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EXIT EVERYBODY:

THE NOVELS OF IVY COMPTON-BURNETT

TO ATTEMPT SOME ESTIMATE of the limits and achievements of Ivy Compton-Burnett's work would now seem to be both possible and desirable. The evidence for judgment is plentiful, and Miss Compton-Burnett, with some sixteen novels in or out of print, must stand or fall by what she has already done. At the same time, and in spite of this quantity of literature, she is a relatively unknown figure in American critical circles and has not even attained the small degree of recognition so recently accorded to Henry Green. This paper will attempt to glance at the principal characteristics of Ivy Compton-Burnett's work and to introduce it to the interested reader. There would seem to be little point in arbitrarily selecting any one novel for intensive and detailed analysis, when to most readers on this continent the author is barely a name and the novels an unknown quantity.

Ivy Compton-Burnett, writing over approximately half a century, has contributed certain notable innovations to the English novel. She has not, it is true, written a great novel, and she has certainly not made any sure place for herself on the English survey courses of American universities. She has, however, taken to its logical conclusion the twentieth-century attempt to write a *novel without an author*, and she has explored and illustrated as thoroughly as possible the ugly side of family life.¹

In her experiment with point of view, Miss Compton-Burnett has demonstrated that when author omniscience or author participation in any form is eliminated, when, in fact, the novel becomes an unbroken dialogue, then it loses both realism and dimension. It becomes a drama without a stage and without players, written by a playwright who has never seen a play. Joseph Warren Beach, in his observations on twentieth-century literature, has pointed out that Henry James was the innovator of intensive analysis of character psychology and motivation. James's own work is distinguished by these elaborations of thought or action or feeling, by the microscopic exploration of every aspect of each decision: "The problem of the

moment is often a very subtle one, and the author's imagination dwells upon it broodingly so as not to lose one shade of what it means to the character."² In Miss Compton-Burnett's fiction this part of the narrative is missing completely. No one has gone further towards eliminating all those aspects of the novel that induce perspective and proportion. There is virtually no description of people or atmosphere and certainly none of places, times, setting, dress, or any of those peripheral matters which help explain why people are as they are in fiction. The effect of all this is that the characters are presented complete; they do not change or develop. Moreover these figures have no depth, because they say what they think and are what they seem; ironically enough, the presence of the author is very strongly felt, even though it is technically excluded. The characters are very often vivid creations, but they always exist in only two dimensions; in other words, they are always types rather than individuals.

Although one can only guess, the novels seem to be set in the England of an Edwardian era, and deal with the decaying upper middle-class which sees itself in terms of a set of material and social standards that it can no longer easily support. Class-consciousness is the dominating factor in the world here portrayed, and it underlies the morals and behaviour of all the characters. The strained relationships of employers and their servants, tutors, nurses, and children; the contest between equals for power, money, and what little there is of love; these are the subjects of the probing pen of Miss Compton-Burnett. The struggle to retain idleness and power produces a jungle in the traditional "manners" drawing room, or—as is actually more often the case—in the dining room. Unfortunately, the frequently satiric pen often seems to slip, and what began as a tone of humorous objectivity yields to the bitter vein of rancour that the characters themselves evince. Miss Compton-Burnett's detachment disappears. In a polite, witty, and lethal way the members of each family fence through their assigned novel, deftly slicing and parrying and thrusting, even taking two eyes for one whenever possible. Consider, for instance, the following dialogue from *A Family and A Fortune* (1949). The invalid Uncle Dudley is the victim of his selfish, grasping family who at no time have really viewed anyone but themselves as of intrinsic value or merit.

"I think Justine is a little more than nothing," said Matty, with a smile.

"I am Uncle's willing slave. That is all I ask to be." . . .

"Well, I may not be a slave," said Matty, holding up a piece of needlework for his eyes, "but I have been willing in your service. A little bit of something made by a friend means more, I hope, than the same thing bought out of an ample purse."

"Is every stitch in it worked by loving hands?"

"Gently, dear, the stitches will unravel," said Matty, leaning forward.

In an instant Justine had the work out of her aunt's hands and before Dudley's eyes.

