BERYL BAINBRIDGE AND HER NOVELS

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by

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ABSTRACT

Beryl Bainbridge is a successful contemporary novelist who has produced ten novels over the past fifteen years, and her writing career shows every sign of extending well into the future.

This Thesis comprises an introduction to this prolific writer by presenting some biographical data which shed some light on the author, her interests, the way she regards her own work, the background of each of her novels, and her views on contemporary life. It examines the accomplishment of Bainbridge up to the present by providing a critical survey of her novels in order of publication. An attempt has been made to find themes and ideas consistent in her work and to show how she has developed.

She is an empirical writer whose emotionally traumatic childhood had a seminal influence on her fiction which is evidenced in her tacit admiration for intensity of feeling.

Under her father's influence, Bainbridge developed a reverence for the past -- a preoccupation which is particularly

apparent in her early novels where she patterned her fictional characters on memories of her own family and depicted the odd little incidents of family life in the Forties. Her strong nostalgia for the past includes place as she sensitively evokes her native Lancashire.

Mr. Bainbridge also instilled in his daughter a deep awareness of the essential loneliness of man, an obsession which accounts for the recurrent themes of isolation, loss and departure so prominent in her work.

Bainbridge recognizes imperfections. She acknowledges failure, ugliness, squalor and corruption as an inescapable part of life. In later novels she becomes more absorbed in the ills of contemporary society. Declining moral standards, increase in crime and violence, and disregard for law and order are the conditions under which hapless characters succumb to falling standards in spite of themselves. Seldom actively pursuing evil, they are contaminated by an evil world.

She finds humanity varied, unpredictable, full of shortcomings and all too vulnerable in a perplexing world. She repeatedly stresses the oddness and incomprehensibility of people and life. Her realistic concerns, original views, polished style and delightful humour make Beryl Bainbridge a fine novelist.

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I extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. G. Jones for his professional advice and guidance which he has administered punctually with unfailing courtesy, patience and good humour.

Thanks to Joe, John, and the rest of the family for support and forbearance.

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INTRODUCTION

Beryl Bainbridge was born in Liverpool, Lancashire, on 21 November 1934, daughter of Richard Bainbridge and Winifred Baines. She was educated at Merchant Taylor's School in Crosby and Arts Educational Schools Limited in Tring Hertfordshire. An actress at repertory theatres in Liverpool, Windsor, Salisbury, Wiltshire, London and Dundee, she performed in such pieces as Tiptoe through the Tulips, The Warrior's Return and It's a Lovely Day Tomorrow. In 1954, she married Austin Davies, a scenery painter from her acting days, whom she divorced in 1959. She has three children, one son, Aaron, and two daughters, Rudi and Jo. [1]

Commenting recently on the Liverpool she remembers, [2] she describes the neighbourhood where she spent the first years of her married life.Toxteth Street in Liverpool 8 was considered Bohemian and run down, not to say sordid. Mr. and Mrs. Bainbridge were embarrassed to tell their neighbours their daughter's new address. Bainbridge herself calls it ' a slum area with broad streets and monumental houses built a century before by the cotton kings and the

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[1] Contemporary Novelists, James Vinson ed. (London: St. James Press, 1967), p. 80.

[2] Beryl Bainbridge, 'The lullaby sound of houses falling down,' The Sunday Times, 19 July 1981, p. 36.

shipping owners.'

> The stucco was peeling and the balconies were unsafe; sometimes the basements flooded. On Sunday mornings the windows rattled in their frames as the bells rang out from the cathedral.

She describes what her next-door neighbours were like:

> The house next door to us was occupied by a stoker from Portuguese West Africa, and his wife, who came from Glasgow. She was an Albino. They had nineteen children, seventeen of whom lived in the house. When the weather got very cold you could hear them breaking up the floorboards for firewood.
>
> The older boys in the family referred to their father as 'that coloured bastard, me Dad.'

Her son and eldest daughter were born in Toxteth Street and went to a nursery school in Lodge Lane run by a Miss Smith. Bainbridge, with customary fondness for the most disconcerting details, recalls that Miss Smith died in the middle of the term, sitting upright at the piano playing, 'The Grand Old Duke of York' while the little toddlers still trotted around her shaking their tambourines.

In warm weather Bainbridge gave the children their tea sitting on the stoop, under the disapproving eye of her

mother, who considered it common to eat anything outside. She did not put up curtains in the windows, or have her children baptized, or even stand up when they played 'God Save the King' at the Rialto cinema. Her shocked mother said it was the beginning of the end. [3] Be that as it may, it is certain that Mrs. Bainbridge has a very unconventional daughter.

It was during the years 1954 to 1959, when her acting career was disrupted by the birth of her children, that she started writing, although not necessarily for publication at that time. It was 1960 before she completed her first novel, Harriet Said....

She talks frankly about her early background experiences, which had a profound effect on her developing creativity. Her working-class father, a self-made man and commercial traveller, met her mother in the top deck of a tram on Lord Street. They were married in 1926, the year of the slump, and moved to a large house on the Wirral Peninsula, complete with living-in maid named Matty. Her middle-class mother, whom Bainbridge describes [4] as an impressive woman, always beautifully dressed and called the Duchess because she dressed up to go shopping and decorated rooms for visitors

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[3] 'The lullaby sound of houses falling down,' p. 36.

[4] Yolanta May, 'Beryl Bainbridge Talks to Yolanta May,' The New Review, London: December 1976, p. 50.

who never arrived, was initially won over by Richard Bainbridge's success. Two years later, when Father lost house and money and was declared bankrupt, the affection, such as it was, went too. Frustrated by her husband's failure and contemptuous of him, she considered she had married beneath her. [5]

Her parents stayed together for appearances' sake but their tiny house was full of frightening emotions. 'My father had terrible moods,' says Bainbridge. 'I was so frightened and alarmed by him that I used to scheme plots to kill him.' Her earliest memories of fear and anxiety centre on her father's violent moods. She describes him as a bad-tempered and morose man, somewhat schizophrenic. 'He would have a flare-up about something trivial, a lump in a potato, or an unwashed cup, for instance.' The first week would be noisy with swearing, slamming of doors, and Mother and Father running past each other in the hall. Violence was always threatening but it never came. Then the indifference would set in. The tension went out of the house and the worst phase was over. After that Father would fall into a sullen depression and go slinking

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[5]Willa Petschek, 'Beryl Bainbridge and her Tenth Novel,' New York Times Book Review, 1 March 1981, p. 27.

through the house like a dog that had been muzzled. His dinner would be left on the landing in a bowl. Recovering, he would emerge sheepishly one night and join the family at table. [6]

Beryl and her brother made a pact that they would never be out of the house at the same time, so there would always be one of them around to stop their parents killing each other. Her brother, an anxious individual like Alan in A Quiet Life, suffered a nervous breakdown at eighteen, but the young Beryl, it appears, was of tougher fibre. At the age of ten, hearing her father's voice raised against her mother, she would hurl herself through the scullery door and leap on him from behind. With her knee on his back and an arm about his throat, she would bring him, commando fashion, crashing to the floor. [7]

The radio was kept on to drown out the sound of the quarrels. Bainbridge thinks this may have had a beneficial effect on her future development as a writer. As she listened to the fine plays and the civilized talks, she began

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[6] Beryl Bainbridge, 'Facing Backwards Family Life -- 7,' The New Review, November 1977, pp. 14-15.

[7] 'Facing Backwards,' p. 14.

at an early age to appreciate the sound of a well-turned phrase and came to know 'the rhythm of the number of words in a sentence.' As a child she remembers her mother buying little exercise books and sharpening pencils for her. 'I was always writing,' she remarks.[8] At 14 she wrote and illustrated a dirty rhyme and was expelled from school for being a corrupting moral influence.[9]

Always eager to talk about her work, Bainbridge is pleased by her success but says it cannot change the fundamental nature of her experience. She is not particularly interested in the present or the future, she explains. 'I like the past and everything to do with it more than anything else.' She attributes her passionate attachment to the past to her father's influence. In 'Facing Backwards' she observes:

> There are people who live in the present and those who live for the future. There are others who live in the past. Early on, life dictates our preferences. All my father's bright days . . . had ended before I was born. He faced backwards. In doing so, he created within me so strong a nostalgia for time gone that I have never been able to appreciate the present or look to the future.[10]

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[8]Barbara A. Bannon, 'Beryl Bainbridge,' Publisher's Weekly, 15 March 1976, p. 6.

[9]Petschek, p. 9.

[10]'Facing Backwards,' p. 16.

She is an empirical writer and her early work, in particular, is an attempt to record the past. She writes about her parents, the sort of childhood she had, and the landscape she grew up in. She firmly believes that childhood is the most memorable part of life because it is the time when feelings are most intense and the mind most impressionable. 'Everything else you grow out of, but you never recover from childhood. So I go over it again and again,' she states.[11] Bainbridge refers to her turbulent formative years as 'an ideal writer's childhood.' That she regards her somewhat traumatic experiences as favourable arises from her conviction that emotional vitality is all-important. She admires people who show their true feelings and respects honesty and truth of expression, whatever the consequences:

> . . . certain people you meet now . . . seem to lead such perfect lives, there are no cracks showing . . . it irks me somehow. . . . There must be something wrong somewhere.
>
> There is a danger that if you behave conventionally enough long enough, your responses become more and more false. There comes a point when you don't know what you are doing.
>
> There is a danger of being over-civilized . . . I sometimes get the feeling that with a lot of people there isn't much going on underneath the facade. I am bothered by the lack of passion, almost of suffering.[12]

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[11] Petschek, p. 27.

[12] May, p. 51.

'The only time when one is really alive is when one feels something deeply,' she states. Her inspiration had its roots in the fear and insecurity of her youthful years when the quarrelsome atmosphere provided ample stimulation for a responsive mind.

The Bainbridges lived in a red-bricked, semi-detached house, twelve miles from Liverpool. There were four small rooms upstairs and three downstairs, plus a scullery. The family only occupied half of the house, the lounge and the dining-room being rarely used. The small room downstairs was entirely filled with a table and six chairs. The son sat by the door with his legs in the scullery. 'We turned round and round in that room, jostling for position, eating and doing our homework and snapping at each other as we fought for space,' Bainbridge declares. [13] Her grotesque portraits of claustrophobic family life derive from her early impressions of her Formby home.

She now lives in a Victorian terraced house in London's Camden Town and its furnishings reflect her great liking for the most unusual objects. A stuffed buffalo named Eric, with a forty-eight inch horn span, blocks her entrance hall. Upstairs, a pink plaster leg, shod in a

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[13] 'Facing Backwards,' p. 14.

silver-heeled dancing shoe, projects from the wall above her brass bed. Over the lintel of the bed-sitting room door runs a stuffed fox in hot pursuit of two hens; a life-sized model of Neville Chamberlain with his Homburg hat and umbrella occupies a nearby chair. Hanging on the wall, her own paintings are another expression of her interest in the past -- 'a wickedly spoofing one' as Bannon has described it. [14] Two of her provocative subjects are Napoleon and a British Captain of World War 1 vintage. Napoleon is dressed in full uniform regalia, but accompanied by a splendid female who seems to be totally unaware of the fact that she is stark naked. The Captain, whom Bainbridge has christened 'Dalhousie', wears his regimental cap and nothing else.

After Bainbridge wrote Harriet Said... in 1960, she sent it to several publishers, who rejected it on the grounds that it was indecent. 'What repulsive little creatures you have made the central characters, repulsive beyond belief,' one of them said. [15] She stuck the novel away in a drawer. Changing her style, she wrote two more novels in 1965, A Weekend with Claud and Another Part of the Wood. A Weekend with Claud was published in 1967 by

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[14] Bannon, p. 7.

[15] Petschek, p. 27.

Hutchinson, had favourable reviews, went into paperback, and earned £25.00 for the author. [16] It was revised and published by Duckworth in 1981. Another Part of the Wood was published by Hutchinson in 1968, was unfavourably received and earned nothing. After completing these three novels, she stopped writing altogether for a time.

There is no hint in any of her articles or interviews as to how she was occupied during the next few years, but in 1972 her son Aaron brought home a playmate who happened to be the son of Colin Haycraft, head of the publishing firm of Duckworth. [17] As a result of this accident, Haycraft read Harriet Said... and published it. He also gave Bainbridge a job as a clerk in his firm, a position which she held for a year.

Her association with the Haycrafts was a most advantageous one for the young author as they gave her much needed encouragement at the critical period when she was just beginning to develop her writing talents. She credits them with putting her on the right track insofar as her style was concerned:

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[16] 'Beryl Bainbridge says...,' The Times, 3 September 1981, p. 8a.

[17] Craig Brown, 'Beryl Bainbridge: an ideal writer's childhood,' The Times 4 November 1978, p. 14.

> [Anna] told me to abandon the flowery and obscure style of my two later books and return to the simpler structure of the first . . . Colin . . . equally dislikes such things as hanging nominatives, sentences without verbs and the historic present. . . . In ancient Greek, he said, the split infinitive is the height of idiomatic elegance, but in English it is plain barbarism. [18]

She admits that when she was working on A Weekend with Claud she had an Anglo-Saxon dictionary by her side. She picked up all the words she liked the look of, wrote them down, and fitted them in. [19] But later, she gradually learned the best way, for her, of expressing what she wanted to say. She read most of Graham Greene and Kingsley Amis, and, using them as her model, she cut out practically every other word and produced a very tight sentence. In this way she came back to the style of Harriet Said... when she wrote The Dressmaker in 1973, a style which she has retained in all her subsequent novels.

In 1973, after working with Duckworth for a year, Bainbridge took a job in a bottle factory, sticking on wine labels at £4.00 a week. She gave that up, however, because it included free drinks. 'It was so cold you guzzled as

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[18] Petschek, p. 27.

[19] May, p. 52.

much wine as you could, and had to be wheeled home every afternoon on a trolley,' she facetiously remarks.[20] The experience provided the material for her next novel, The Bottle Factory Outing (1974). Following that, she wrote Sweet William (1975), A Quiet Life (1976), Injury Time (1977), Young Adolf (1978), and Winter Garden (1980).

An extremely productive author, Bainbridge herself is as capricious and fascinating as any of her fictional characters. In order to complete a book a year she writes for three months with great concentration, usually at night, either at her kitchen table or in her publisher's office, which is an old piano factory, reachable only by a fire-escape. Once she is half way through a book she can write in the day as well. She gets ill around the ninth week because she smokes day and night: 'I don't answer the phone or see anyone. I don't get any fresh air. I get heart palpitations.' She thinks she is having a heart attack. The doctor is called in the middle of the night. He diagnoses nicotine poisoning. 'Round about this time I know I've cracked the book and I can spin on to the end.' She averages twelve pages a night, often throwing out eleven the following morning and sometimes redrafting the remaining page as many as fourteen

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[20]Petschek, p. 27.

times. 'And I can't go on to the next page until I've got the preceding one right,' she says. She types on an ancient machine, its steel parts painted black in accordance with World War 11 blackout regulations, as she jokingly remarks. It is crashingly slow to type on, she adds, every letter an effort to produce, which stops her from running away with herself. She claims a predilection for the popular Jaws, Airport, and Towering Inferno, loving narrative bumps and shocks. She feels that nowadays, unless a writer is superb, it is not enough just to go wuffling on. [21] Whatever her eccentricities, it is evident that she takes her craft seriously and strives for the readability which she admires in other novelists.

Bainbridge neither goes 'wuffling on' nor does she run away with herself. Her novels all fit into a neat 160 pages or so. She is completely original in style, with a gift for compression: her unique talent is to convey a myriad of impressions with the utmost economy. She is totally devoid of pedantry or sentimentality. She exercises the strictest control over her material, weaving a strong narrative line, neatly and tautly plotted, one

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[21] Petschek, p. 27.

event leading logically to another, every hint and prophesy fulfilled. Everything is significant and nothing extraneous to her purpose. She often includes rather bizarre, disconcerting details, short and to the point, which serve to emphasize oddness and unpredictability in people and in life, as well as providing the narrative bumps and shocks that she talks about. It is her style that brands her a modern novelist in the strictest sense, her hard hitting realism where nothing is sacred, everything is mocked, including death.

Elaine Showalter [22] sees in Bainbridge and some of her contemporaries a renaissance in women's writing, providing 'woman's view of life, woman's experience.' Concerned with the conflicts between art and love, self-fulfilment and duty, they insist upon the right to use vocabularies previously reserved for male writers and to describe formerly taboo areas of female experience. Anger and sexuality are accepted not only as attributes of realistic characters, but also as sources of female creative power.

Contemporary female authors are largely concentrating on areas of women's experience which include the perplexities

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[22] Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 35.

facing women in their new, more challenging roles in society [their liberation], changing moral standards in society, sexual permissiveness, easy abortion and its attendant trauma, as well as the threat to the family unit posed by the mobility of its members. They show how these changes develop a sense of insecurity, even alienation in the individual. Although not exclusively or consciously exploring these themes, Bainbridge acknowledges the changes in modern society. They form the background for the more fundamental problems which she investigates. She focusses on domestic life, exploding myths of happy marriages and conventional, quiet families by bringing to light the disturbing and often violent nature of human thought and feelings as people interact with one another. She reminds us that the most innocent are capable of murderous thoughts and that sometimes thought becomes deed.

Her novels have repeatedly been described by reviewers as 'sinister' or 'chilling'. Bainbridge is sure that these qualities spring as much from her method of construction as from the peculiarities of her own imagination. 'If you take the way you know your family has lived, and you stick into it a plot from a newspaper story, you get a big imbalance, and the whole thing seems weird.' [23] Harriet Said... and

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[23] Brown, p. 14.

The Dressmaker are two such novels in which she has amalgamated biographical material and a plot provided by a news item.

While she has been criticized for portraying 'crazy' characters, Bainbridge claims that she has actually had to tone them down since in real life they were even crazier. The most unbelievable episodes, she states, are taken from real life. William (Sweet William) was modelled after a former boy friend who was quite offended because he was not portrayed as a great lover, which, in fact, the author says, he was. [24] Father's bizarre behaviour in A Quiet Life is reported exactly as she saw it, and the attempted shooting of Brenda in The Bottle Factory Outing is based on her own experience when her mother-in-law took a shot at her.

