)

But here again where the details are most precise, the language assumes another dimension; for the cause of Ruckmani's nervousness is a snake that hid beneath the vines until her husband killed it. It is entirely credible that snakes should prefer the warm damp shady ground that also produces the best pumpkins; this is an observed

fact of nature, and its observation helps establish the narrator as a believable peasant, as does the fact that she should fear the snake and her husband kill it, despite its sacred significance. But just as pumpkins are later referred to as "smooth-skinned . . . round and fleshed like young women," so the snake's ancient significance, the result of its secret dangerous ways, becomes attached to people that threaten and events that are cruel. It fulfills its role of symbol, but it is also a necessary evil; and evil is sometimes the product of love and always the companion of happiness. The two aspects of existence, as the author sees it, exist side by side throughout the novel, the immediately apparent mood of which is sombre while the fortitude with which Ruckmani and her family face life's cruelty — the cause of this sombreness — establishes the deeper mood.

The success of a novel of this kind — one employing an Idealist philosophy and shaped by its demands — depends on its plausibility. The plausibility of *Nectar in a Sieve,* being told in the first person, depends on characterisation. First person narration is always prone to incredibility because the narrator's point of view, uncorrected by any other, tends to prejudice. By making her a peasant, Markandaya goes some way to guarding against this: however magnanimous we are, we condescend, and in condescending, propose another point of view. Because the narrator is a peasant, we expect her commonplaces; but because she is literate, we accept that elucidation of the experience from which such commonplaces are distilled. But because of the novel's shape, the placing of comments, such as Kenny's, the language that grows from metaphor to symbol, we are aware of the author's presence. And because the ideas with which she is dealing are profound and are explored in a novel that appears disguised as simple, we recognise that presence as an intelligent and sophisticated one. The tension between author and narrator that is thereby set up is one of the novel's main delights.

NOTE

[1]Kamala Markandaya, *Nectar in a Sieve* (New York: John Day, 1954; rpt. New York: Signet, n.d.). Subsequent references to this edition appear in the text.

ARIEL: CANADIAN ISSUE

It has so far been the editorial policy of ARIEL to devote at least one number per year, usually the third number, to a special area of literature or to a special author. It would therefore seem appropriate this year to devote Volume 4, Number 3 (to be published in July 1973) to Canadian literature. Already a number of distinguished Canadian critics have promised to submit articles for this number. Since we should like this critical survey to be as comprehensive as possible we invite articles for consideration on Canadian literature — even at the risk of over-subscription.

We invite also poems for consideration for this special issue which will contain an extra poetry section.

The deadline for submission is 1st May, 1973.