"Barely an inch or two. Nothing compared to the satisfaction of proving to Uncle that the work is all your own."

"He would have taken Aunt Matty's word," said Mark.

Matty retrieved the work and placing it on her knee, set herself to remedy the damage.

"Not much harm done, is there?" said her niece.

"A piece to be worked again, dear. It does not matter. I have all the time to do it, as no doubt you thought" (p. 275).

Now if Miss Compton-Burnett had written one novel of this kind we would probably judge it as a vivid picture of a certain time and condition and say that the author had captured with finesse the exact quality of superficiality and shabby gentility that characterized the class under the satirist's microscope. In actual fact, however, novel after novel reveals embittered maiden aunts, frustrated mothers, isolated fathers, disgruntled heirs, degraded tutors, and worst of all, persecuted and misunderstood children. In this last group lies our best key to the views of Ivy Compton-Burnett. Her children are always charming and direct and obliging, but they are also always doomed to be sacrificed ruthlessly for the selfish ends of the adults around them, and worst of all, to become those same adults. In a world where the sensitivity and affection of children are abused and exploited for the self-gratification of frustrated adults, what hope is there for such as little Dora in *Elders and Betters* (1944)?

"It is not anyone's fault that Aunt Sukey is ill," said Julius.

"Poor little things, it is not yours indeed," said Sukey. "And your life will be the same, when mine is over. So there is nothing for you to be too sorry about."

Dora sank into tears.

"The comforting speech failed of its effect," said Tullia.

"My little niece does not like the thought of life without her aunt," said Sukey, resting her eyes on Dora, so that she seemed not to see that the protest on Thomas's face had almost reached his lips (p. 67).

What starts to emerge and take precise shape is a clearly defined view of the family itself as a savage and ruthless society in miniature, a pessimistic, disenchanting picture of everyman at his "normal" worst. The overall impression that these novels leave, therefore, is one of unrelieved pessimism. Lies, hatred, jealousy, even murder and incest may readily be discovered in the family life so persistently presented. What love there is is perverted or abused by others, or always qualified by practical considerations. Goodwill hardly ever prevails over ulterior motives, and the net re-

sult is the presentation of what we might call a chamber of horrors with animated waxworks.

There is a very distinct relationship between these themes and the style itself, and this is one of the real, technical achievements of Miss Compton-Burnett's work. The absence of all literary adornment and the direct verbal conflict between one apparently disembodied consciousness and another seem to lend much point and force to the presentation of stark and simple emotions. The polite hostility and tension that characterize the family gathering, where individual wills must become reconciled to the bonds of obligation and necessity, are effectively produced and paralleled by the formality and restraint of the style.

Miss Compton-Burnett's most devoted critic, Robert Liddell, gives us many clues to the nature of her work by his own approach to the problem of estimating her achievement.³ Although Mr. Liddell has unqualified and extravagant praise for his subject, the very arrangement of his study would seem to modify his claims. He finds it convenient to separate the characters into groups, and he discusses them under headings such as "The Chorus", "The Tyrants", "The Victims", and then further subdivides into "Toadies", "Prigs", "Good Governesses", "The Lower Orders", etc. This arrangement is fair, and while Mr. Liddell does not use it to find fault with his subject, it does demonstrate that there is no more natural way to approach the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett and that the characters do follow the rigid patterns and types which characterize, for instance, Victorian melodrama. With few exceptions, each group of characters comes from the same set of moulds, and one witty or wicked conversation is much like another. In spite of variations in plot, it is difficult to keep the novels apart in one's mind, and the characters could be shifted willy-nilly from one book to the next with little or no artistic disruption.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate these generalizations is to consider briefly three of the novels that span the whole period of production, from 1925 to 1955. *Pastors and Masters* (1925) is a trivial little novel that recalls its more weighty and colourful prototype, *Nicholas Nickelby*, and establishes certain characters and themes that are to recur for the next thirty years. Mr. Merry, who "caused his face to undergo a change, preparatory to whatever final one might be expedient" (p. 19), manages a private school for Mr. Nicholas Herrick, a disillusioned failure and a pathetic Cambridge Don. Mr. Merry is the first of what is to be a long line of pitiful, pseudo-professional servants, forced by dire necessity into the humiliating position of being unable to afford integrity, or even personal opinion, and torn between their resentment of contemptuous pupils and their need to impress their employers. Aside from