It may well be she knows a lot of crazy people and some unusual and interesting things happened to her, but it does not explain her art, how she rounds out her eccentric characters so that they become all too human, even arousing our sympathy while doing the most extraordinary things like committing murder. She makes it seem so justified, yet

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[24] May, p. 51.

accidental in the sense that it was not premeditated. Bainbridge does not portray murderers, but ordinary men and women, who, through no fault of their own, have death on their hands. It is not that they are over-ambitious individuals who destroy others to realize their own goals, but generally the reverse, with excessive docility and meek submissiveness to rules. That seems to be the cause of much of their misfortunes.

Within the narrow confines of her domestic world, violence is generated by the frustrations which arise from overwhelming petty irritations. Bainbridge characters have no space to manoeuvre. The most common objects cause tempers to flare. They cause bodily injury simply because they are always in the way so that people bump into them or trip over them all the time. Her protagonists emerge largely through stoicism. That they emerge intact in spite of the beating they take from life is remarkable. Perhaps the author has observed this character trait in her fellow Britons. She most certainly knows her England, the strengths, the weaknesses, idiosyncrasies and humour of its inhabitants.

A keen observer, she has a tremendous admiration, indeed a bubbling enthusiasm for all kinds of people in their endless variety and especially the Liverpudlians whom she

knows so well:

> All my childhood was spent with people who were disappointed. They'd married the wrong person, failed in business, been manipulated by others. They took a fierce pride in knowing themselves for what they were. Not for them the rosy view of life, the helpful excuses that might explain and mitigate. They gave each other labels -- fifth columnist, skinflint, hysterical baggage, wreck of the Hesperus. Class conscious, they were either dead common or a cut above themselves. In the family album it was true there were some faded snapshots of holidays at Blackpool, with everyone smiling and fooling on the sands, but it must have been a trick of the camera.
>
> Liverpool people have always been articulate and my family used words as though they were talking to save their lives. Facts might be hidden, like income and insurance and sex, but emotions and judgments flowed from them like water. If you sat in a corner being seen and not heard, in the space of a few minutes you could hear a whole character being dissected, assassinated and chucked in the bin, to be plucked out and redeemed in one small sentence. Thus my mother, in a discussion with Margo concerning Aunt Nellie, would say how lacking in depth Nellie was, too dour, a touch of the martyr. And Aunt Margo, heaping on coals of fire, would mention incidents of malice and deceitfulness, my mother nodding her head all the while in agreement, until just as Nellie lay unravelled before my eyes, Aunt Margo would say, 'By heck, but you can't fault her sponge cake.' [25]

These are the people she brings into her fiction with their oddities and all, who entertain us, shock us, and in the

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[25] 'Facing Backwards,' p. 16.

long run, elicit our admiration for their truly indomitable spirit.

The ensuing essay, consisting of a brief study of Bainbridge's ten novels, may serve as an introduction to an original and intriguing novelist.

CHAPTER I

A WEEKEND WITH CLAUD

A Weekend with Claud, Bainbridge's first published novel, is the story of a small group of people who spend the weekend at the home of Claud and Julia. Each of them in turn recollects the short visit and records his own impression of it. The book has six divisions, three of which are very short and set in the present at Claud's house; the other three are longer and consist of Maggie's, Norman's and Shebah's version of the way they remember a shared experience. Little of importance happens, apart from a minor incident when Shebah is slightly wounded by a stray bullet from Claud's gun. Tension and interest are generated by the conflicting emotions which arise among these few friends in an everyday social situation.

Events are unimportant in themselves. The author is primarily concerned with her characters' inner experiences. The four main characters are quite different, each possessing a unique vision of the world which is gradually revealed in their thoughts and opinions about what happened and what they think of themselves and each other. Through interior monologue the story unfolds in a series of flashbacks. The

author uses a stream of consciousness technique whereby the reader can follow the thoughts of the central figures as they jump backwards and forwards in time until eventually most of the important feelings they have sustained since childhood are divulged.

The stream of consciousness technique, as Bainbridge uses it in this novel, has some negative aspects, the chief of which is the difficulty of following the narrative in the dramatic present. It is not easy to follow what is going on during the weekend in question because the facts have to be extricated from layers of recollection about the past and speculation about the future. Almost every sentence refers to a different time period from its neighbour. Transitions are made in a manner that is most confusing to the reader. For example, Maggie is having a conversation with Edward:

> 'Baths are important. Having a wardrobe to hang clothes in is important. It's not materialistic. It's romantic.'
>
> My lips finish forming words and close to kiss his shoulder . . .
>
> Scurrying away from Edward I carry my skirt, my shoes, my underclothes into the bedroom that is a living room and lay them on the piano, and get into the brass bed quickly, taking my thick ankles with me. . . .

> 'I'll come back first thing in the morning,' says Billie. [26]

On first reading one gets the impression that Maggie is physically scurrying away from Edward. It is only later when Billie speaks that it becomes apparent that it has been a mental scurrying. There are numerous examples of this type of transition in the book, which necessitates some mental backtracking on the part of the reader if he is to place events in a logical time sequence.

The use of the present tense in Maggie's interior monologue also tends to confuse:

> 'You did have a bathroom in Morpeth Street,' Edward sounds accusing. 'A big one.'
>
> 'But I couldn't use it. Victorian Norman says it was dangerous. The geyser leaked.'
>
> Behind a wall of flame Victorian Norman calls for help. In the bathroom he stands dripping on his tiny black satin underpants, sulphurous flames sear up on the copper side of the antique geyser. (pp. 67-68)

One immediately imagines that Norman is standing in the

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[26] Beryl Bainbridge, A Weekend with Claud (Hutchinson New Authors, Limited, 1967), p. 67.

Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

burning bathroom now, while Edward and Maggie are talking, rather than visualizing the incident as having happened in the past.

In spite of the obscurity which often derives from the stream of consciousness technique, it is an excellent device for probing a character's inner experience of living. A Weekend with Claud is primarily Maggie's story and Bainbridge is using the technique here to explore the many facets of her personality. The facts of her life are gradually revealed by the 'tunnelling process'[27] whereby events in the present stimulate thoughts of things that have happened in the past through association with a factor common to both. The feelings that surround the event are usually more important than the incident itself. An illustration is provided in the opening chapter. As Maggie travels in the bus on her way to Claud's, she associates the journey with the one she made on her first trip to school. She recalls even the most elementary sensations of contact with things:

> I remember . . . the first term, with my hair waved permanently, and a grey school coat that

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[27]Virginia Woolf's term in A Writer's Diary (London: The Hogarth Press, 1954).

> had the same texture as my head, harsh and hairy. (p. 31)

She remembers her feelings of inadequacy during those first few strange days in boarding school when most of the other girls seemed more mature and efficient while she herself felt 'foolish, shabby, and plain.' It is the nature of the contact between herself and others that determines the quality of Maggie's life, that makes it a happy and fulfiling experience or a desolate one.

The portrait of Maggie is almost wholly biographical. Most of the particulars about her background are identical to those which Bainbridge has disclosed about her own life.[28] When Maggie is unable to make up her bed she recalls her childhood:

> . . . I slept with my mother, and . . . she always made the bed anyway, and my brother slept with my father. There were two empty rooms as well and we all slept without nightclothes, except my father who wore cream combinations. . . . If one of us went to the lavatory in the middle of the night, Father would shout: 'Many there luv? (p. 32)

Maggie's casual approach to housekeeping corresponds with

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[28] 'Facing Backwards,' pp. 13-16.

Bainbridge's own. Interviewed recently, she remarked, 'Journalists only seem to write about the dirty milkbottles and rotten housework.' [29] Maggie's living-room, one feels, is certain to be one which the author occupied, so similar in style is it to her present one:

> . . . with Sicilian lions . . . tongues sticking out wallpapered all along one side, and a brass bed and the piano and two samovars with the head of a moose and a paper garland twisted around its horns, . . . (p. 34)

Maggie remembers the cold blustery winds of Kirriemuir and her flat in the tenement with the tram-line running down the street outside her window when she worked in the theatre. She remembers her emotional father and her proud mother, her lover Billie, who resembles the hero of Sweet William. Bainbridge could be articulating her own early experiences in the portrait of Maggie.

She captures some of the pathos in the family situation, no doubt arising from her feelings about her real family life:

> Last Sunday he didn't leave the car to see me and the children onto the train. That irritated me; I thought he ate too much and took too little

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[29] Brown, p. 14.

> exercise. When the train passed the crossing, the car was still there, the children pressed stubby fingers against the glass and waved to the old man bent over the wheel. I meant to ring him when I got home to see if he felt ill, but I never did. (p. 55)

It is not only the facts of Maggie's life that accord with Bainbridge's, but her feelings and response to life as well.

The style of the novel is quite different from that of Bainbridge's other books. She describes it as 'bombastic'. Harriet Said..., on the other hand, is written in the style she adopted and perfected in later novels. This is somewhat unusual in view of the fact that she wrote Harriet Said... before A Weekend with Claud. One would assume that an author's first novel might well be experimental and less successful than subsequent ones but the reverse happened here. Harriet Said... became a best seller while A Weekend with Claud was a near failure. Bainbridge explains it by saying she believed the style of the latter would be more acceptable to a publisher after the rejection of Harriet Said.... That novel, however, was not rejected because of its style, but because it was considered indecent at that time.

She has written a revised edition of A Weekend with Claud which was published by Duckworth in 1981. Her editor suggested

she cut out 'the ex-husband, the two children, a third of the flashbacks, and a dozen or so characters' who add nothing to the narrative. Drastically reduced, she says the book now reads the way she wants it to read.[30]

The flowery style mars the book because it is distracting and slightly disruptive to the narrative. Instead of an adjective or two to describe a person, the author uses phrases which are sometimes bracketed:

> Billie (a name for a comedian, a funny thing happened to me the other night) was on his feet . . . (p. 39)

The meaning of many passages in the book is nearly obscured by a sheer abundance of words:

> I went all huddled through the dim living-room and saw through my dishevelled hair the sleeping body of Victorian Norman, safe in the bosom of the deep, the sofa, face turned from me, and a dog, the feminine one with the white face, sharing his temporary bed. (p. 78)

A plethora of adjectives weighs down a simple sentence:

> City white in a pink nightgown, padding with flat yellow feet across the lino-covered floor

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[30] 'Beryl Bainbridge says . . . ,' p. 8a.

I take my swollen ankles.

(p. 66)

Characters are known by several names so that one has to be attentive not to lose track of identities. Maggie's lover, generally known as Billie, is also referred to as William, the Wild Colonial Boy and Beauty Boy. Shebah is described as 'the nun', 'the figure all in black', and 'my Liverpool Salome' (78).

Much of the extraneous material is generated as part of the stream of consciousness technique in an attempt to evoke the texture of the thoughts of her characters, which naturally wander from subjects relevant to the narrative to subjects which are not. For example, Bainbridge moves from a description of Norman's laugh to describing a hair remover:

> Norman has got an awful laugh . . .
> When I first heard it I was interviewing him about a room in our house . . . living there . . . was Miss Evans the hair remover who pretended she didn't live there and changed into mackintosh and gumboots when she returned from work at the end of the day, and carried a torch. She did not like to use the light switches in case she got a shock, which was being a bit over-cautious, but then her electrolysis career had probably unnerved her.
>
> (p. 33)

Bainbridge has a particular fondness for eccentric characters

like Miss Evans. There is at least one in all her books. They are minor figures who have little influence on the main plot but they add considerable colour. The author invariably includes her facetious remarks to round off the description as she has done here.

A Weekend with Claud is primarily a novel of characterization, with Maggie as the central figure. Claud has arranged this weekend especially for her, and her friends' thoughts are largely centred on her dilemma. Her former lover has departed, leaving her pregnant, and so it is planned to make Edward, her current lover, believe he is the father of the expected child and offer to marry her. While Edward appears to cooperate, we learn later that the affair fell through and that Maggie is no longer pregnant. There is no explanation of what happened. Nothing is really accomplished, then, during the weekend, but we are aware that friendship involves complicity in deceit insofar as Claud, Julia, Norman and Maggie are concerned. Shebah does not know exactly what is going on.

Maggie is a very emotional person who feels things intensely for a time: yet she also realizes those emotions are ephemeral. Her passionate temperament is evident in her sensual account of the weekend and her affair with Billie.

She describes how she was fascinated by him because he was so different from the men she knew:

> I had never known a man who went into pubs, who smelt of beer, who smoked tobacco, who went to football matches, who drove a car and had men friends. (p. 51)

She, who associates with the sort of people who go to exhibition openings and symphony concerts (51), has a fanciful image of a man with typical working-class male interests. In her thoughts she surrounds him with an aura of romance. For a time love is glorious as she envisions herself as really beautiful, reflected in his eyes as a desirable creature. She basks in the image of him thinking of her as he sits on a balcony overlooking Sydney Harbour while he is in Australia. Reflecting on her lover's return to England, Maggie is sensitively aware that the setting for her romance is less than ideal. Physical intimacy takes place in a background reminiscent of Eliot's The Waste Land:

> Darkness, a faint spattering of rain on the bowler hat, ploplets in the canal as rats moved, hands fumbling on impossibly thick suitings . . . A nonsense of threshing bodies, grunts stifled, the bitter taste of beer on his tongue, and a dozen small boys swarming and squealing about the bonnet . . . and more evenings in the kitchen, and then the other public houses . . . (p. 52)

Because he loves and accepts her, she retains pleasant memories of him through the long months when he is away. When it is time for him to return, Maggie is in a flurry of anticipation. She buys new lino for the floor and new curtains for the windows in an attempt to alleviate the dinginess of her surroundings. Children are put to bed early, she is washed, combed, and perfumed; there is a fire in the grate and the meat is ready to be broiled as she expectantly awaits Billie. She is thinking about the advice Shebah gave her on the importance of the correct facial expression for that first meeting when suddenly she faces the truth. Love has died and she feels old and tired as she opens the door to a stranger:

> . . . a face the eye fails to memorize, only a coat, a check coat, beautiful and alien, comes into the house. (p. 64)

Maggie's romantic longings have no basis in reality. The long separation has changed them both.

The coat, associated with the grief of losing Billie, haunts Maggie. Shebah, too, will remember the 'dark majestic coat' of her lover long after she has forgotten what the owner looked like. Clothes are always important in Bainbridge's novels. Here the coat epitomizes the cleanliness and vitality of Billie in contrast to the dowdiness of Maggie. Reality

destroys the romantic image. The girl receives a beautiful velvet jewel box which she opens with thoughts of a ring; but it only contains sweets. Love dies because there is no beauty to sustain it:

> . . . too long entombed, too long used to neglecting my teeth . . . I forgot the body can be a mirror to the soul.
>
> . . . subastral love flickers, struggles to evoke some past echo of wonder and delight, and begins wholly to be extinguished. (p. 65)

The story of diillusionment is rendered almost poetically by Maggie with colourful and figurative language. Billie is 'an executioner in a beautiful coat'. 'Everything bears fingerprints of neglect' (66). Feelings of longing, or regret and loss are strongly expressed in the language:

> What happened to the day I had dreamed about, those long hours of winding exploration, fingers tracing lines of unknown experiences on faces wet with tremulous emotion? . . . I stood alone and watched with pity and with panic the blond stranger facing his disenchantment and could only turn away because apart from the ugliness of my weeping willow countenance, I irritated and appalled him. (p. 68)

It is from Victorian Norman's account of events that we learn that Billie is repelled by Maggie's sloppiness:

> 'I just couldn't bear the mess, Norman, I just couldn't get used to the dirt everywhere . . . '
>
> 'The awful thing is that if only she had washed a bit more and looked a bit prettier and cooked just a bit better, I'd have married her. I really would.' (pp. 102-103)

This is the way Maggie's dreams are destroyed. Billie has moved away from the era of the old and rotting socks, the fingers stained with nicotine, and the too-long toenails (49) into a consciousness of conventionality. He cares what people think. The tidy house, the well-cooked meals are important to him. Maggie is so despondent when he leaves that she attempts suicide. She survives only because of Norman's intervention.

Some typically Bainbridge humour emerges in the characterization of Norman. A born survivor, he is a practical minded conformist among a group of the unconventional. His attempted seduction of Julia is recorded quite differently from Maggie's impassioned recital of events:

> I don't think she was very responsive but a middle-class upbringing is a great help. If you have been taught that a refusal will cause offence and that politeness is next to Godliness then you don't push a house guest away in a hurry. . . . As I straightened up in a quiver of energy, bare to the elements, ready to spring upon my hostess with the tightly closed eyes,

> pausing only for a moment to stretch the toe of my right foot, numb from the constriction of a Chelsea boot, I saw a little window half obscured by a creeper . . . and outside the glass . . . the sardonic face of Claud. Then my reflexes saved me and jerkily, like an old film running backwards, I re-dressed again.
> (pp. 112-113)

Norman's matter-of-fact appraisal of a situation which appears advantageous to him, as well as his imagined discomfiture at being caught is very funny. The final ironic touch comes when Claud reveals it is impossible to see through that window anyway.

In the characterization of Norman, Bainbridge has the perfect vehicle for satirizing the actions of two emotional women. Seen through his eyes, some of their more tragic moments dissolve into laughable situations:

> She moved suddenly as if propelled by an almighty hand and touched the case of china figures. I thought she was in one of her appreciation of beauty moods, a little accentuated by drink. . . . How often had she cried to be given patience to endure her load, she with the soul made for loveliness. It appeared to me that she had thrown patience aside and was about to seize her rightful portion, and she might have done had not Claud cried out -- 'Leave it Shebah' -- very stern, as if he was addressing the dog. . . . In a spastic fit of lamentation Shebah tossed her ruined head and jerked the spectacles from the nose of Julia.
> (pp. 138-139)

Norman is a total contrast to Maggie and Shebah. Their happiness depends on the love and affection they receive from others; but he is seemingly oblivious to the finer nuances of feeling. He does not give or expect sympathy, believing that if he does so, more will be demanded (142). Independent and detached, when the weekend is over he dismisses it as a time with nothing to remember:

> Someone perhaps found a daddy to rock the baby's cradle . . . someone perhaps found pleasure in the minute wound in the flesh of a swollen ankle. But I cannot be sure I shall remember, being so uninvolved.
> (pp. 143-144)

The sense of separation which Karl Miller [31] finds in Bainbridge is strongly evidenced in this book. Norman's lack of sympathy for Maggie has changed the nature of his relationship with her. Before her attempted suicide he admired her as a 'creature of light and shade, amusing and entertaining'. Afterwards he brands her as a 'hopeless neurotic'. He blames her for giving way to an act of irresponsibility. Feeling this way, he is no longer at ease with her (123). Shebah's preoccupation with self alieniates her, too, from Norman:

> . . . her temperament . . . I ascribe to the

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[31] Karl Miller, 'A Novelist Worth Knowing,' New York Review of Books, 16 May 1974, p. 25.

> absence of her ovaries. An insistently expressed egotism is the keynote of the hypogonad character. Coupled with and dependent on this is an active resentment towards a world that is inadequately mindful of her imagined excellences. (p. 97)

He describes her as 'Maggie taken to extremes of eccentricity forty years along' (123). Thus he detaches himself from his two friends. Temperamental differences form barriers to love and affection.

Small acts of vindictiveness also mar friendship. The story of Billie's visit to Claud's antique store highlights the malice in human nature:

> He purchased a stuffed mallard for thirty shillings and told Claud to keep the change. . . . according to Claud, he dropped it case and all in the yard when getting into his motor car. . . . The exhaust smoke from the green Crossley dropped like a veil and covered the shining pieces. Claud, to be even, directed him a good ten miles out of his route north . . . before taking Maggie for a healing walk. (pp. 120-121)

Life is like a game of chess which nobody wins. Loneliness and separation are shown to be inevitable conditions of life. The factors which create them are beyond an individual's control. Shebah's story is one long plea for understanding in which she constantly tries to understand the nature of communication between people:

> It could have been so charming, this weekend, in this ideal setting . . . but almost from the moment we arrived there were undertones and atmospheres and one or other of them would vanish into another room and whisper away, or there would be looks at each other, and those tedious half finished sentences, like the half of a letter you find in the street, that you can't make head or tail of, no matter how hard you try. It's as if all this fascination with sex builds up a big wall betwixt the devotees and the non-devotees. If you are not a participant there is simply so much that is incomprehensible. (pp. 162-163)

Shebah also believes that the way people talk has an influence on the quality of communication:

> They never sound as if they believe what they say. . . . The art of conversation is communication and communication is a thing that must be felt. The spoken word seems to have lost its meaning. With all this television any little chit of a nothing . . . can mouth about life and suffering. (p. 170)

The frustration of not being understood leads Shebah to think she is associating with fools:

> Some of my so-called friends were dreadful fools. Their banality robbed my heart of heights of happiness. There were times when I felt oppressed by a sense of omission, a feeling that I was utterly alone, that the words I mouthed continually through my unkissed lips were words behind glass and nobody could grasp their meaning. At least not the fools I knew. (p. 192)

The situations and conditions of misunderstandings between people are endless, as Bainbridge has shown in this novel.

The stream of consciousness technique provides the key to an understanding of the three main characters. They have told their own stories. Claud, on the other hand, remains an enigma. Why was he shooting into the woods knowing his guests could be there? Did he intend to shoot anyone? Norman tells us he was a good marksman (96), and Claud himself reveals that the gun is accurate (89). Did he aim at the stone angel with such perfect calculation that he judged Shebah to be in the way of a richochetting bullet? It is rather curious that he regards the gun as a way of establishing contact with the flesh, ' a precise acoustical reality that one can hardly ignore.' 'It does establish reality,' he remarks (89). His statement implies that the shooting was a deliberate attempt to wound Shebah so that she will have something real to complain about instead of imagined wrongs and hurts. Maggie confirms this view:

> . . . she probably felt better for being shot at, less under an obligation to Claud . . . it will give her something to remember, something concrete, personal, to add to her list of Jewish persecution. (p. 83)

Claud and Maggie believe that physical contact, even if it

be injurious, helps cement relationships.

Theme and structure are related in showing a sense of loneliness and separation. Three individual characters tell a story about a weekend which has provided a different experience for each of them. All recognize the difficulties of understanding and being understood. The nature of the relationship between one person and another determines the quality of life, makes it a harmonious and fulfilling experience or an awful one which devastates a sensitive human being. There is a deep, intangible unity between Claud and Maggie because they have shared the common feelings of deep suffering over a broken love affair. Norman and Shebah have not been so badly hurt, consequently they feel no empathy with Maggie.

A Weekend with Claud can be viewed as an attempt to capture the essence of life and reality. In this novel Bainbridge is trying to find a method of expressing a multiplicity of views on human nature. The pen is like the camera, an inadequate instrument to capture the dynamic nature of life:

> Missing were the daisies sewed tight in the grass, so little, so white, and the exquisite line of dust on Shebah's hat. (p. 206)
>
> . . . but in the end it was only a photograph and lifeless. (p. 90)

> The old woman with the bandage around her legs sat on her cane chair. Her eyes were veiled by the thick lens of her curious glasses. A rose is a rose is a rose, thought Betty . . . (p. 152)

Each character's story is initiated by the photograph, as if the author were attempting to bring the still portrait to life: but at the end she realizes she has not fully succeeded, the daisies are still hidden in the grass, the miniature tiger is stalking through its tiny jungle, unseen (206).

The novel bears little resemblance in style and structure to Bainbridge's later work, but there are some elements in this first published book that are more fully developed in succeeding novels. There is the biographical aspect which is a strong feature in all her books, most of them containing facts from her family's life and background. They have been incorporated here into Maggie's story, and, to a lesser extent, into Norman's. Billie seems to be an amalgam of the author's first husband, Mr. Davies, and a later lover whom she brings to life in Sweet William. Some of Maggie's reminiscences are echoed in Another Part of the Wood, Harriet Said..., Sweet William and A Quiet Life in which the biographical circumstances have been disclosed by the author herself.

The book is similar to the others in that Bainbridge is using only a few characters and has detached them from outside influences for a short period of time. The themes of difficulties of understanding, ineffectiveness of communication, and the general unpredictability of mankind found in this early work are primarily her concern in all her books. Clothes are important and symbolize the wearer. Objects, too, are beginning to assume significance, as are the claustrophobic, seedy surroundings which have an adverse effect on characters. Physical shortcomings are noted, often indicating some fault or lack in the owner. For example, Norman is deaf, Shebah is nearly blind, and Julia is short-sighted. Imperfections of the body are particularly important to female characters here and in all Bainbridge novels, as perhaps they are in society at large. She is especially interested in body and personality traits as a determinant factor in life's satisfactions.

Although A Weekend with Claud has many trace elements that we have come to associate with Bainbridge, it is not typical of her later work. Most obvious is the difference in style. In this novel the prose is flowery, explicit and wordy; later she trims it down to a remarkable brevity and tautness. Missing, also, is the sparkling wit, the dark humour, the enjoyable dialogue and the sense of immediacy.

One of the strong points in her later novels is her excellent evocation of background which contributes in no small way towards underlining her themes and that, too, is missing here.

The stream of consciousness technique, as the author uses it here, is not especially amenable to her particular talents in that it involves a psycho-analytical approach to characterization where she must focus on the thoughts, rather than on the outward aspects of characters. So much introspection tends to make abstractions out of them, so that, paradoxically enough, they emerge less human and less real than her later creations.

The novel has strong thematic links with its predecessor. Again, the author's primary concern is to show how important and difficult it is to attain harmonious relationships. Another Part of the Wood is a study of people relating to one another, an exploration of the complex nature of communication, of how the quality of life depends on the success or failure of an individual to integrate into a group or community. Unsatisfactory relationships are frequently caused by ridiculous habits and actions, so that the friction which ensues, although it may hurt the participants, is very funny to the observer. Friends, lovers, husbands, wives, even children have their quirks, which form barriers to understanding and which ensure that the state of happiness to which they aspire is seldom achieved. The small group who have come to the country to enjoy a short holiday are an ill-assorted group who have more than their share of human weaknesses and fallibility. John Naughton [32] colourfully describes them as a nest of vipers:

> First in the pecking order comes Joseph, educational administrator and emotional fraud, complete with second-hand Jaguar, patronising social conscience and the glib vocabulary of Sunday-supplement liberalism. In tow, Joseph has Kidney and Dotty -- the former a maladjusted child adopted in a fit

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[32] John Naughton, 'Creepies,' The Listener, 13 December, 1979.

> of generosity, the latter the latest in a string of gullible, inadequate mistresses; there is also Roland, Joseph's son by an earlier marriage. This Jaguar load of misfortune is desposited in a corral of woodland holiday shacks owned by a taciturn, indefatigable giant called George and tended by a machine-tool fitter with the improbable name of Balfour. To complete the picture, the group is joined by Lionel -- a military has-been whose psyche is immovably locked on his transient greatness in the war -- and his wife, May, a sexy, overweight little bitch.

With their faults thus catalogued, they do indeed sound like the venomous creatures to which he refers; but Bainbridge characters are rarely the awful people they appear to be or, if they are awful, they have good reason to be. As in real life, one recognizes disparities. They become different people at different times, changing in response to varying conditions or in relationship to different people.

In this novel, most are lonely individuals and the themes of isolation, loss and departure, to which Karl Miller [33] draws attention in his excellent review, are overtly expressed. As in A Weekend with Claud, each member of the group experiences a feeling of alienation. Bainbridge repeatedly affirms in her fiction that physical separation

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[33] Miller, p. 26.

is an incontrovertible condition of life which precludes the possibility of forming close, lasting ties. Undoubtedly, she was influenced to some extent by her father, to whom she attributes the beliefs that are most explicitly conveyed in this early work.

When Joseph becomes aware that Kidney has understood the taking of his pills as a necessary condition for love and acceptance, he thinks of the many rejections one has to bear, of the separation which begins in early childhood:

> No one could admit failure, no one dare admit an absence of love. Some tried in dreams, some tried by touching fingers in darkened rooms, some, the very few, succeeded, but only for a few days, a few hours. The illusion, fostered from birth to grave that man belonged to man, that love existed. First the parasite growth, jelly wrapped in the womb, mother's little seed, and once born, wrapped in woolly blankets, all the uncles and aunts, the fathers, the brothers and sisters, the far-off cousins, the people next door, the cousins close by. Then gradually the sloughing off of the old shoots and the grafting of the new ones; the aunts and the grandfathers beginning to be buried, the mothers and the fathers starting to die . . . the brothers and the sisters becoming strangers, to be replaced in their turn by the wife or wives, the sweetheart or mistress . . . [34]

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[34]Beryl Bainbridge, Another Part of the Wood (London: Hutchinson New Authors Limited, 1967), p. 89.

Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

Marriage does not guarantee love and affection either. Bainbridge reveals some the ridiculous reasons why it does not in her portrait of Lionel and May. The girl's background and reasons for getting married are hardly conducive to future happiness. Before she met Lionel she was 'gay and attractive and the men loved her as she tumbled from one bed to another, working as a secretary in the day and going to clubs and restaurants at night' (110). When she met Lionel she was impressed by his manners and his Triumph Herald. After they were married the Triumph Herald disappeared. Shortly after that they were evicted from their Bayswater flat, then the Maida Vale one: Lionel kept telling May that his shares were looking up but they were always down the following day. As Lionel's fortune declines, so does May's affection:

> She could take the caresses of the man of the Stock Exchange, soon to make his million, but she despised the tubby husband panting on the rented settee in the flat with the . . . plastic tulips on the windowsill. (p. 111)

Many and varied are the barriers to love. Lionel's docility causes May much frustration:

> How she kept fighting him, how she wasted her time trying to goad him and wound him. It just never got through to him; he was encased in a suit of armour. It was stupid

> really because all the time she was screaming at him she did know fractionally that he was good and sincere and normal . . . that he was light years away from people like Joseph, superior in every way. Yet she could not tell him for she hated him for his rolling belly and the bald patch on his head and the way he would go on about the army and deep down . . . she was frightened of him and what he thought of her and she could not explain herself how she had come to marry this stranger with the thinning hair. (pp. 109-110)

The passage illustrates the vacillating nature of thoughts and emotions. May moves from frustration to a grudging respect, then to contempt and finally to fear and bewilderment.

The inability to understand and communicate with another, even in the closest bond of marriage or a love affair, causes individuals to question their own worth. May is distressed because Lionel never calls her by her name and so she comes to feel she has no identity. Dotty also finds it hard to achieve a sense of belonging. Her first marriage has failed and her affair with Joseph is an unrewarding one. She envisions people as totally and insurmountably separated, recognizing, too, how vulnerable one is. Little things like the reminder of a physical imperfection can hurt:

> 'It's all so silly . . . you feel fine and quite pretty and you're with friends and suddenly you overhear someone saying --

> hasn't she got a big nose -- and everything just crashes down . . . (p. 115)

Life is so transitory that Dotty wonders if anything, even expressing love for someone, is important:

> 'It sounds like all the same in the end . . . saying it . . . not saying it. All the fuss . . . all that wasted emotion . . . and then you lean out of a window and look at the back view of someone going away, someone who meant everything . . . it's just so monotonous . . . all those back views . . . as if one didn't exist. I don't have any identity . . . no identity. (p. 116)

The fleeting nature of life is acknowledged by everyone in his own way. Wille, the handyman, is an old man who nostalgically recalls his life as a lad, thinking of it as 'one long leap of loneliness till the nights of the hot-pot suppers' (103). There is some pathos in the fact that such seemingly trivial events create the happiest moments in a man's life. For Willie, a poor man, occasions were rare enough when he could enjoy the camaraderie of his companions but as he looks back, treasuring his memories, he is full of regret that he cannot recapture even the occasional closeness he enjoyed in his youth:

> . . . everything was different those nights somehow.. . . Everyone knowing each other,

> a funny kind of knowing, though it was a daft way to think because didn't they still know each other, though some were dead long ago, and didn't they nod to each other in the village? It wasn't the same. Definitely not. (p. 104)

Lionel, an ex-serviceman, equates life with war, success depending on good communication. May's betrayal instigates thoughts of how people change:

> How often had he met old comrades from the regiment who seemed at first the old comrades, untouched by time. Only later, after some conversation . . . were they not the same but altered beyond recall . . . People changed and in changing affected others, were affected in their turn, a continual process of addition and subtraction. What remained was not recognizable. To know was to be in communication. Cut the communication lines and . . . no information could come through. If . . . the lapse of time were long enough, the individuals and the situations became different, alien. (pp. 269-270)

Balfour and George, as hosts, observe their visitors' behaviour with some interest. Balfour feels something of an outsider among them. He senses their feelings of insecurity behind the facade of their manners:

> Behind everything they said lay something else . . . there was something wrong in it all, outside his understanding. (p. 268)
> None of it was real. He could not begin to guess

> what they were like deep inside themselves, they were so hell-bent on putting up a front . . . they were scared of being what they presumed was ordinary in case nobody noticed them, let alone loved them. (p. 257)

Balfour, like Norman in A Weekend with Claud, thinks family ties are important. He believes that cutting these ties results in a feeling of alienation:

> There was family and blood ties . . . bashing some kid on the nose if he thumped your younger brother, and sticking up for your Dad even if you did think . . . he was a bastard . . . and telling the rent man your Mam was out when all the time she was hiding behind the back door. (p. 268)

It is notable that Balfour's background is working-class and consequently his values are different from the middle-class group with which he is associating. It is another reason why he feels an outsider among them.

George has a different view of personal relationships. He believes it is necessary for man to be isolated from outside influences in order to be happy. Balfour calls him the 'detached Commandant'. A self-styled observer, he tells May that he has studied the problems of the Jews for some time and the prolonged contemplation of their suffering has placed him in an aloof position (276).

> 'For most of us, suffering can only be observed at second hand. At such a remove we find it . . . difficult to believe, despite proof, despite documents. We have been taught that to love is to experience self-negation . . . hence our sense of guilt when we find that we cannot forget ourselves. We imagine that we can be transformed by . . . someone more generous than ourselves . . . but we are all alike . . . we hold up a mirror reflecting identical natures.'
>
> 'We cannot care for other people. We can only observe. We have only enough to spare for our own needs, we must give compassion . . . to ourselves. (pp. 276-277)

Like everyone else, he has his inconsistencies. For all his carefully thought out theories, it is apparent in actual practise that he is quite a compassionate man. He is very concerned about Balfour and tends to his injuries when he is hurt. He has invited guests to his country estate so that they may enjoy a brief respite from the city.

During their few days together characters realize the difficulties of getting along but find themselves unable to penetrate the barriers that keep them from liking one another. Relationships are mutually abrasive. Day to day exchanges are often injurious, usually something of a power struggle; and in closer kinship the wounds are deeper. Pleasant affinities are elusive in an ill-assorted assembly with little in common other than being in the same place at the same time. May recognizes the problem:

> [It was] as if they had all been plucked up out of nowhere and set down with the express purpose of being amusing or interesting or something, and they had all been found wanting. (p. 225)

Attempts to alleviate loneliness result in hurt feelings, betrayal and boredom. Lionel escapes from it all by listening to the financial report:

> All alone in the little cabin sat Lionel listening . . . to the market trends. A liturgy of big business, a rosary of abbreviations, and percentages, gilt-edged and gold leafed. He would wait . . . till the announcer said Goodnight gentlemen. One gentleman to another. (p. 228)

There is consolation in the ritual of the stock market. He is safe from betrayal there. The polite announcer will call him a gentleman and he will feel like one.

Nothing emphasizes the nature of isolation so dramatically as the final scene, in which Balfour discovers the dead child:

> It was not his child, he could not feel surprised or shocked. He had always it seemed been on the threshhold of some experience that would open a door . . . and now here was just such an experience and there was no sudden illumination, no revelation . . . Indeed it appeared to him that the door had closed forever . . . there were no pictures, no truths, no emotions. Soon . . . there would be . . . a general exodus, a disper-

> into the landscape, a journey into another part of the wood. It would soon be over.
> (pp. 287-288)

It is through Balfour's vision that we experience the death of the child. He is perhaps the most worthy of the characters in his humility and humanitarianism, but he is very much a realist too, as he has demonstrated in his approach to the problems of the poor. His vision, we feel, is the clearest of all.