this cheerless below-stairs subplot, the novel mainly concerns itself with the Herrick family and their friends. Nicholas has sustained himself for years on a promise to produce a book, his one gesture of ability to his acquaintance and to posterity. The book which he finally almost reveals is one that he has taken from the sick-room of his old friend and master, after the latter's death. The book turns out to belong, not to the dead man, but to Herrick's friend, who is also about to reveal it, claiming it as a second effort, when it is simply a copy of some earlier book. The impression that all this gives is of gross and shabby deception, perhaps of self more than of anyone else. Self-delusion, social duplicity, and the total absence of any really meaningful pattern to the lives of those below or above stairs seems to be the general impression that this work is meant to convey. Herrick's sister, Emily, lives only for and in her brother, but she must finally come to terms with his pathetic failure to be anything but a sham. Her answer is to rationalize intensely, and thus, by a parallel self-deceit, to go on with her role as loving sister: "I shall tell him nothing. If he thinks I know, or may know, we just shall not speak of it. Then that will be the same to him as my not knowing. Nicholas is like that" (*Pastors and Masters*, p. 101). This novel distinctly parallels other writings of the period. Though the parallel may seem far-fetched (because the setting is so different), it recalls, for instance, *The Sun Also Rises*, published a year later. Hemingway's novel is also about a "set" of people stripped of illusion and desperately trying to come to terms with a meaningless existence, partly by the tacit acceptance of a code of social pretences. The endings to each novel particularly resemble each other in tone and implication:

"Yes, yes, Emily. I dare say I shall have a time yet. Time to do something in. It sometimes happens that the end of a man's life sums him up. There is no great wrong about being an exception. Exceptions are more worthy of interest in a way. I don't think I have ever been quite on the ordinary line."

"No, I am sure you have not. It would have been dreadful of you" (*Pastors and Masters*, p. 126).

"Oh, Jake," Brett said, "we could have had such a damned good time together."...

"Yes," I said. "Isn't it pretty to think so?"⁷ (*The Sun Also Rises* [1926], pp. 258-259).

This aura of despair persists, however, in the subsequent work of Ivy Compton-Burnett. The sophisticated disenchantment of the author's view dominates her work. As time passes the novels broaden and deepen, incorporate more characters and a greater complexity of plot, overflow with more brilliant wit and conversation, and reveal a greater variety of human emotions and responses intensively explored.

Yet all conspires to produce a similar ending in each case. The family is still an unpleasant phenomenon. When it is not a battleground for savage conflict it is a dreary museum of dusty fossils. In *A Family and a Fortune* (1939) the embittered and unrelenting old-maid aunt, Hetty, says "Dear, dear, it is a funny thing, a family. I can't help feeling glad sometimes that I have had no part in making one" (p. 59), and it is impossible not to hear Miss Compton-Burnett speaking the words over and over again. Another character in the same novel seems to imply by the following comment that the word "family" is synonymous with chaos, anguish, and ill-will: "Miss Sloane, what must you think of our family?" "I have belonged to a family myself" (p. 88). This novel deals with a family residing in a large country house and struggling to avoid the encroachment of austerity that threatens to eat its way farther into the faded gentility which they seek to preserve. The family is possessed of two remarkable characters who lend to the novel whatever distinction it has. One is the youngest child, the idiot Aubrey, who speaks very un-idiotic choric wisdom throughout the drama. His words seem to come from the heart of his creator when he says, "I was making my little effort to keep the ball of conversation rolling. Every little counts" (p. 11). The other notable character, one of the few noble figures in the work of Ivy Compton-Burnett, is Uncle Dudley, a bachelor who lives with his brother's family and who inherits the fortune that brings out the worst aspects of all the characters. The novel concerns itself very simply with portraying relationships and responses to the loss of relatives and the gain of money. The daughter, Justine, and her invalid aunt, Matty, indulge in acrimonious verbal exchanges that are neither amusing nor exaggerated enough to be satire, while the son, Clement, is discovered to be a miser, hoarding gold in his bedroom. What this novel, like its earlier counterparts, seems to imply is that the family can only survive when its members agree (and they never really do) to close their eyes to each other's all too obvious failings. With biting irony the convalescent Uncle Dudley exclaims at the end of the novel,