There is not a great deal of action in Another Part of the Wood other than the exchanges between one person and another. The ordinariness or unworthiness of each human being is emphasized together with the normality of the surroundings. The unusual is cloaked in the same dull mantle and tends to pass unnoticed. It is the world of Woodbines, Tesco Stores and the Midland Bank. It is the world of the Profumo scandal and P.J. Proby's song, Somewhere There's a Place for You. The dramatic event in the novel is the death of Roland, the reader being aware that he has taken an overdose of phenobarbitone some time previously, so that this event fits in with the general drifting and accidental quality of life as Bainbridge depicts it here. No one is really to blame, yet many are not blameless either. At one point George remarks:

> . . . nothing was entirely accidental nor entirely planned. Chaos could escalate to such a point that what preceded it achieved a degree of order. (p. 166)

Such is the nature of life. One cannot say with certainty that the innocent die because of the apathy of those responsible. Each one has his own share of suffering and tries to fulfil obligations. Roland becomes a victim because of the element of chance in life. Joseph taunts the boy about his skinny body -- an innocent enough start to the chain of events that finally results in the child's death. Kidney is large -- he might well have been small -- therefore he is a model for Roland to imitate. Kidney takes sedatives because he is mentally disturbed and feels the drugs afford some security in life; but he is too dull to realize the danger of Roland swallowing all his pills, so he is blameless. He tries to tell Joseph that the boy took them but Joseph is too preoccupied to pay attention to what he is saying. There is the possibility that Roland could have been saved had Joseph been more alert and perceptive about the real problem instead of wasting time worrying about possible sexual abuse of the boy by Kidney about which May has been nagging him.

By retracing events that led to the boy's death, one can fully appreciate the author's skill in depicting the complexity of feelings, motives and choices that confront

one all the time, as well as showing how vulnerable we are to pure accident and the unpredictable. Everyone is endowed with innumerable contradictory traits which manifest themselves according to the mood of the moment -- kindliness and thoughtlessness, intelligence and stupidity, generosity and selfishness, vanity and humility. All sorts of passions are generated by mankind and it is usually very difficult to trace the source. No one is totally blameless, nor is anyone totally criminal.

In this particular part of the wood, the microworld in which Bainbridge has placed her assortment of humanity, people are searching for something better, yet there is little hope of ever finding it. They recognize their deficiencies but seem powerless to overcome them:

> Why did he find it so difficult to like someone so fleshily built? Or too thin, or too small, or too old? Why was it so difficult to like anyone for any length of time? He himself did not know if he was unable to love because he held no tenderness for himself or because he felt himself to be perfect and out of reach of compassion. . . . He did not remember either the lengths or depths of any of his involvements with any one person. He was either absorbed or empty and one feeling followed the other. (pp. 24-25)

> He must insist that Kidney do some hard physical exercise. . . . Tomorrow without fail he and Roland would climb that mountain. Believing it, he looked for a moment longer at the forest . . . (p. 27)

Joseph believes he will be able to do all these things, but he never does take Roland up the mountain, nor will he ever solve Kidney's problems.

Lionel, like Joseph, is a self-deceiver, believing May to be a loving wife when in reality she is utterly contemptuous of him. Dotty is also deluding herself that her relationship with Joseph is a satisfying one. Even the children are deceived because life itself is full of deceptions. Roland thinks it is clean and safe up on the mountain but when he reaches the top he is disapppointed to find only a ruined tower with a mound of refuse in the corner. It is there that he swallows the fatal dose of phenobarbitone. The trip up the mountain becomes symbolic of unfulfilled promises and expectations.

It is part of Bainbridge's art to present these rather sober themes lightly, and although Another Part of the Wood is more serious in tone than her later novels it it not without that characteristic Bainbridge humour. She has a flair for exploiting the ludicrous, the inconsistent and the banal in human nature, thus preserving the balance between the serious and comical aspects of life. An example is to be found in her presentation of the scene in the sleeping hut when Balfour has to share accommodation with Lionel and May.

Lionel is entertaining May with the erotic tale of Lalla Rookh (ironical in view of the fact that Lionel himself is impotent). May's attention wanders off to motherhood and general dissatisfaction with the concept of love:

> It made one old if one's mother died, it was the beginning of the end.. . . Wasn't it futile the way one forgot what mothers did? All that loving and kissing and rocking and changing.. . . Either you were with someone or you weren't, it didn't really matter. Either the person wasn't right or the time wasn't, or love came out as something else. . . . Take Lalla Rookh -- she didn't really care for Abdalla or he for her, it was just that they were all so perfumed and sexy, and it was all right to behave like that in church in those days. (p. 150)

The accidental eavesdropper reacts quite differently:

> Balfour, alone in the upper air, was huge and bloated with excitement . . . It shouldn't happen to a d-dog . . . (p. 149)

When Balfour tries to tell George what happened, he cannot find the words, and George in turn, cannot draw him out. Lalla Rookh becomes Larry O'Rourke, whereupon George mentions the Irish are fond of singing. When Balfour corrects him and refers to a temple, George coolly remarks that Lionel was in the East, in Palestine. Thus communication is comically distorted and understanding thwarted.

Comic effects are also created by the juxtaposition of dissimilar characters. The grave George, who is very comfortable with the 'normal' unhumorous Balfour, becomes upset when the young man sheds some of his inhibitions after drinking. Sensitive about the Jews, he takes exception to Balfour's little limerick:

> 'There was an old Jew of Belgrade
> Who kept a dead whore in a cave
> He said I admit
> I'm a bit of a ----'

'Why Jew?' asks George, as he fixes censorious eyes on Balfour who then wonders if he should not have inserted Scot instead of Jew, deploring his own lack of sensitivity. Joseph's orderliness is outraged by Dotty's carelessness, so that she must surreptitiously attempt to remove her soiled underwear from under the settee while his back is turned. May is disgusted with Dotty because she does not exploit her femininity more. Such inconsequential misunderstandings and abrasions are the common currency of life. They are amusing when happening to someone else.

Bainbridge uses the same method of juxtaposing unlike characters to show the humorous side of the trip to the village. Balfour's extreme self-consciousness causes him to be shocked by Dotty's flamboyancy:

> The flowered coat was made of some kind of velvet. It rippled and shone; it was orange and blue and green and black, with a mustard yellow ground, and there were buttons small as beads going from wrist to elbow. He thought it was terrible.
>
> He prayed she wouldn't wear it now. He visualized her stalking through the busy market town, the bell-bottoms of her denim trousers flaring out beneath the long and violently coloured hem. (p. 200)

Incongruous objects are similarly paired with startling effect. In this instance it is a gaudy velvet coat and a best end of neck (presumably mutton) so large it can only be carried with difficulty. The ailing Balfour must bear this burden stoically as he stumbles along the road, faintly resembling a Christ figure carrying a cross.

By exploiting human foibles Bainbridge succeeds in eliciting sympathy for her foolish characters while she is poking fun at them. Lionel feels his war experience qualifies him to look after the toilet paper in the latrine. He has picked up a worthless metal token which becomes the focus of many adventurous tales in which he plays the hero. Each story is different yet he believes they are all true. He can forgive May her deceits and cruelties, but when she throws away this piece of metal that has assumed such importance he experiences a 'prolapse of feeling'. It is one of the odd facts of life that the destruction of dreams

can hinge on a seemingly insignificant action.

Another Part of the Wood lacks the sharpness of Bainbridge's later books. Her characters do not have as much vitality, nor is the prose as incisive. By comparison, the later novels are more firmly compacted. This is a somewhat drawn out novel, far more explanatory, and, as she herself has described it, [35] a little more 'flowery' than the later ones. She wrote this third novel in the style of A Weekend with Claud, which was written immediately preceding it. Patricia Craig, [36] reviewing the revised edition, feels that although we are reminded of the author's exceptional ability to make the squalid and the commonplace funny, the narrative lacks the distinction of the later books, partly because the faculty of selection, used to insure that nothing goes down but the most accurate, most expressive word or phrase, is not yet working to its greatest capacity, even in the much compressed later version. [37]

There are Biblical and Shakespearian echoes throughout

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[35] 'Beryl Bainbridge says . . . ,' p. 8a.

[36] Patricia Craig, Books & Bookmen, February 1980, p. 58.

[37] Bainbridge revised this novel in 1979, paring it down from its original 288 pages to 176. It is the original version upon which this study is based.

the book which are but another example of the rather strained pretentious effects being sought after as they are not presented in any fully organized pattern. Symbolically, the group are entering a Garden of Eden which is already inhabited by the 'giant of a man', George, an idealist, who champions the persecuted. The Biblical references, however, only serve to contrast the ideal with the actual. George, in his idealism, fails to have any real empathy with his fellowman. He is unable to understand the practicalties of helping those in need. He talks about natural beauty when the poor have rotten homes, insufficient food and little medical care. The Biblical Joseph, like Bainbridge's creation, was an introspective man, an interpreter of dreams. Both were given a coat of many colours, but whereas the Biblical Joseph was betrayed by his brethren, this one is a betrayer. Roland makes the observation -- ironic in view of later events -- that his dad would never sacrifice him as he does not believe in God.

There are evident similarities, however, which make this novel typically Bainbridge. The author focusses on a mere handful of characters, confined in close proximity, for a short period of time. They are characteristic of the passive individuals we find in most of her books who, though seldom seen in physical action, have strong passions. Conversations

are at cross purposes and are largely commonplace. The most unheroic of creatures, presented without a trace of sentimentality, her characters are often likeable because of their humanity and uniqueness. Even in this early work she has a keen eye for natural description with an artist's perception of colour, texture, shape and detail. She pinpoints the action within the social and historical context by referring to prominent news items and popular songs of the time.

In common with her other novels, Another Part of the Wood is carefully plotted with everything working towards a clearly defined end in a circular pattern. People assemble for a period of time and work out their various destinies. Then there is a general exodus, a dispersal into another part of the wood. Characters arrive, perform for a while, then depart, seemingly unimportant in the larger scheme of things. As the title implies, the scenery may change but Bainbridge leaves us with the impression that most of these characters will go on repeating the same process, never growing, never getting anywhere no matter where they go.

When the novel was first published in 1968 it attracted little attention from reviewers. An unsigned review in

Times Literary Supplement was not complimentary:

> Miss Bainbridge is less successful in arousing our interest in and sympathy for dreadful misfits seeking salvation. The depressing effect may be intentional . . . but one has the feeling Miss Bainbridge intended some Huis-Clos-like conclusions to appear and they do not. [38]

Few other reviews appeared, probably because Bainbridge was a relatively unknown writer in 1968 with only an unsuccessful first novel to her credit.

Reviews of the revised edition which was published in 1979 were more plentiful as Bainbridge had by this time established herself as a prominent novelist. In a general way, Patricia Craig's [39] remarks sum up the reception the 1979 version received. Most reviewers felt the conciseness of the later book was a great improvement on the expansive wordiness of the original. There was muted praise for the glimmer of Bainbridge talent, but most agreed it was not one of her best books. Presenting another view, Betty Falkenberg writes:

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[38] 'Cold Comfort,' rev. of Bainbridge: Another Part of the Wood, Times Literary Supplement, 14 November, 1968, p. 1269.

[39] Craig, p. 58.

> . . . she has a fine ear and previously has exhibited an enjoyment of dialogue for its own sake. Here the dialogue is not naturalistic; it does not seek so much to imitate class levels of speech . . . as to capture the quintessence of persons and states of being. . . . If an atmosphere is established, it is part of the statement. Boredom, insensate chit-chat are so infused with evil that they rise to another plane. Bainbridge is doing something in this novel that was not apparent in her earlier ones. She is artfully creating a Fiction, and the sum, by virtue of its being less, has become beautifully more than its parts. [40]

It is notable that Craig treats the 1979 edition as one of the earlier novels while Falkenberg considers it one of the later ones. The former is basing her opinion on comparison with later novels, the latter with previous ones (or what she considers to be so) -- a confusing situation well worthy of Miss Bainbridge.

Some lack of enthusiasm may stem from the so-called underlying theme, described on the jacket as, 'a study of selfishness and self-absorption disguised as concern'. This implies, as Craig has pointed out, a disapproving assessment of the characters by the author and it is a totally misleading estimate of the intentions of Bainbridge,

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[40] Betty Falkenberg, 'The Price of Deceit,' The New Leader, 5 May 1980, p. 16.

who is the least didactic of novelists. Approaching the book as a lesson in morality is, without doubt, most unrewarding.

CHAPTER III

HARRIET SAID...

Following Another Part of the Wood (1968) Bainbridge published her first-written novel, Harriet Said... (1972). It is an exploration of the consciousness of two teen-age girls, impatient to enter the adult world and determined, during one summer, to search for 'experience'. In an interview with Gareth Marshallsea [41] the author reveals some of the facts about the origins of the novel. She had read a newspaper report of a New Zealand murder case where two young girls killed their mother. After reading the story, she looked up everything she could find about it in the Collins Newspaper Library. The incident started her thinking about her own childhood and how such a thing could so easily come about in a given situation. She recalled a school friend of hers, a very strong and dominant person, of whom she was afraid. 'I was really scared of the power she seemed to have,' Bainbridge remarks. Thus it was that she created Harriet Said....

Keenly aware, as always, of her own early experiences in the Thirties, she remembers that children had power in

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[41] Gareth Marshallsea, 'Beryl Bainbridge: dressmaker novelist,' Books & Bookmen, 19 February 1974, p. 52.

those days because they grew up in a completely secret world which they wouldn't dream of sharing with grown-ups. She remembers it as an era when children were infinitely more mature as they watched and listened more. In those days there was no question of the children staying behind. They visited relatives with their parents, they sat for two or three hours without talking, and they observed. That, she believes, gave them something to rebel against. 'You wondered: who are they these awful people, your parents? You hoped: I am adopted perhaps...'. Bainbridge 's recollection of her childhood world is of a claustrophobic and restrictive environment which nevertheless cultivated certain powers. It is the world of Harriet and her friend.

> I myself find it very strange when reviewers say, what extraordinary characters, how weirdly they behave. The only reason for it I can think of must lie in the mechanics of story-telling. . . . The flashback at the beginning, the word 'scream', and the death scene at the end . . . make Harriet seem evil. But the world I grew up in is the world these girls inhabit. And if you end up writing, the best upbringing you could have was the kind I had. There must equally be millions of men and women who have fallen by the wayside because of such an up-bringing. [42]

An interesting and astute study of adolescence,

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[42] May, p. 49.

Harriet Said... is a perfect illustration of the in-between stage of life when the child is gradually emerging as an adult, of the traumatic experience of leaving the world of dependent childhood to enter a new one of adult responsibility. It is the time to begin 'observing' life and taking stock of adults in their world, the time of diaries, when happenings have to be recorded in writing so that they can be read again and relived in order to wrest from them as much emotional satisfaction as possible. It is the age of dramatizing every little event, thinking of death and aging for a while, more for the thrilling feelings that are evoked than for any serious contemplation about life's tragic aspects. It is also the age of trying to outmanoeuvre parents and guardians so that one may explore thoroughly the new-found world.

On one level, Bainbridge renders an accurate portrayal of two adolescent girls behaving quite naturally. The narrator as a spectator of life fulfils her role very well. She states clearly that she is, or starts out as an interrogator and spectator (under Harriet's guidance):

> She said we were not to become involved, we were too young, only to learn. She said our information was a kind of training course for later life; living at second-hand was our objective until we were old enough. [43]

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[43] Beryl Bainbridge, Harriet Said... (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1972), p. 39.

Subsequent quotations are taken from the above edition.

Her observations are those of the adolescent. She sees the Tsar, a middle-aged man, as rather ugly in aging:

> . . . a dark figure whose dancing days were over. (p. 28)
>
> . . . the sallow neck beneath the collar . . . 'It's probably dead white like something under a stone.' (p. 30)

As she finally moves from spectator to participant, in the midst of the experience so arduously sought after, surroundings must be noted so as to be reported:

> I looked at the chair by the fireplace, and the framed picture on the wall above it, memorizing positions so nothing should be lost when I told Harriet. I did not dare smile though, in case he opened his eyes. (p. 116)

The Tsar's attempted love-making has upset him more than it has the young girl. Far more interested in the concept of 'experience' than in what is actually taking place, she is completely unaffected by either the trauma or the impropriety of sexual involvement with a middle-aged married man:

> I imagined his sobs must be more from shame and self-pity than from sadness, so I just sat there and stored up the experience inside me. (p. 116)

An illicit rendezvous with two men (alone) in the house promises to be another thrilling adventure:

> Even Harriet was impressed by this. Drinking coffee was part of a way of life alien to us; it went with concerts and theatre going and people who played bridge of an evening. Seeing a man on the train in the summer, wearing a neat little suit of small check and shoes of honey-coloured suede, one could say with contempt that he drank coffee after his meal. But oh the stylish little panel in the back of his jacket, that flared out like a skirt frill as he alighted on the platform. Anyone who called in the evenings to the homes we knew wore gunmetal trousers and green jackets, and at nine o'clock were given tea and fancy cakes. They were always invited, never unexpected.
>
> We both sat silent, imagining the scene at the house of the Tsar, drinking coffee out of thin white cups, locked together in the lamplight with the two men: the delicious secrecy of the night, the unfamiliar bitter taste of the dark liquid, the fearful danger, footsteps coming up the path, the Tsar crumpled paper-pale against the window as Mrs. Biggs. . . fitted her key in the locked door. It was a lovely fearful thing to imagine. (p. 104)

To a certain extent, the passage redeems the girls. It convinces the reader that they are not the wordly, cynical creatures they sometimes appear to be. There is the hint of a fairly restrictive home life and of romantic yearnings for something a little more exciting. However, it is just this aggressive search after excitement that has overtones of evil and reveals a darker side of the girls'

nature: on the one hand, seemingly immature, innocent, imaginative and dreamy, on the other hand, scheming, lying and quite ruthless. That the narrator remains unnamed -- is just a short, stout, presence -- adds a macabre touch to the narrative, giving the eerie impression that perhaps there is only one girl with a Jekyll and Hyde personality, that there is no Harriet except as a figment of the other's imagination.

Coincidental with the naturalness of the girls, Bainbridge continually evokes a menacing and sinister atmosphere throughout this novel. Suspense is created as one waits and wonders what Harriet will say and do. The air of suspense originates in Chapter One with the narrator waiting for Harriet to tell her how to act in some awful emergency. They are both very frightened, but Harriet is scheming to make it appear that they are hysterical, with screaming and tears and flight for their parents' benefit, lest they should be blamed for what has happened. They are being asked if they are sure it was Mr. Biggs. Chapter Two is a flashback to the beginning of the school holiday and the sequence of events comprising the novel. It is only in the final chapter we learn that in Chapter One the girls are fleeing the scene of death and naming Mr. Biggs as a murderer.

It is a neatly planned book gathering momentum towards the climactic killing of Mrs. Biggs. The search for experience moves along with increasing intensity as the girls, led by Harriet, become bolder, more insistent, shifting from passive spectators to active participants and losing no opportunity to promote excitement. They define their goals as they go along. To begin with, it is enough to observe a love-making scene. Observation, however, leads to disillusionment: when they witness the joyless scene of Mr. and Mrs. Biggs making love, they suffer deep anguish:

> Never never never, beat my heart in the garden, never never; battering against invisible doors that sent agonizing pains along my wrists, unshed tears dissolving in my head . . . (p. 62)

The unimaginable has become pitiful. This dreadful passivity is not what they are looking for. Each new experience is supposed to stimulate more exciting thoughts and leave a 'tracery of sensations'. Harriet, with the help of her compliant friend, resolves to punish the Tsar for his docility.

The nature of the punishment is to force him into a liaison with the narrator, a form of humiliation which they hope will cause him a great deal of remorse. At the same time, the thrill-seeking adolescent will have the satisfaction

of experiencing a sexual relationship at first-hand. She learns that sought after thrills do not come up to expectations:

> Pinned there rapturelessly, a visit to the doctor, nothing more, and a distant uneasy discomfort of mind and body as if both had been caught in a door that had shut too quickly. (p. 135)

It is the unplanned, the killing of Mrs. Biggs, that provides the ultimate excitement. Concomitant with the gradual intensification of the girls' passions, the story of the Tsar and his wife is unfolding: it is, in contrast, a story of meekness, monotony and resignation. It is funny in its absurdity. Relating the story of his courtship and marriage, the Tsar confides that his reason for marrying was because his wife won a house in a raffle. If the winner did not live in it, the prize had to be forfeited, so, he explains to his young companion, it was really the only thing to do:

> 'Just a little ticket . . . a little ticket and you get married and settle down. (p. 46)
>
> . . . I hoped he could not realize how like a bad poem he sounded. Harriet would say it was because most people had unoriginal minds, but I could not think just then how else he could paraphrase his existence.
>
> Darkness settled along the neglected garden;

> leaves rustled frantically in a sudden small wind.
> 'What number was the ticket?' (p. 114)

The passage demonstrates how adroitly Bainbridge swings away from pathos or sentimentality. Just as one starts to sympathize with Mr. Biggs, attention is switched to the precocious child, who veers away from the relevant to the irrelevant. The author's sense of timing is unerring; the little pause to register the background noises as one waits for some words of comfort or encouragement, or some profound observation about the vagaries of life, only produces an inane question about a raffle ticket. It is notable how, in this small exchange Bainbridge has again confirmed the presence of Harriet, established the narrator as spectator, and maintained a sense of reality all at once.

Harriet Said... is a novel of post-war England infused with details which capture the temper of the times. The dreary predictability of the Biggs's lives is alleviated to some extent by the radio. With the advent of television still many years in the future, the radio is an important source of entertainment in working-class life and still regarded as something of a wonder:

> 'She'll be waiting in the dark listening to

> the wireless when I get in. I'll just pause in the hall . . . to get my face right . . . she'll say, 'It's a wonderful invention this you know, me sitting here with Max Jaffa playing just for me . . .' and I'll see how empty the room is except for her sitting on the sofa in her cardigan and sandals and the room in darkness but for the orange dial on the wireless. And you see . . . she'll know I've been talking to someone. I won't be able to hide it. It will put her out.' (p. 14)

Bainbridge also evokes the era with references to the residue of war. There are craters left by German bombs, potholes in the earth where soldiers trained, the abandoned barracks still stands, and Father still wears his old A.R.P. uniform to clean the house on Fridays (12-16). The girls remember getting into trouble for being on the shore with Italian prisoners.

Valentine Cunningham [44] has drawn attention to Bainbridge's special talent for rendering natural scenes and compliments the author on her 'sensitively rendered dunes, tadpole ponds and rhododendron lands' in Harriet Said.... One senses in Bainbridge a loving familiarity with the time and place of which she writes. Interspersed with the bizarre experiences of the girls is the delightful natural descriptions of the Lancashire countryside. She has an unerring

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[44] Valentine Cunningham, The Listener, 12 October 1972, p. 482.

instinct for creating strong visual impressions of scene which are interwoven so accurately with the moods of humanity as to be worthy of the Romantics. The narrator's contented mood is reflected in the peaceful street setting:

> Everything in the lane was so quiet, and similar, so conducive to calmness; the row of red-bricked, identical little houses; a toy-town line of chimney stacks bobbing blackened corks into the colourless sky. A Sunday decorum enveloped the lane in silence and respectability. Behind lace curtains, families sat in mettlesome companionship, shut securely in their boxes on the squares of lawn. (p. 58)

The outward calm of the scene threatens to be as fleeting as the girl's mood. The 'mettlesome companionship' of the family 'securely shut' in their houses is perhaps suggestive of the lull which comes before the storm. The same scene assumes a threatening quality in accordance with the tension felt by the girls as they embark on their illicit adventure outside the Tsar's house:

> . . . the back fences of the Timothy Street houses stretched in an unending stockade across the grass. Grey walls rose up behind the enclosure, curtains like eyelids drooped across blackened windows.
>
> Narrow and long lay the garden behind the house, spotted with fruit trees and black-currant bushes. A bed of flowering cabbages reared monstrous heads, swollen and decayed above the yellow soil. (p. 59)

With its Gothic-like overtones, Harriet Said... is an unusual novel for Bainbridge. The pervading atmosphere of evil is absent in her other books. Aggressive characters like the central figures who actively plan revenge are also rare in Bainbridge. Generally life has an accidental quality where passive characters may commit acts of revenge in a haphazard unplanned way.

Although the first written, the novel has more of the distinguishing features of the author's later work than the intervening A Weekend with Claud and Another Part of the Wood. Harriet Said... marks the first step towards Bainbridge's future as a superb stylist and it is on this book that she patterned her most successful novels. The spare, simple, suggestive sentences, the short paragraphs, the evocative descriptions of odd or amusing characters are typically Bainbridge:

> Dodie always walked down the lane, swollen ankles in apricot stockings, dressed forever in black. She would cry out to us as she passed our fence, 'Hallo Pets . . . How's my Pets?' She lived in a bungalow next to the lunatic asylum, handy for Papa, her husband, as Harriet said. (p. 9)

These characters appear briefly, introduced as part of the background scene, are usually submerged for a while only to

reappear later to fulfil their role in the narrative:

> In the beginning we never searched for experience . . . we never verbally abused each other except . . . to reassure our parents. It was Dodie who began it, telling us of the gay times she had known in her youth without Papa guessing. 'Making the friendly gesture' she had called it. And we liked her stories, we were fascinated. (p. 38)

The bizarre and the seedy are always included in Bainbridge's novels. Perjer is a good example. He is one of the failures of the world with whom she is preoccupied and who embodies some of the characteristics of those alcoholics and derelicts whom she sees lolling in doorways and sleeping in doss houses near her home in Camden Town. A doctor's son who studied to become a lawyer, Perjer lives the life of a hermit in an old shack and is sometimes to be found lying drunk in the ditch. A novelist not given to ignoring the outer fringes of society, she acknowledges the presence of social misfits and outcasts as a very real part of contemporary life. She is also concerned with the general lackadaisical attitude towards derelicts and vandals. She tells the story of a personal experience recently in Liverpool:

> . . . some children, no more than 10 or 11 years of age, hurled a brick through the back window of my daughter's flat. The glass shattered over the baby. When the police

> came after three-quarters of an hour all they asked was where she had got her sun-tan. [45]

The decay in society is mirrored in Harriet Said... in her description of refuse on the beach:

> Whole crates of rotten fruit . . . swollen and bursting with salt water . . . meat through which the maggots tunnelled . . . stranded jellyfish, purple things, obscene and mindless.. . . half a horse and two small dogs . . . full of water, garlanded with seaweed, snouts encrusted in salt, and teeth exposed. Their necks were tied with wire. (p. 17)

It is noteworthy that there is scarcely an admirable character in the whole of the book. The church, traditionally a symbol of faith and strength, is represented by a senile Canon, totally impotent, who allows teen-age girls to dupe him, who allows picnics in the church and who calls Harriet the 'Constant Nymph', lisping the words in his babyish voice honeyed with sentimentality. Harriet describes him as sugary:

> 'If we broke off a piece of him,' she said, 'even a bit of his little finger, it would be sweet through and through.' (p. 106)

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[45] The lullaby sound of houses falling down,' p. 36.

It is in the church that the Tsar and Narrator have their ridiculous escapade. A middle-age man and a teen-age girl climbing up a window does nothing to preserve the dignity of the church; but it is Bainbridge's habit to hold nothing sacred, and a church is as good a place as any to create a farcical situation.

Fun, innocence and horror are dispensed in varying proportions. Although the dominant theme of the book is youth out of harmony, there are many natural moments when we glimpse the innocent side of the adolescents. The narrator's relationship with her mother is a case in point. There is a suggestion of regret that she has passed the stage of childhood in which she can bask in her mother's love. She looks with envy at the spontaneous hugs and kisses meted out so generously to her young sister, at the easy affection existing between mother and child, realizing it no longer exists for her. She feels separated from her mother by an invisible wall, by feelings of guilt for some of the 'enormities' she has done. It is remarkable how well Bainbridge has captured the typical mixture of innocence and cynicism that constitutes the adolescent.

Because Bainbridge had not established herself as an important novelist with her two previously published books,

Harriet Said... attracted little critical attention. It did win for its author, however, a spectral silver medal.[46] The few reviewers who commented on the book largely praised it as a good horror story. Gail Godwin touches on the strengths of the novel:

> . . . a highly plotted horror tale that turns the 'Obstinate Questionings' of puberty into deadly weapons. The 13 year-old narrator and her friend Harriet set out to collect Experience as others might collect coins or butterflies. Harriet Said... ranks in content with more celebrated thrillers of corrupt childhood, but it has literary and psychological values as well. The architecture of its narrative would have satisfied Poe: every incident advances the design. The language, though simple, often has the effect of poetry, especially in the languid and sorrowful monologues of the doomed Tsar.[47]

The meticulous plotting, the exactly reproduced feeling and the appropriate subdued style are among the qualities that were to be developed in the novels that followed and were to attract increasing critical attention.

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[46] Auberon Waugh, 'Young Pretenders,' The Spectator, 14 October 1972, p. 584.[Spectral silver medal being award for good horror story]

[47] Gail Godwin, New York Times Book Review, 30 September 1973, p. 28.

CHAPTER IV

THE DRESSMAKER

The Dressmaker, published in 1973, established Bainbridge's reputation as a first-class novelist. This extraordinary little novel was acclaimed by all. Karl Miller [48] calls it a magnificent book. Another reviewer comments:

> . . . surprising and salutary to find a young novelist evoking with ruthless realism the darkest days of 1944 -- and a million miles away from heroics, adumbrating in one grim little tale the cataclysm that was created in working-class society. [49]

In this novel she has flawlessly captured the spirit of the times and the people about whom she writes. It is Liverpool in the dark days of 1944. The lives of her characters are set against a background of a country at war with all its dreary accompaniments, the shortages of essentials, the queuing, the lack of variety and small luxuries, the squalid appearance of the air-raid shelters with their malodorous interiors. The air raids are over, however, and the war has shifted from the home front to Europe, so now it is a

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[48] Miller, p. 27.

[49] 'Bad Old Days,' rev. of Bainbridge: The Dressmaker, Times Literary Supplement, 28 September 1973, p. 1101.

matter of simply enduring, surviving as best you can in a world gone crazy. Young girls take consolation in the presence of the G.I.s who provide the fare for dances and house-parties; they can put sand on their legs in lieu of nylons and try to enjoy themselves despite the circumstances. For the mature, there is the sense of boredom that comes from familiarity with the humdrum, cheerless, 'do without' days of a seemingly never-ending war fought on the other side of the English Channel. There is also lurking anxiety which an uncertain future elicits in everyone, the memory of the dreadful violence of bombing raids, the concern over loved ones fighting overseas, the dread of the telegram announcing, 'missing in action', the reported atrocities of Belsen and Dachau.

Ordinary life continues, though. In portraying the lives of Nellie, Margo and Rita in their working-class milieu, Bainbridge shows us that those awful things in the background are mainly forgotten. It is the small inconsequential incidents that direct life. It is the minor irritations that build up frustration and tension and slowly poison existence. Quarrelsome family relationships contribute towards taking the joy out of life. It takes courage as well as a sense of humour to persevere through the difficulties of life on the domestic front.

The structure of The Dressmaker, like Harriet Said..., is circular. Chapter One is really a continuation of the conclusion begun in Chapter Eleven. Bainbridge explains her difficulties in getting the novel started:

> When I worked on The Dressmaker I tried it in the first person, I tried it in the third person. I went backwards and forwards and couldn't establish who the girl was telling the story to: was she an old lady who was telling it to her grandchildren, or was she dictating it to me, the author. I always found that the solution lay in having a flashback and tying it up with the end.[50]

It is an eminently successful way of preserving the neatness of her design. The circular pattern permits a smooth transition into the story and also makes the conclusion a less abrupt and artificial one. The device is particularly attractive in The Dressmaker as it allows Bainbridge artfully to smooth out the narrative shocks and bumps that occur with Ira's death and disposal by enticing the reader back to Chapter One with familiar-sounding words. The structure also reinforces the major theme: Nellie will sacrifice her life to preserve continuity. When she is 'beginning to retreat from the front line' she is terribly concerned about her mother's possessions, which she feels she holds in trust for the next generation to enjoy:

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[50]May, p. 51.

> . . . her first thoughts were not thankfulness that she had been spared breath, but worry over mother's furniture. Did the damp warp it in winter, the sun expand it in summer? Had it deteriorated in the small hours of the night? There was dry rot, wet rot, woodworm. [51]

Margo upsets her so much because she does not fit into the ideal mold she envisions; she cannot be trusted with family heirlooms, so it is Rita that Nellie tries to shape in her own image in an attempt to preserve order and continuity.

Once again Bainbridge draws on her own past for the material on which to build a novel. She did have two aunts on her father's side of the family. [52] In real life, Margo was the dressmaker who owned the dummy but she 'swopped' the sisters around in the book. She describes Aunt Nellie (Aunt Margo in real life) as very sweet and cuddly, the one who did the cooking and the looking after. In the end, Bainbridge says, she was annoying because she was so convinced that she was right about everything, whereas Aunt Margo, who could be an absolute melodramatic bitch, remained constantly curious about things:

> I always wanted to write about my childhood

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[51] Beryl Bainbridge, The Dressmaker (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1973), p. 48.

Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

[52] May, p. 50.

> but thought it would be too self-indulgent to talk about two old aunts. A lot of G.I.s went missing at the time, so I found some newspaper cuttings and worked the plot in.[53]

This is Bainbridge's favourite formula for a novel and one which she uses in her most successful books.

The biographical aspect is important because it authenticates the period and the people of which she writes. She presents a faithful portrait of the domestic environment. Anyone who is familiar with the working-class habitat of a poky Bingley Road terrace house in the Forties could readily verify the truth of her observations: the gas-ring and the fire in the grate were usually the only sources of heat in the house, encouraging the practise of undressing in close proximity to the only warmth available in chilly weather. It was also a habit among older women to pull their voluminous nightdresses on over their underwear and then, as Bainbridge has observed, with much wriggling, free themselves of the remaining garments gradually. The flesh-coloured corsets were universally popular and effective in restraining spreading body proportions to the extent that circulation was mildly impaired, giving rise to the custom of gently massaging the abdomen to restore it to normal. Furniture and personal belongings were revered and treasured -- no matter that they were

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[53] May, p. 49.

ungainly and ugly --enshrined in the front room, polished to a fine sheen, they were held for posterity. It almost amounted to sacrilege to defile a piece of this precious heritage. The philosophy of women of Nellie's generation often was 'sacrifice yourself but spare everything else'.

While Gerald Weales [54] has rightly described Bainbridge characters as uncertain creatures who live with a sense of anxiety, inferiority and loneliness even in the heart of the family unit, they are not pitiable creatures. In spite of the deprivations of an impoverished life, they have an indomitable spirit and keep fighting for what they want. In Bainbridge's novels, the family is a sounding-board where members constantly bombard one another with conflicting ideas, get on one another's nerves, argue incessantly about trivialities, and only truly listen to one another when something serious has happened. Yet through it all they are loyal to one another. Nellie disapproves of Margo's irresponsible ways, hates anyone smoking, yet she trudges over to the shop to buy cigarettes for her and becomes infuriated when the shopkeeper won't let her have them. Bainbridge considers turbulent family relationships to be more genuine. Families, like the Manders', she observes, [55] that appear so together tend to

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[54]Gerald Weales, 'Acts of Horror,' The New Republic, 28 September 1974, p. 28.

[55]May, p. 51.

irritate one as it is difficult to come to grips with them. Nothing seems to go wrong, which makes her suspect that families of this sort are good at covering up the cracks.