"I can't be shut away from family life; it offers too much. To think that I have lived it for so long without even suspecting its nature! I have been quite satisfied by it too; I have had no yearning after anything further. Matty is going and the gossip can have its way. It will be a beautiful family talk, mean and worried and full of sorrow and spite and excitement. I cannot be asked to miss it in my weak state. I should only fret" (*A Family and a Fortune*, p. 285).

There seems to be little more to be said.

In 1955 there appeared *Mother and Son*, a novel about a family in which there are three adopted children and an adult son, their supposed cousin, Rosebery. The

relationship between this womanly man and his tyrannical, masculine mother, Miranda, is the dominant feature of the novel. Upon the death of the mother, several significant facts emerge. Rosebery learns that his supposed father is not his father at all but the father of the three children whom he had thought to be his cousins. The parents have at one time betrayed each other, and the helpless issue inherit the spirit of disharmony. With the death of his mother, Rosebery finds himself cut off and in complete isolation. He makes two proposals of marriage, in neither case out of love, and is rejected both times by women who prefer the less demanding and more *self-satisfying* lives of spinsters. The novel ends on the most pathetic note possible. Adrian and Francis are Rosebery's half-brothers.

"Would she [Rosebery's mother] have liked us to play cards?" said Adrian.

"Was it that doubt, that prevented your playing?" said Rosebery, with a smile. "I can relieve you of it. She taught me to play herself, when I was a boy."

"And now has left him partnerless," murmured Francis.

"And now has left me as you say, Francis," said Rosebery (p. 256).

In this novel all the old family skeletons are revealed, and a picture emerges of mutual infidelity, deception, and perversion, and a family "unity" based on the flimsy threads of necessity. As in the other novels at which we have glanced, there is all but a total absence of affection, no generosity, and nothing worthy of the admiration that in other fiction characterizes the artistic view of the human situation and experience. Nowhere here does pathos become tragedy. In fact, the tendency in this novel is more consistently towards the ludicrous, and at one point Miss Compton-Burnett seems almost to be laughing at her own construction of the novel: "My life has been torn away. My mother is gone; my father is changed for me; my young cousins are that no longer. It is a great adjustment. I cannot make it all at once" (*Mother and Son*, p. 129). With slight variation, the pattern persists. People use others, especially children, in the most unremittingly selfish way, conversation is never enjoyed for its own sake but takes on the form of a deadly contest in which words are designed to wound, and life proceeds, at best, under an uneasy truce.

Ivy Compton-Burnett has been compared to Jane Austen and to Henry James. There is no doubt that she does recall and resemble these writers in a certain measure. The drawing room and the dinner table, the social repercussions arising from seemingly trivial incidents: all these derive in part from Austen and James. There, however, similarity ends. There is a difference in technique that stems from a fundamental difference in the authors' point of view and intention. Miss Compton-Burnett is neither moralist nor psychologist, as Austen and James were. Jane Austen

was possessed of a great comic vision. Her novels are different from Miss Compton-Burnett's not because, as Mr. Liddell suggests, her time was a different one, but because her view was a much more complete one. Her novels encompass a much greater range of human emotion and psychology, her characters move on a much larger scale of human possibility, and her novels end as they do because she chooses to shape and order her view of the human experience rather than simply to record it. Nowhere in the writing of Ivy Compton-Burnett is there a Mr. Knightley, a Robert Martin, or a saintly Mrs. Weston. And there certainly is no Emma, who slowly and painfully struggles upward out of herself to master finally the worst in her and absorb the best from the best people around her. Emma's inner conflicts have a supreme moral significance, and her final victory, even though it emerges from a lighthearted background of satirical romance, must be seen as a tribute by Jane Austen to human free-will and the possibility of human improvement.