Nellie, the domineering character who runs her family is at her best when she has something under her control. She is at one with her sewing-machine, which is obedient to her commands, helping her shape garments as she would shape her loved ones' lives:

> And it was her instrument, the black Singer with the hand-painted yellow flowers.
>
> As long as he could remember, Nellie had played the machine . . . Like the great organ at the Palladium cinema before the war, rising up out of the floor and the organist with his head bowed, riddled with coloured lights, swaying on his seat in time to the opening number. Nellie sat down with just such a flourish, almost as if she expected a storm of applause to break out behind her back. (p. 27)

Dressmaking provides a feeling of security and accomplishment, a concrete demonstration of her skill in handling materials. It is also a sensual experience as she 'strokes the material' over the tailor's dummy. Her world is a very limited one, bounded by the walls of the old house, but it is her domain. Here she is leader in more than the domestic sense; she arranges and shapes lives as well as furniture. Jack has almost forgotten that Rita is his daughter,so much is she

Nellie's creation:

> It was as if the dressmaker had cut out a pattern and pinned it exactly, placing it under the sewing-machine and sewing it straight as a die, over and over, so that there was no chance of a gap in the seams. (p. 25)

In adolescence the young girl envies those females who walk with swaying hips. Under Nellie's tutelage she has no opportunity to practice feminine wiles and moves stiffly 'like a nailed up box'. Nellie feels she knows what is best for Margo too. Practical considerations must override feelings. She considers Mr. Aveyard a poor catch, for he was neither a well man nor a young one. It would have been a pity for Margo to have lost her widow's pension just for the honour of 'siding his table and darning his combs' (6) Nellie remembers it had taken a lot of persuasion to convince Margo but she had eventually come to her senses and sent Mr. Aveyard packing into the wide blue yonder. In time Margo can look back (102) and see the wisdom of the decision; yet she refers to herself as a 'casualty'.

Nellie also sees Mr. Bickerton off the scene. It is she who nurses him on his death-bed, not Margo his wife, whom Nellie considers too much of a flibbity-jibbet. Nellie's influence even pervades the marriage-bed, intensifying Margo's

inhibitions:

> She didn't know what to do, and neither did he. Never been talked to . . . A mist of ignorance, of guilty fumblings; it didn't matter about the church and that they were allowed to be in bed together. Nellie was in the next room, the blankets over her head. There was no excitement, no joy. (p. 85)

She also dominates Jack, her brother, in a motherly way. Accepting Nellie's standards, feeling that she is carrying on the family traditions by clinging to the old ways and resisting change, Jack is a passive individual content to let his sister have her own way. In his youth he 'took what Mother said for gospel', questioning nothing. Later, when he must dispose of a corpse, he follows Nellie's instructions implicitly. He, too, is a casualty but less keenly aware of it than Margo.

Nellie's tragedy is her failure to see that in shielding those she loves from life she is destroying them. She herself is a victim. It was she who did all the work and walked in her mother's shadow. Her life has been a constant sacrifice, her only joy in mothering others, and as age advances life becomes just a battle to preserve the past. Mother's furniture epitomizes earlier, happier days, providing a tangible link between one generation and the next and, in Nellie's

mind, providing mute evidence of her devotion to duty. As she strives vehemently for the best for her family, she reaches heroic heights; but ironically she places more emphasis on inanimate objects than on the human beings around her. She does not kill Ira for ill-treating Rita but for ill-treating her furniture. Nellie may be a murderer (we are not absolutely sure if the blow from the scissors killed Ira or the fall down the stairs) yet as the old lady says, 'there are mitigating circumstances' (155). The blow she deals Ira is a blow against the frustrations of life itself. It is an assertion of her rights.

> 'We haven't had much of a life,' cried Nellie. 'We haven't done much in the way of proving we're alive. I don't see why we should pay for him.' (p. 148)

Ira has attempted to destroy the order she has sacrificed her life for; so he must pay the forfeit.

Karl Miller [56] points out that the relationship that exists between Nellie and Margo, a partnership of the stern and the flighty, has long been the centre of working-class life in Britain, and that Beryl Bainbridge has done well to acknowledge the importance of spinsterliness and sisterliness

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[56] Miller, p. 28.

in this setting. He adds that very few writers have been aware of it. The particular type of relationship that Bainbridge depicts is a strong factor in developing authenticity as well as creating a balance in the novel between the serious and the frivolous. Nellie would not be very effective if she did not have someone to grumble about, someone to manage. Rita and Jack are too meek, the more flamboyant Margo takes a strong hand to manage:

> There was the occasion, never to be forgotten, when the Dutch seaman billetted on them in the first year of the war had given her a length of cloth from the East and she had gone secretly behind Nellie's back and had it made up into a sarong -- wearing it at the Women's Guild night, with a slit right up the leg and all her suspenders showing beneath the baggy edge of her green silk drawers. (pp. 79-80)

Margo continually offends the more sedate with her taste in clothes. Mrs. Mander thinks that there are certain indications of lack of judgment, of hysteria in her appearance. She wears a cocktail dress around the house, a fur coat and wedge-heeled shoes to work. As the sewing-machine defined Nellie, clothes define Margo:

> . . . she looked like a woman gutted by fire -- she was wearing a dress of a slightly charred texture, several sizes too large for her, with panels of silver let into the bodice. There was a scorch mark at the shoulder and a diamante clasp at the hip. (p. 79)

The image is of a woman tarnished by life, yet there is a suggestion of defiance in the diamante clasp at the hip. Bainbridge explains [57] that her real aunt, on whom the fictional character is based, bought a lot of material for dressmaking from shops that had been bombed. She remembers seeing her in a frock made of slightly charred cloth, a diamante clasp at the hip and a scorch mark on the shoulder. She also claims that the sarong episode is true.

Although life is cruel, Bainbridge characters are not always fully aware of it; they live in hope. For Nellie, the hope is an assured place in heaven with Mother; for Margo, the right man, and for Rita, she 'cannot wait for the love story to begin'. The fact that they remain hopeful invests them with dogged perseverence and optimism. Margo, in middle-age, is still outfoxing Nellie:

> 'I may pop over and see Jack,' Nellie called, listening to Marge wheezing in the bedroom. Marge didn't reply. She was lying upstairs right as rain, smoking her cigarettes in bed.
>
> . . . She put her earrings on, and a bracelet, and pinned a brooch to the front of her dress. Then she unpinned it, because she didn't want to seem to be trying too hard. It was her talent they were after, not the crown jewels.
> (p. 126)

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[57] 'Facing Backwards,' p. 15.

It is typical of Bainbridge that it is the more frivolous characters that possess the keenest insight. Nellie, with her nose too close to the proverbial grindstone -- her sewing-machine -- is but vaguely aware of the frustrations and dissatisfactions of life, while Margo realizes quite clearly what the difficulties are. She sees the futility of denying change, resenting the way Nellie and Jack are bound to the old ways of life and irritated by their smug righteousness. She scolds Jack for his Puritanical outlook which cramps his life with regimentation and repression of natural instincts and physical pleasures. She blames Nellie and Jack for imposing restraints which she feels are damaging to herself and to Rita. She wants to reproach Jack for stopping her from belonging to Mr. Aveyard and for the chances he had made her miss in the past. In her calmer moods, however, she is aware that no human being is totally responsible for another. The love affair was on the decline anyway:

> He was getting tired of her long before Jack put the kybosh on things . . . and he was so set in his ways, so careful about money -- no go in him at all. There was a certain coldness about him, a detachment in his wary eyes. (p. 97)

With womanly wisdom, Rita remarks to Ira that Margo didn't care enough, she didn't fight for him (53). Margo is very much aware of her own shortcomings:

> She was devastated by the uselessness of her personality. The kind of men who fancied her -- George Bickerton, Mr. Aveyard, the chap on the tandem, the Dutch seaman in the box-room . . . it was precisely the glitter that drew them at the start that drove them away in the end. (p. 129)

Characters are victims of their own temperament. The environment only exacerbates an already existing problem. In Harriet Said... Bainbridge portrays two teen-age girls who are the antithesis of Rita in their bold aggression, and yet the author speculates that their behaviour could well be the result of a constricting childhood. The logical assumption one makes is that no one -- parent or otherwise -- is fully responsible for what the child is or becomes.

The love affair between Rita and Ira is cleverly depicted, not only as an example of non-communication, but of the adolescent longings of a shy, introverted girl. It is comically ironic and the occasion of some expressive phrasing and evocative sentences. Ira is 'slow and unaware, locked in the protracted torpor of adolescence'. Bainbridge describes his effect on Rita succinctly:

> If there had been less space in her life before his coming, he would not have taken up so much room.
>
> [Rita] wondered how anyone survived being in love, let alone got married -- condemned to live forever in this state of quivering uncertainty. (p. 96)

The object of the romantic longings is the dullest of men. It is Bainbridge's method to convey stark contrasts so that she can accentuate and diminish simultaneously. In this instance, Rita's emotional turmoil is set against Ira's stupor: as Rita's feelings become more intense, Ira seems the more insensitive. Rita, pale, dry, faded in her love-sickness, is contrasted with the glossy Valerie. Compared to the expansive Chuck, Ira appears unimpressive:

> . . . pale eyes, pale mouth, colourless hair
> . . . no bulk to him, thin as a whippet, with
> big hands and feet like an elephant. (p. 38)

He is not much of a talker, his conversations are as colourless as his person. 'Nothing touched him'(110). 'There was no ring to his speech, no cadence . . . (111). His language skills are further impaired by the fact that he is illiterate. However, Rita turns all his faults into virtues:

> He was a dunce, her Ira, thick as a plank,
> not able to play cards, to read a book; he
> would never write her a letter. And at this
> hope surged in her heart . . . if he was that
> unschooled, he would need her, he would want
> to hold her in his life. (p. 136)

The advent of Ira, and with it the realization of Rita's sexual maturity, puts the whole family in a mild state of

shock, with each one scurrying around trying to make up for all the deficiencies of her upbringing. Jack tries to give her some fatherly advice, but the best he can come up with is, 'Don't do anything you'll be sorry for' and some equally trite statements. Margo worries that Rita is not equipped to handle Ira (she knows what Ira is) but at the same time she helps the young girl to make herself more attractive to her way of thinking, dressing her up in accordance with her own poor taste. Nellie views the American as a disruptive influence and as one more frustration added to the many she is suffering already. However, she decides that he constitutes no real threat, that he is a nice boy, so quiet it will be easy to steer Rita away from him,and makes the ironic observation that he will not be a threat to Mother's furniture.

Bainbridge increases the irony of the situation in her portrayal of Ira. Rita, we were led to suspect, was something of a casualty, a victim of her Puritanical upbringing. Ira rejects her because 'she's kind of joyless. She don't want no drinking nor dancing' (135). But the real failure lies in Ira, not in Rita. Empty, except for the hungers of food and sex, it is he who fails to measure up. In the final analysis it is fortunate that Rita does not conform to Ira's standards.

The characteristics of Bainbridge's original style found in Harriet Said... are perfected in The Dressmaker. The writing is terser than ever without a trace of awkwardness or stiltedness. She achieves remarkable cadency. Variety and balance are attained by exercising strict control over her material. Her method is to intersperse short pointed statements with snatches of dialogue, descriptions of objects, or brief interior monologues. Dialogue is invariably in the local idiom, with vocabulary meticulously matched to the speaker. Objects are vividly and economically described, becoming indelibly printed landmarks. Transitions in time sequence are smoothly effected when the narrative takes the form of interior monologue.

Digressive thoughts of characters cast in the form of theatrical type scenes are frequently suggestive of things to come. It is typical of the author to insert such a prophetic scene in the opening chapter. In The Dressmaker, Rita is thinking about Nellie's former job in a millinery shop:

> When the roof split open, the prams and bedding spilled from the top floor to the next, mingling with Aunt Nellie's rolls of dress material, snaking out wantonly into the burning night, flying outwards higgledy piggedly, with the smart hats hurled from their stands, the frail gauze veils spotted with sequins shrivelling like cobwebs, tumbling down through the air.. . (p. 13)

The image of death and destruction is a harbinger of Ira's fall from the top of the attic stairs. The passage is notable for its strong association with the later violent event. Ira will resemble a roll or dress material 'snaking out wantonly' as he flings out his arms, his coat flying, as he tumbles head over heels down the stairs. The sequins, like the pearls, add a touch of the macabre as well as the sexually suggestive to the scene. Vivid scenes of violence will be repeated at intervals throughout the novel, leading up to the climax.

In The Dressmaker, for the first time, objects loom large, treated in Hitchcockian as well as humorous style so that the most mundane article takes on a sinister aspect. Here it is the tailor's dummy that provides the final grim irony. It is first introduced as a sort of dancing partner of Nellie's:

> . . . she lifted the tailor's dummy out from its position under the stairs coquettishly, holding it in her arms like a dancing partner, circling the armholes with chalk, stroking the material down over the stuffed breast . . . (p. 28)

There is a loving relationship between the two. She acts protectively towards it later, when she removes it from the

smell of Jack's pipe:

> 'How you can smoke that stuff beats me,' said Nellie. She stood up, grasped the dress-maker dummy in her arms, as if she was tossing the caber, and staggered the few steps into the hall. Parting the brown chenille curtains . . . she trundled the dummy safely into the darkness. (p. 41)

The author is slyly building up to the finale. There are hints of athletic prowess in the old lady as she is associated with a burly highlander tossing the caber. The dummy is mentioned again at the end of the book where we find Nellie energetically applying herself to the task of disposing of Ira:

> She was as white as a sheet, strong as steel. She never paused to gather breath. She pulled Ira down the back step into the dark and told Margo to open the wash-house door. She was used to carrying the dummy about. The screw had gone from the stand -- you had to watch the body didn't fall away from the pole. (p. 150) (italics mine)

Bainbridge's portrait of Ira suggests that he is just another dummy.

The final operation is undertaken with efficiency as Nellie brings all her superior domestic skills into play.

It is like turning a mattress, getting him into the curtain, but she has turned hundreds in her lifetime. Ira ends up in Margo's arms as a corpse, for she must hold him in position while Nellie sews up the shroud. Compulsively neat, Nellie demands that they pick up all the scattered pearls and put them in with Ira. This is the second time they have been buried. Ira is transported to the wash-house, from whence he will proceed to the river, to have his sins washed away. The old lady is a tower of strength and thinks of everything. She gives Jack directions and the courage which he needs. Margo also needs a firm hand, she is 'gormless'. Nellie is neat, a dressmaker to her bones, the place is all tidied up and the women and the cat settle down for the night.

Bainbridge has employed catch-phrases, snatches of songs, and trite little sayings common to the era in authenticating the period and individualizing characters. Nellie, being an old lady, has ideas that date further back than the Forties:

> For the moment she would suggest as quietly as possible that Margo keep her underwear clean until she was up and about again, and pray to God that she wouldn't be run over by a tram before she herself was fit to do the washing. (p. 66)
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> . . . there were two things they must never do: never sit on somebody else's lav and never eat a shop-bought meat pie. (p. 78)

Expressions of this sort almost explain Nellie by themselves. Jack, the anxious, would-be cynical father, sees the 'Yanks' as a threat to his Rita in the phrases of the day:

> 'There's only three things wrong with them. . . . They're overpaid, oversexed and over here.' (p. 90)
>
> 'It's a trick,' said Jack. It's all me eye and Peggy Martin.' (p. 105)

Although the mode of presentation is lightly ironic, The Dressmaker offers a disquieting insight into the lives of English working-class women during a period of turmoil in world history. The story of Nellie and Margo is an account of grit, perseverance and courage. No matter that we judge Nellie's standards to be false, one cannot but admire her fierce allegiance to principles and in this respect she reaches heroic stature. The changes that the war have brought about constitute a threat to her way of life:

> Out there, over the network of decayed alleyways and the stubby houses, the city had turned into Babel, the clubs and the halls filled with foreigners, the free French and the Americans, the Dutch and the Poles, gliding cheek to cheek with Liverpool girls to the music of the dance bands . . . (p. 98)

She is only happy when she is protecting her family from this 'evil' world.

Margo's dissatisfaction with life, on the other hand, comes from an awareness of its meanness. Realizing that the old ways of life and its standards are passing, she is not certain, like Nellie, that they are worth fighting to preserve, yet in middle-age she finds herself inextricably bound to them. Hers is a life of thwarted dreams and frustrations. The Dressmaker is a tribute to these women.

CHAPTER V

THE BOTTLE FACTORY OUTING

The Bottle Factory Outing, Bainbridge's fifth novel, is one of her best. Wilder and funnier than The Dressmaker, it won the Guardian fiction prize for 1974. The judges described it as 'full of sly glee in story and the intense curiosity about people with all their warts and ways that gives her characters an almost Dickensian sort of jocularity'. An eminently entertaining book, plotted with care and precision, it has the hallmarks of her other domestic novels. Once again she based her story on events in her own life and wrote virtually all her background material out of her experiences four years previously in such a bottle factory in London, where the bulk of the workers were imported from Italy, forming a little community of their own. The workers were allowed to drink as much wine as they wished. They did have an Outing to Windsor, where the Queen's horses were being exercised and where the soldiers shared the wine with them. They, in turn, allowed the workers to ride the horses. Bainbridge also reveals [58] that the driver of one of the cars had designs on her and tried to lose the other one. Even the attempted shooting of Brenda has its origins in personal experience:

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[58] May, p. 51.

> My mother-in-law did try to shoot me. She saved up for a gun from her old-age pension and turned up on the doorstep demanding to see some old photographs. When I came down at hand them over she was pointing a pistol at me, whereupon I did what I've seen done on the telly, I pushed her arm up and the gun went off into the roof.

Questioned about the Safari Park incident in which the workers drive around with the body propped in the back of the car, she explains that it demonstrated the Italian workers' loyalty to Mr. Paganotti: he had donated the wine and hoped they would enjoy the outing which, like the fictional one, was a fiasco. They couldn't very well give up their visit to the park without letting their benefactor down completely:

> Also, I must admit that I wanted to do the Safari Park partly because it happened, and partly because it gave the workers time to decide what to do with the body. [59]

The tour de force of this novel is not the depiction of the Italian community but the central character, Freda, who is perhaps Bainbridge's largest and most flamboyant creation. Based on a girl she worked with, Freda is admirable, lovable, beautiful, energetic, fastidious, generous and romantic; but she also becomes absurd and pitiable at times. She is an incurable romantic and it is on this aspect of her character that

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[59] May, p. 52.

Bainbridge practices her ironic cruelties. Freda aspires to the stage. In reality she did a couple of walk-on parts, but in her imagination she is always playing the leading lady in romantic scenes, with the world as her stage:

> By the strength of her sloping shoulders, the broad curve of her throat, the dimpled vastness of her columnar thighs, she would manoeuvre him into her arms. I will be one of those women, she thought, painted naked on ceilings, lolling amidst rose-coloured clouds . . . she imagined how she might mesmerize him with her wide blue eyes. Wearing a see-through dressing-gown . . . from Littlewoods . . . she would open the door to him: 'Forgive me, I have been resting -- the strain you know. My mother was particularly dear to me --' All Italians . . . were dotty about their mothers; he would expect it of her. She would not actually have to gnash her teeth but imply that she did so -- internally. Rumpling her newly washed hair, the black nylon sleeve of her gown sliding back to reveal one elbow, she would press her hand to her brow and tell him the doctor had prescribed sedatives: 'Do sit down, we are quite alone. Brenda has elected to go to the cinema.'