Similarly, Henry James is both a moralist and a psychologist who, with infinite care and precision, steers his characters along the tortuous paths that constitute the maze of human involvement and shows how the most dramatic struggles in human experience take place in a workaday world and beneath the surface.

Where Austen and James tend towards a consideration of the individual case, Ivy Compton-Burnett is inclined towards generalization:

"It is a pity we have to be human," said Dudley. "Human failings, human vanity, human weakness! We don't hear the word applied to anything good. Even human nature seems a derogatory term. It is simply an excuse for everything" (*A Family and a Fortune*, p. 28).

She is not really interested in human beings; she is interested in the abstractions that her characters illustrate. She does not seek to present complex minds or individual struggles or problems. Rather, she wishes to present the atmosphere that is created by the interaction of classes, groups, and types. There are no three-dimensional individuals in her work; there are only voices. Her novels are overcast with the presence of hates and lusts, jealousies and affections, envies and resentments, and it is these that emerge rather than the people who produce them. That is why Mr. Liddell can refer so conveniently to the "Toadies" and "Tyrants" in her work.

In fact, the impression that her novels generally leave on the reader is very much the same as that gained from a visit to the zoo. This kind of metaphor for a social atmosphere has been brilliantly presented by Marianne Moore in her poem, "The Monkeys":

Winked too much and were afraid of snakes. The
zebras, supreme in
their abnormality; the elephants with their
fog-coloured skin
and strictly practical appendages
were there, the small cats; and the parakeet—
trivial and humdrum on examination, destroy-
ing
bark and portions of the food it could not eat.

There are also, of course, many small, undignified, and helpless grey creatures who seem designed by nature to set off their more colourful and distant relatives. The whole visit is interesting momentarily but not to be made again for a long time. And like an Ivy Compton-Burnett family, none of the animals seems very real to us as we wander around. They are somehow, all these creatures, unimportant.

Whereas Miss Moore writes one poem on this theme and then forsakes it, Miss Compton-Burnett writes numerous novels reiterating the statement until it becomes a cliché. It is as a menagerie, I believe, that she actually sees the family, and she cannot resist the strength of the image sufficiently to write of anything else. She has really, it would seem, no sympathy for her subject, and herein lies her limitation. Nowhere do we encounter the many-sided richness of family life as it is presented, say, in Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* or even more brilliantly in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. There the family is revealed fully and realistically, tortured by both love and hate, by the fears that arise out of love and by the conflict of self-interest and devotion to others. Here, however, we find the stark simplicity of the miracle-play, emblematic puppets moving jerkily on strings, caricatures instead of people: these are the marks of the Ivy Compton-Burnett novel.

Joseph Warren Beach has defined psychology in fiction in the following way:

The reader wishes to know from time to time more particularly how the character feels in a given situation, how he reacts to a particular predicament, what conflicts arise in him with regard to his course of action, what are his motives for acting as he does—and so in general how his feelings and mental processes in a given situation reflect the general character of him which has been rendered in the characterization. This detailed presentation of his feelings and mental processes is what in fiction is called psychology.⁴

There is none of this in the work of Miss Compton-Burnett because she is interested not in the members of the family but in the abstraction, the institution itself.

The most memorable characters in the novels, who in fact constitute the exception to what has been said above, are the children, and they are brilliantly cap-

tured with a few gestures and phrases and actions. There is Nevill in *Parents and Children* (1941), who speaks of himself in the third person and is an irresistibly childish and good-natured three-year-old. And there is his precocious sister Honor, who has a strong sense of drama, of which she is aware, and who enjoys with the savour of an artist the implications of melodramatic aphorism.

"Hints are in the air," said Honor, swinging one leg round the other. "Hatton and Mullet [servants] are big with them."

"What?" said Gavin.

"Hatton is big," said Nevill. "But not as big as Mullet. Hatton is rather big."

"A cloud no larger than a man's hand," said Honor.

"Why do you talk without saying anything?" said Gavin. "It makes talking no good."