There is always a broad gap between the ideal and the actual. All Freda's dreams are centred on Vittorio who is supposed to fulfil her dreams of a wonderful future. Instead, he cuts it off by accidentally killing her. It is the incongruity and the unexpected turn of events that create the

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[60] Beryl Bainbridge, The Bottle Factory Outing (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1974), p. 40.

Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

interest and the outrageous humour in The Bottle Factory Outing. Freda, who is beautiful and fastidious, ends up dumped in a barrel, doused with brandy as a preservative. Freda, the proud one, is propped up in the back seat of a Cortina like a drunk. Freda, with the nice taste in clothes, is dressed in one of Mr. Paganottie's unstylish leftovers -- a white dress (Freda was never keen on white) decorated with wax flowers free in a box of detergent. Freda, who loves life, is suddenly deprived of it.

Brenda, on the other hand, who is unimaginative and inhibited, gets all the amorous attention from the men. In spite of her private schooling and her advantages, she was brought up on Spam and chips (39). She marries a farmer and is transported from music lessons and tennis to farm and outhouse, gets herself locked in the geese barn (31) but does not voice any objection because 'she didn't like'. She is the passive one who allows everyone to take advantage of her. Freda tells her she is a 'born victim', but she somehow survives, while Freda ultimately becomes the victim.

Brenda is the perfect foil for Freda. When Freda is looking at the world through rose-coloured glasses, Brenda sees it as a dull grey. Brenda's inhibitions cause as much hilarity as Freda's flamboyancy, the one accentuating the

other. Freda's life consists of grabbing at things while Brenda's consists of pushing them away. She piles up volumes of books in the centre of the bed to 'protect' herself from Freda and wears layers of newspapers and clothing to protect herself from the men. Ironically she attracts men like flies while Freda frightens them away.

Bainbridge's method in this novel is to prophesy through dialogue, imagery and setting the fate of her central character. As the ironies unfold in the book, it becomes a series of prophesies being fulfilled incongruously. In the opening chapter, a funeral is described in ship imagery:

> . . . the block of flats, moored in concrete like an ocean liner. Behind the rigging of the television aerials, the white clouds blew across the sky. All hands on deck, the aged crew with lowered heads shuffled to the rails to watch the last passenger disembark. (p. 7)

Freda is only a spectator this time but later she will play the leading role as she embarks on her final sea voyage, bound for Spain. As she watches, she decides she likes funerals and 'a full life coming to a close'. She even visualizes her own with her family about her -- daughters, sons, husband, grey and distinguished. The reality is far from the dream. Maria tells her fortune, forecasts a long journey by

land and sea, mentioning galloping horses, which Freda regards as a romantic omen. Unfortunately, they turn out to be an omen of death; they are black ones, the funeral horses of the queen, and although Freda cuts quite a dash riding around the park, her happiness is short-lived.

Bainbridge keeps poking fun at Freda's aspirations and it is disconcerting to find her also emerging as a sensitive girl who is often deeply hurt by the misfortunes of life. She becomes a little jealous of Brenda with her family connections when she herself has no one to call her own except a distant aunt in Newcastle. People always expect her to be funny so that she gets little sympathy:

> She went to the theatrical pub to be among people who understood, and was unwise enough to tell her version of Mrs. Haddon on the stairs. She performed modestly and with seriousness, rolling a cigarette nervously between finger and thumb, and was distressed at the wild hoots of mirth that interrupted her narrative. She joined in the laughter -- tears squeezed from the crinkled corners of her eyes -- but she was hollow inside.
> (p. 59)

Brenda, her closest associate, sees only her hard exterior and becomes puzzled by her depression. 'It was unnerving to live with'.

Pain felt, or insults endured, made her the

> more articulate. In adversity she saw the funny side. She would spit out words describing in precise detail just how badly she was wounded, until her shoulders began to shake with the burble of huge choking laughter that finally burst from her.
> (p. 57)

Her large, if attractive, body dictates the role she must play. The shy, retiring wallflower is not in keeping with her robust physique, so that, yearning to be protected she becomes the protector instead. She manages and protects Brenda, keeps the men in line by intimidating them. The meekness of the Italians and the aggression of the English girl precludes any chance of a romance between them.

An atmosphere of foreboding haunts the book, as it does most of Bainbridge's novels:

> The sky was so overcast it was almost dark. The little naked bulbs handing from the ceiling glowed like small red stars. Outside the row of windows the rain fell heavily and began to stain the concrete wall of the chip-shop.
> (p. 63)

In this passage there is a complete change of tone from the one immediately preceding it:

> In Bologna . . . she would open the shutters in the morning to let in the sun and shield her eyes

> from the blue surge of the sea sparkling
> beyond the dusty line of the olive trees . . .
> (p. 63)

The starkness of the language produces a sobering effect in contrast to the ebullience of Freda romancing about her wedding. The real world is a dreary and uncomfortable place. The girls' flat is sordid with its 'yellow utility furniture', lack of colour scheme, antiquated piping and faulty cistern box. The bottle factory is a cold dismal place where the workers must sit on beer crates or stand on planking to avoid the cold of the concrete floor. It is little wonder that Freda dreams of escaping to sunny Italy.

The outing itself takes place in cold, damp October. The discomfort of sitting on the wet grass eating cold chicken and drinking bad wine does nothing to alleviate the misery. Nobody enjoys it, but each one is determined to see it through out of loyalty to Mr. Paganotti. Minor irritations gradually pile up for Freda as one plan after another fails to bring Vittorio into her arms. Patrick thwarts her schemes by his unwanted presence and a minor battle breaks out between them (94).

Bainbridge uses the same method of discomfiting her characters in The Bottle Factory Outing as she does in some

of her other novels. Everyday objects take on a Satanic quality in their perversity. Descriptions of buildings suggest a clumsy awkwardness. The coffin goes down the stairs 'at an acute angle', toes are stubbed on bottles of brandy, Freda and her co-worker are see-sawing all day long on a plank. Mechanical things break down; the machine for dispensing cocoa gives soup instead, the toilet will not flush. Small nuisances are observed as part of daily life; the tablecloth nearly blows away at the picnic, Freda is out of cigarettes, the cat is always producing unwanted kittens, Vittorio's peach is squashed on the floor, Patrick inadvertently gets in the way of Vittorio's lovemaking.

There is also a strong emphasis on the visual in this novel. She has an unusual flair for evocative description. The clothing of the bus driver at the Safari Park is colourfully described:

> [he] was dressed in a camouflaged jacket of mottled green and a hat to match, one side caught up . . . as if he were a Canadian Mountie . . . he was wearing plastic sandals, bright orange and practically luminous, and striped socks. (pp. 133-134)

Her description of Freda's corpse is a good example of how meticulous she is in filling in the minutest details, of how

she can evoke a myriad of impressions so that the image emerges like a good painting capturing the essence of the subject:

> Freda looked disgruntled, her mouth sucked inwards. The blue eyes stared fixedly at the sky. Under the dark leaves her skin assumed a greenish tinge, her cheeks brindled with crimson and spotted with raindrops. For a moment Brenda thought she was weeping. Her painted nails, black in the shaded light, rested on the woollen swell of her stomach.
>
> Freda's eyes stayed open. A grey insect, sensitively quivering, dawdled on the slope of her thumb. Brenda knelt on the ground and touched the curled edges of hair turning brass-coloured in the rain. She couldn't understand why Freda's face, normally so pale and luminous, now burned with eternal anger, mottled and pitted with irregular patches of brown as if the leaves had stencilled rusty shadows on her cheeks. Only the nose was right, moulded in wax, the nostrils etched with pink . . . It was as if somebody had disconnected the current, switched off the light . . . she'd gone out. Oh, she did feel sad then. Lonely. The terrible pious curve of her hands on the purple jumper.
> (p. 110)

In describing the visual aspect of Freda's death, the author evokes a sense of loneliness, loss and sorrow. Death is casual in its occurrence, but moving in its aftereffect. Bainbridge's very expressive phrasing is used here not for comic purposes, but serious ones. She describes Freda's face as 'burned with eternal anger', suggesting how much Freda, who loves life, detests being deprived of it. The rain on her face makes

Brenda think she is weeping. The total effect is of a terrible loneliness, which is hinted at throughout the novel under the farcical comedy. Brenda demonstrates it as she insulates herself with clothing, her life a series of withdrawals. Freda vainly tries to remedy her loneliness by sheer aggression but the aftermath of her death implies a lonely life:

> What would the aunt in Newcastle say? Freda hadn't been home for years . . . there were the theatrical set at the Friday night pub in their second-hand clothes, but she didn't think they would hear about it. There wasn't even a photograph of Freda in the . . . room. She'd never written her a letter or been on holiday with her or shared an adventure.
> (p. 126)

Bainbridge never portrays relatives and friends grieving over the death of a loved one. Maggie (A Weekend with Claud) has a party the night after her father died, Mother (A Quiet Life) tosses Father's hat into the bin as if glad to be rid of it. Death is treated in an off-hand way and Brenda's reaction is typical of the others'.

> There stole over her a regrettable feeling of satisfaction . . . Superstitions were needed at a time like this. The wrongdoers had to be punished in some way. It was not to be wondered at that God had spoken. 'I don't know what's the matter with me . . . I don't feel very upset.' Every time she tried to

> concentrate on what had happened she was distracted by something trivial. (pp. 126-127)

Unlike the previous novels, the death does not come at the end of the narrative, and The Bottle Factory Outing is badly disrupted by the loss of the central character. Freda is still the centre of attention, a presence, but a lot of the vitality goes out of the story with her death. We would not really have missed Ira or Mrs. Biggs or Roland, even if they had been plucked out in mid-stream; but we do miss Freda. The focus changes from Freda's exciting aspirations and hilarious antics to the anxiety felt by the group as they attempt to dispose of the body and the mystery of which of the three suspects are guilty. Brenda, without Freda to banter her, becomes a little colourless.

More interesting is the sense of community among the Italian workers, although there is the impression that this is another story. The sketch of the Italian fraternity is not without its ironies. Mr. Paganotti is a father figure who instills great loyalty in his employees; he does not do it by paying high wages or providing good working conditions. His wine is of poor quality (Freda says it is all the same -- only the labels are different), yet he is regarded as a benefactor. He expects his workers to pay for the castoffs he puts in the

ragbag. By allowing them to sip wine and donating two small casks of wine for the outing, he has their complete loyalty. No one has ever left the factory to take other employment, the sons and daughters are encouraged to go to the university and become doctors and accountants if they have the ability. If not, then they go into the factory with their fathers:

> In spite of their good fortune they still stood like beasts in the field, tending Mr. Paganotti's machines. (p. 19)

Bainbridge invests them with an air of meekness and humility towards their employer and a fierce allegiance to one another. She depicts them as a close and isolated community and is careful to preserve this sense of 'apartness' throughout the novel in describing their manners and actions. In their dialogue they show an awareness of the foibles of the English and utter platitudes with a few misplaced words. Their loyalty to one another is evidenced in the way they react to Freda's accidental death. All accept part of the guilt for what has happened. Maria, who has had nothing to do with the event, also does her part to cover up. It is all very neat but darkly ironical, that the staunch Roman Catholic Italians with strong devotion to the Blessed Virgin (her picture hangs

on the wall) should unite in an attempt to cover up this 'sin', disposing of the body without benefit of spiritual blessing while at the same time they are so adamant about dressing up the corpse in proper raiment. The whole procedure is reminiscient of an Irish wake without the benefit of religious faith. Bainbridge satirizes everything, including death and religion.

At the same time she succeeds in imparting a sense of innocent bewilderment in her depiction of the Italian character:

> Vittorio was not clear what was at issue. The Irish van driver was an unknown quantity. Nobody had explained what he was doing in the bathroom the night he had visited Freda. Maybe she had allowed him too to take liberties with her Rubenesque body. The remembrance of her billowy flesh and her grasping little hands pulling his hair made him giddy. (p. 84)

Their meekness and their subservience is at variance with the violence that has occurred, part of the constant play of contrasts in the novel. In the Safari Park the noble animals sleep while the smaller ones are vicious. Describing the baboons, Patrick says, 'They'd have your guts for garters, they'd tear you limb from limb.' Brenda thinks it a pity that they hadn't brought Freda into the Reserve so that they

could have shoved her body out and say her heart had stopped. Those are malicious thoughts coming from the passive Brenda, who hates to offend anyone. The author has interlaced animal and human characteristics so that they are similar. Brenda says of the baboons, 'They were so ugly, so human in their aspect, so vicious in their glances'. Flamingoes are described as obscene, as if 'they bled all over'. Brenda cries, 'Was she bleeding?' (137) The novel is laced with images of flesh torn and bruised. The Safari Park episode depicts a jungle, a sordid one just like the one Bainbridge characters inhabit.

The Bottle Factory Outing is typically Bainbridge, a highly readable novel shot through with her inimitable wit and observations. Her portrait of Freda as a comic heroine is superb, cleverly set off by the timorous Brenda, the argumentative Patrick and the manageable Italians. Her terse, dry prose is ideally suited to the effect she is striving for and dialogue is skillfully attuned to character. The book seems to be marred, however, by the loss of Freda, so that the latter part becomes too obviously devoted to working out dark ironies.

Reviews of the novel were mostly complimentary. Jonathan

Raban [51] made the interesting observation that it has both the simplicity and the savagery of one of the nastier folk ballads. That is certainly the impression one gets of Bainbridge's work, so ruthlessly trimmed of excesses, so tightly controlled.

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[61] Jonathan Raban, 'Taking Possession: New Fiction,' Encounter, February 1975, p. 82.

CHAPTER VI

SWEET WILLIAM

Sweet William, the next novel to be published, is more lightly humorous. Ann gives birth to an illegitimate child, which, if regarded as a misfortune, is a slighter one than death. It is the story of a rake's progress and the gullibility and unpredictability of women. To begin with, it is amusing that a leading female novelist writing in 1976 should choose to portray subjugated womanhood when, all around her, contemporaries are concentrating on the problems associated with women's independence. Bainbridge, typically, sees things differently from the majority. She believes that women of her mother's generation were far more 'women's lib' in the worst sense than they are today.

> Although we weren't Jewish, we were a very matriarchal family. All my father was there for was to pay the bills.. . . [men] were treated with the utmost contempt . . . Fathers were of no account whatsoever: 'Get them out of the house first thing in the morning. God, the week-end's coming, we'll push him out into the garden.[62]

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[62] May, p. 49.

She sees a danger in women assuming more aggressive roles:

> I disapprove, in a way, of men becoming too domesticated, doing the washing-up or looking after the children. I disapprove of it sexually: if people get too friendly and the roles too intermixed, we shall all end up with brothers and sisters, mums and dads. I think men are superior, or you have to think they are.[63]

Mrs. Walton, an example of the sort of woman who rules her family, is probably patterned after Mrs. Bainbridge:

> Ann felt that it was funny that anyone should call Mrs. Walton ordinary. It wasn't an adequate word. She thought of her mother's piano playing, her scheming, her ability to read French, the strengths of her convictions, the inflexibility of her dreadful will.. . . The way she referred to men as 'persons'. Her use of the possessive pronoun. The subjectivity of her every thought.[64]

However, Ann is not the formidable person her mother is and she succumbs only too readily to William's charm.

There are at least three women in his life (and Gus) who

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[63] May, p. 49.

[64] Beryl Bainbridge, Sweet William (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1975), p. 13.

Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

are all aware of his infidelity yet overlook it, apparently thinking he is worth sharing. Bainbridge leaves us wondering why. He has little enough to recommend him. He is neither intelligent, handsome, nor rich; he is not even a great lover. His outstanding characteristic is his audacity and it is perhaps that quality which attracts women like Ann, who appear to have masochistic tendencies, who enjoy being 'put upon'. William could be likened to Bonser in Joyce Cary's A Fearful Joy -- a rogue who helps people to escape from boredom and insignificance, although it is questionable whether Ann is aware that she is living in that kind of world. For the short period of time he is associated with her, her life is exclusively concerned with William, who makes things more exciting, dispelling loneliness and depression. It may be preferable to live a life of uncertainties than a dull or lonely one, but in Bainbridge you fill in all the gaps yourself since the author does not dwell on the mental turmoil or develop the motives behind Ann's reactions.

Sweet William is, above all, a very entertaining book with layers of comic absurdities arising from the activities of its central catalytic figure. Ann is astonished by the turn of events sparked by this enterprising individual:

> How far we have travelled, thought Ann . . . she

> was contemplating . . . her attitude to life, her abandonment of standards. In ten days she had encouraged adultery, committed a breach of promise, given up her job, abetted an abortion. She had not been aware, throughout these happenings, of any unease or distress. She had become like one of those insect specimens under glass, sucked dry of her old internal organs, pumped full and firm with an unknown preservative. She was transfixed by William. (p. 67)

William has led Ann into the 'new permissiveness' and she has become one of its victims. Mrs. Walton is upset by the thought of a weak indulgent man like that reducing her daughter to such straits:

> 'He needs putting away.' . . . If a man treated me like that . . . I'd have him restrained . . . you talk about modern life and things being different now. You haven't learnt anything at all. All this permissiveness has led you young girls into slavery. I wouldn't give him house room. (p. 150)

The affair with William widens the generation gap between mother and daughter. Family relationships are usually strained in Bainbridge novels and this one is no exception. Ann and her mother quarrel and snap at each other like turtles. The two were not on the best of terms before William came on the scene. Mar. Walton is offended by the 'farmyard noises' of Gerald and Ann making love in the living-room when she stays overnight in

her daughter's flat. Ann, in turn, is annoyed because her mother is in the way. Constantly getting on each other's nerves, they fail completely to understand one another:

> It was to her credit that she kept her temper in check, held back the bitter words. It was very difficult for her, under the circumstances. All those years of duty and conformity gone for nothing. Of no value. Twenty years later the old standards swept away as if they had never been. There was Ann, pregnant, unmarried, money in the bank, neither ostracised nor selling heather in the gutter. Unrepentant. One might say unaware that there was anything to be repentant about. It was terribly unfair. (p. 148)

It is a marvelously humorous passage. Mrs. Walton regrets the passing of the old standards as Nellie [65] does; but while Nellie fiercely defends and clings to the old ways, Mrs. Walton seems to regret that she could not take advantage of this new morality herself. She is put out because Ann is getting away with things that never would have been allowed in her day. Ann feels that it was her mother who should have met someone like William (86). Fortified with the strength of her convictions and the subjectivity of her every thought, she thinks life is terribly unfair.