"All in its own time," said his sister.

"You think you are grand," said Gavin, and ended the conversation (p. 218).

Honor proceeds to infuriate her little brother Gavin, who worships her but cannot follow these pronouncements, by continuing in the same vein:

"The screams of the damned," said Honor.

"Don't let her talk like that," said Gavin, with a note of misery.

"There are breakers ahead," said Honor.

Gavin walked up to her and gave her a kick (p. 219).

There are many other children equally wonderful and real and vivid. The only way one can explain the distinct superiority of the artistry in the drawing of these characters is to suggest that the child-mind simply lends itself to the technical method of Miss Compton-Burnett. Children *are* caricatures. Simple dialogue reveals them fully, and no analysis or commentary or introspection is necessary in the presentation of the delightful, realistic "norm". Unfortunately for the reader of these novels, the problems of revealing the adult mind are quite different. It might almost be true to say that all Miss Compton-Burnett's characters are children, though only some are intended to be.

By virtue of her mastery of natural dialogue, however, there does emerge in her work an undeniable dramatic power, a bright and vivid quality that recalls no one so much as Dickens, the master of caricature. True, Ivy Compton-Burnett is not possessed of Dickens' range of character or of subject matter, nor is there the same masterly description that appears everywhere in Dickens' work. But there is a liberal quantity of truly Dickensian humour and a large measure of melodrama. It is humour, perhaps, that is the real mark of distinction and, at the least, the saving grace possessed by these novels. The quality of exaggeration, of civilized nonsense,

is really exquisitely handled. Here, too, it must be said, children are often involved. In the following conversation, for instance, the governess, Miss Lacy, with her two charges, confronts her employers and is seen trying on the one hand to conceal her limitations and on the other to evoke the awe that would be a desirable attitude in her pupils:

"Why are the sun and the moon in the sky at the same time, Mother?" said Dora, not feeling this negative treatment of the matter a safe one.

"I do not know how to put it to you, dear. Miss Lacy will explain."

"No, I have done enough explaining for one morning," said the latter, shaking her head.

"Are you going to find out the Latin names of the plants?" said Jessica to the children, who had once been doing this.

"No, we are going to enjoy our walk," said Miss Lacy, going out into the porch and lifting her face to the sky; "and enjoy the sun, and if we like, the moon. I have left my Latin behind me in the schoolroom. And not much of it there. It won't stretch out over the hedgerows" (*Elders and Betters*, p. 48).

Ivy Compton-Burnett is a humorist without a comic vision, an author who purports to see her subject as funny, even ludicrous, but who in reality is overwhelmed by the macabre aspects of the tyranny and hypocrisy that characterize the family. Where Swift could be intensely aware of human failing and at the same time detached enough artistically to present these failings as ludicrous exaggerations, Ivy Compton-Burnett is time and again lured into a proximity with her subject that leads to a kind of half-realism. Her characters never become quite ludicrous enough, for just when one is about to laugh at their follies, they cease being foolish and become pathetic, the helpless and tortured victims of each others' natures and their own accidental situation.

Ultimately, then, the reader is forced to make one of two judgments. Either Ivy Compton-Burnett is attempting to find and present that subtle vein of experience that lies somewhere between the comic and the pathetic, or she is a satirist, wishing to castigate human follies but failing to attain a detachment sufficient to permit her the presentation of a clear and amusing indictment. Whichever is the case, she has succeeded, perhaps unfortunately, in almost exactly re-duplicating the tone, matter, and setting of her novels, without any apparent striving for different effects or statements, as the years have gone by. For the *aficionado* her great productivity will be a source of joy; for the merely interested, one novel will serve as well as another.

NOTES

1. The most thorough elimination of the author has occurred, of course, with the use of interior monologue. Miss Compton-Burnett, however, depends almost wholly on dialogue and has simply varied the traditional form of the novel.
2. Joseph Warren Beach, *The Twentieth Century Novel: Studies in Technique* (New York, 1932), p. 314.
3. Robert Liddell, *The Novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett* (London, 1955).
4. Beach, p. 25.