Bainbridge is devoid of sentimentality towards motherhood. Mrs. Walton is a practical woman who sees men as the providers. The more they can provide, the more suitable they are as

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[65] The Dressmaker.

husbands. When Ann mentions that William is rich and a General's son (she neglects to say it is in the Salvation Army) Mrs. Walton immediately finds him acceptable. That he is already married is of no consequence, 'It's every woman for herself,' she remarks (63).

Much of the comedy of the book derives from Mrs. Walton's flatfooted opinions and shocked indignation over William's behaviour. Bainbridge heightens her comic effects by describing William in terms of a tom-cat:

> After a moment there was a faint swishing sound outside the landing, like a cat rubbing itself along the carpet. Scratchings at the door. Fingernails on the glass. . . . A low moaning began. 'Let me in . . . let me in.' The voice was weary, filled with pain.
>
> Ann opened her eyes. She couldn't understand what her mother was doing paddling about the room like a dog. . . . 'It's William.' She wanted to let him in, but she didn't dare . . . the moaning went on.
>
> 'What's wrong with the fool?' hissed Mrs. Walton. 'Does he think he's Heathcliff?' She had never known anything like it. Not even during the war when things were more casual. (p. 149)

Bainbridge is having fun here parodying a grand passion. She is adept at creating those farcical situations where someone is roused to righteous indignation by extraordinary audacity. The idyllic scene in the park is another example of this type

of comedy. William, the ultimate confidence man, has convinced Ann that he is a born romanticist: he is going to bury a lock of her hair under a tree to that they can come and look for it when they are old:

> She rolled over onto her large stomach and looked at the matchbox. An ant ran over her fingers. She shook it away and reached for the little carton with the coloured label. William turned and smiled at her. She smiled back. Birds sang. She opened the matchbox and looked at the lock of dark hair bound with white cotton.
>
> She banged her face on the ground. She threw the twist of glossy hair at the tree. She ripped the matchbox into shreds. . . . William thought she had been stung by a wasp. (p. 153)

The timing of this episode is just right. Ann's calm, benign mood is underscored by the inclusion of the most minor details. Ants crawl, William smiles, Ann smiles back, birds sing. However, at the moment of revelation the short simple sentences are exclusively directed towards Ann's feverish activity.

The light side of Bainbridge's humour is more in evidence in Sweet William than in her previous novels. It is not her style, though, to maintain superficial slapstick comedy throughout her work without touching on serious themes as well. Beneath the surface we can glimpse the darker hues of the scenario: the selfish lustfulness

of William, the stupid submissiveness of Ann, the greedy shallowness of Mrs. Walton, the ineffectiveness of Mr. Walton and the delusions they all foster. There is a harsh world out there. Pamela has had an abortion, Sheila has William's children, who see him if he can spare time between his amorous adventures. Viewed from a certain angle, the book is a disturbing commentary on the nature of life, society, and human relationships. Bainbridge has the uncanny faculty for casting shadows on her landscapes, seldom dwelling on happiness for more than a sentence or two. She covers the whole gamut of human ideosyncrasies succinctly so that it is extremely difficult to extract and emphasize themes without seriously misrepresenting her work. She is the type of author who sees things from so many angles that she makes us realize how difficult it is to reach conclusions. Reality is very elusive -- just as each fact is established, something will happen to contradict it. Her fictional world is a kaleidoscopic one which she depicts but does not explain.

Communication is a complicated matter in Sweet William. Sometimes it seems as if people simply like to hear themselves talk. Instead of having a conversation where thoughts and ideas are conveyed to-and-fro, characters will be observed conducting two separate monologues:

> 'He wanted me to take off all my clothes'. . .
>
> 'There's something I ought to tell you, I've come down for a reason.'
>
> 'I didn't like the way he was so rough with me . . .'
>
> 'I'm late with my period, . . . Two months.'
>
> 'How would you like it if your mother started calling out? . . . She kept calling out for water.'
>
> 'The old bastard . . . fancying landing on you the week he was leaving.'
>
> Ann was shocked that Pamela could be so brutal. She regretted instantly that she had told her so much. Pamela had obviously missed the point.
>
> (pp. 29-30)

Ann has not heard what Pamela has said and Pamela has misinterpreted Ann's meaning: she is really complaining about Gerald's behaviour, not her mother's. It suits Ann's purpose to find fault with Gerald as it is a way of rationalizing her precipitate involvement with William. The statements she is making are an attempt to clear some of the mental confusion she is experiencing over an unexpected turn of events and are more for her own benefit than any real attempt to communicate with Pamela. Much later, she 'half remembered Pamela talking about being late for a period'. (45).

Sometimes conversation is avoided because of the risk of arguments:

> There was little conversation between them. One topic would only lead to another. What

> have you been doing? Who with? It wasn't worth the risk. (p. 152)

Ann has to tell her mother to go back home when she would like to have her support during the birth of the baby but she knows 'sooner or later one of them would say something to be regretted' (155). Mrs. Walton has the knack 'of stemming communication at the source . . . like frost, she nipped the bud before it had time to open' (98). Captain Walton 'typically becomes articulate when atmospheric conditions render her deaf' (102).

Despite problems, there <u>is</u> some form of communication -- the non verbal where Ann knows exactly what her mother is thinking without the need of words. Mrs. Walton's disapproving assessment of her daughter's behaviour is an ongoing thing which Ann has becomes only too well aware of over the years.

William, the arch-deceiver, is particularly ingenious at breaking off communication to suit his own purposes. He writes promising to take Ann to the States with him where they will live in a house in California with oranges growing in the garden (156) but guardedly omits his address. His favourite ruse is to baffle Ann with his use of metaphor, his most preposterous excuses being designed to sound like profound

philosophical statements. No matter how nonsensical the expression, Ann will accept it as a truth. She does not understand what he means when he says he has compartments in his life:

> What kind of compartments did he mean -- air-tight ones or the sort on railway trains? Was he in the compartment with her? His desk was here, his best suit, his razor in the bath-room. Edna was . . . forty-two and grey-haired and life was putting the boot in. You couldn't hope to be all things to one person at all times. It made her feel important and extended, having come to such a conclusion . . . It was something in him that brought out the best in her. (p. 76)

The passage underlines the gullibility of Ann and emphasizes the hypnotic effect William has on her as she echoes his trite phrases and rationalizes his behaviour.

William's play is a very pointed example of how Bainbridge creates diversion while reinforcing her themes of duplicity and communication breakdown. Paradoxically titled, perhaps imitating La Vida es Sueno, The Truth is a Lie sounds like the most nonsensical thing that was ever written. It purports to be about a boy in a tenement room, different from his parents, who went into the city to play pool. Two old men take care of the tables. They love the boy but love taking care of the tables more (36). The quotation from the play underscores

its inanity:

> 1st. Old Man: 'I don't like ma' table having dust on it.'
> 2nd. Old Man: 'You dinna like that!'
> 3rd. Old Man: 'That's wha' he said.'
> 1st. Old Man: 'I know wha' I said.'
> 3rd. Old Man: 'It's not your table that has dust on it.'
> 2nd. Old Man: 'You dinna like that!'
> 3rd. Old Man: 'That's wha' he said.'
> 1st. Old Man: 'I know wha' I said.'
> (pp. 78-79)

It is a parody of the Theatre of the Absurd, reminiscent of Samuel Beckett in its language breakdown. The pointless dialogue is funny in its foolishness.

> 'You're restless Gus.'
> 'Ays, I'm restless.'
> 'What's making you restless then?'
> 'I canna tell. I'm just restless.'
> (p. 92)

The play mirrors life. Attempts to communicate are empty repetitions, or echoes of words heard in another context. When Edna writes to Ann (88) begging to have her husband back, the note is a paraphrase (92) of a few lines from The Truth is a Lie. It turns out there is good reason for this as William himself has dictated it. Dialogue in the play and in life is equally meaningless.

The title of the play epitomizes William whom Bainbridge has drawn as a master of deception. With customary wit, the author draws all her characters into the web of deceit. Some are adept at deceiving others, some deceive themselves. Mrs. Walton tells her friend Mrs. Munro that Ann has been secretly married for several months to a well-known writer. However, Mrs. Munro produces a clipping and photograph of William and Edna as they are ready to sail to the States to promote his play. Ann is the prime self-deceiver. William tells the truth when he claims that Ann has made him up (109). He is not what she imagines him to be. He calls himself her 'dulcimer boy' which is rather apt since the dulcimer is a wind instrument. Ann is occupied in trying to sort out relationships and identities of people during her affair with William, always puzzled by the number and diversity of his liaisons. At the end she is still trying to identify the clump of hair she had flung away on the heath. Ironically, the birth of the baby establishes the most important relationship of all, that Gerald is the baby's father. For once, the arch-deceiver has deceived himself.

Appropriately, Bainbridge associates William with railway lines and trains to suggest his mobility. In the opening chapter, the author describes a small painting on the wall of Mrs. Kershaw's flat which depicts a man and woman making love

on a railway line. There is no sign of a train (13). This seemingly insignificant detail burgeons forth into all sorts of suggestions and associations as the narrative takes shape. The railway line is like the central figure: we do not know where it is coming from and we do not know where it is going, and the train --the vital force -- is missing. Ann and William do have a passionate reunion aboard a train in which he actually cuts the communication cord, aborting the journey. The train goes on, while they make love in Crewe, thus fulfilling the prophesy in the picture. William is fond of referring to the 'compartments' in his life.

Many Bainbridge characters, and this is true of Ann, are slaves of authority. Bainbridge confesses that she made her 'a bit more wet and drippy' than even she was at that age.[66] William is the authoritative figure in Ann's life and although she is thoroughly surprised at herself, she complies with all his suggestions, many of which are slightly ludicrous. She wonders about her own genetic conditioning:

> Was it always like that, Ann wondered. Did people endlessly choose the same kind of people

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[66] Barbara Bannon, 'Beryl Bainbridge,' Publisher's Weekly 15 March 1976, p. 7.

> to love? Her grandfather, it seemed, had, like her own father, avoided involvement. Once the big Victorian family had been swept away -- the wide scope of aunts and uncles and cousins -- did the choice narrow? Did you trudge around in an inner circle waiting for the one person who reminded you of your father? Did William think deep inside, that she was none of his business.
> (p. 104)

Ann's fleeting thoughts are an echo of Bainbridge's own preoccupation with the past.

In Sweet William the setting is again the comfortably familiar domestic world which provides a realistic background for the strange antics of the people who inhabit it. The most extraordinary things happen in the most ordinary places. Ann's passionate love affair takes place in her shabby pink bedroom, the kind of shabby surroundings for which Bainbridge has a preference. She has a taste for the seedy:

> She was travelling through an area of devastation, a rubbish tip of piebald fields filled with falling barns of rusty tin, chicken coops, lumpy cows lying down under a pale sky . . . spattered with dried mud, sullenly munching. What a mess it was, the countryside, fractured and torn, threaded with abandoned canals, tyres floating along the thick green water -- caravans, ruined cars, obsolete tractors, bushes ghostly with lime from a kiln ripped out of the ground.
> (p. 122)

This is an unsettling image, completely at odds with a lovers'

rendezvous or an idyllic affair. As Ann continues her journey, the landscape gives impetus to thoughts of her life and her relationship with William. The train dips downhill and Ann thinks of the 'devious routes' he has travelled. She sees women tossing cabbages into an old pram and remembers she has never thanked him for the pram. It is by association of scene, thought and event that the author not only sustains a realistic effect but broadens the landscape of her work with impressions of the outside world which in turn mirror the inner lives of her characters. The above passage depicts a ravaged scene in keeping with the rapacious nature of William's alliance with Ann. Bainbridge's gloomy scenes, though, are as fleeting as the mood which elicits them. As the journey proceeds, the scene brightens:

> The fields flew, black and brown and tender mauve . . . Then another train . . . rattling alongside the carriage -- people drinking coffee . . . More fields, cut into furrows by the plough, glinting with strips of rain water. A church set among juniper and laurel. Horses running, men chopping wood. (p. 122)

The scenery is as changeable as the tenor of life itself, as Bainbridge demonstrates in her novels. Traumatic events in Sweet William are followed by little acts of kindness which people extend to one another:

> Pamela was discharged from hospital and Ann took care of her. Having survived William's deceit, she felt she was now older and more capable of love. She brushed Pamela's hair, made her toast and boiled egg, bought her a new flannel -- bright purple from John Barnes. (p. 76)

The mention of a new facecloth from John Barnes is a typical Bainbridge touch. The pram has also come from John Barnes, confirming the London setting. The author shows a strong predilection for purple objects. Ann buys purple shoes and stockings to match her grey dress, Freda [67] wears a purple cloak, William a purple velvet tie, even the fields are described as 'tender mauve' (122).

In common with previous novels, objects and clothes are important. The pram and the wardrobe are concrete symbols of William's way of life. The dictionaries and volumes of Shakespeare he carries around with him are ironic reflections on the quality of his work. William's clothes are as diversified as he is. He has a coat and cap made out of tweed stolen from Roddy: he has a wardrobe full of elegant clothes and suede boots but is usually dressed in unlaced sneakers and a tee-shirt. Mrs. Kershaw is a vegetarian but wears a butcher's apron, while Edna floats around in ballet slippers and gauze

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[67] The Bottle Factory Outing.

scarves. Clothes, in Bainbridge, underline the eccentricity of the wearer.

Sweet William is written in typical Bainbridge style. It is a short novel written with characteristic terseness. It has many of the earmarks of the preceding books and most of the similarities have been discussed. It does not mark any particular advance in her work, rather it is a regression from the quality of The Dressmaker and The Bottle Factory Outing. The fault may lie with her portrayal of William. At times he is a likeable scoundrel by virtue of his incompetence and unpredictability as one sees him making all kinds of tactical blunders from which he cleverly extricates himself. His audacity is emphasized by the fact that he never apologizes or makes excuses for anything he does. He is a fund of information, inconsistent in his behaviour, full of unique and daring eccentricities which are a tribute to the author's imagination. However, Bainbridge fails to sustain our admiration for him as a clever rogue throughout the book. He too often becomes simply annoying, involved in episodes which seem a little too contrived. An incident occurs in the hospital waiting-room which illustrates the point:

> She thought she knew why William behaved as he did. He couldn't compromise or wait for the

> right moment or the right place; he loved her so much. He wanted to show her -- in this building, silent as a church and sanctified by disinfectant -- the discrepancy between one act of love and another. (p. 69)

One feels that Bainbridge is manipulating her characters here to produce the comic scene which ensues when Sister, with moral indignation, orders the love-making pair out of the hospital. The taxicab episode (62) also seems a little strained when William's sexual advances are interrupted by a car collision. The colourful remarks of the bystanders, displaying characteristic British outrage, are funny enough in themselves without the need to relate them to the couple's amorous behaviour.

The final ironic twist redeems the novel in that it reduces the protagonist's frenzied efforts to a waste of energy, verifying the truth of William's earlier observation that 'it was in the nature of an idyll to be episodic'. Bainbridge's novels always contain prophetic ironies and this one is no exception.

The majority of the reviews of Sweet William were favourable. Katha Pollitt [68] lauds Bainbridge's portrayal of Ann:

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[68] Katha Pollitt, New York Times Book Review, 17 May 1976, p. 4.

> William is a psychological curio, a demon lover whose very bizarreness makes him unworthy of serious scrutiny. There are thousands of women like Ann, though, lost somewhere between rage and daydreams, and Bainbridge treats her with a perceptivity that is devastating. Ann, in the sort of epigrammatic character assassination 19th. century writers used to delight in, 'possessed in equal quantities, the reticence of her father, the vampire instincts of her mother.' Her genteel passiveness, we are made to see, serves the same purpose as William's melodramatic deceptions, both mask the fact that behind them lies no real self at all.

The portrait of William drew mixed reaction. Susannah Clapp [69] states that it isn't easy to recognize in William the compelling character who excites so many women in the novel and she sees his solicitous attention to other people's trivial occupations as coming close to irritating smugness. Anthony Thwaite,[70] on the other hand, commends William who he feels is a memorable creation. He prefers Sweet William to the earlier books, regarding it as an improvement that she has ditched the facile gruesome stuff and the Hitchcockian deaths to deal with a birth -- something which he feels is much more difficult in terms of Miss Bainbridge's magisterial comedy. Like Pollitt, he praises the characterization of Ann, noting that her life of quiet desperation is deftly sketched in. He concludes that the effect of the book is brisk, outrageous, exhilarating.

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[69] Susannah Clapp, 'Goings-on in North London,' Times Literary Supplement, 3 October 1975, p. 1125.

[70] Anthony Thwaite, 'Portrait of a Bastard,' Observer Review, 5 October 1975, p. 23.

CHAPTER VII

A QUIET LIFE

A Quiet Life is set in the Forties in a Lancashire town on the coast. Ironically titled, the novel presents a picture of family life that is anything but quiet. In depicting the painful tensions of a lower middle-class English family, Bainbridge is expressing the feelings she has about her own formative years. As she relates the story of her family background, it becomes evident that her early memories greatly influenced the design of this book. One can see the embryonic form of the novel in her description of home and family:

> Twelve miles from Liverpool, red-bricked and semi-detached, it was set on a road that led directly to the sea-shore. The house had four small rooms upstairs, three downstairs plus a scullery, and a long thin back garden separated from a field by a timber fence and a row of poplar trees. The lounge and the dining-room were never used, save on those rare occasions when my maternal grandparents or my aunts came to tea. We occupied only two bedrooms out of the four available; . . . it was generally understood that the mattresses in the other rooms were mildewed with the damp and unfit to lie on. The tiny room downstairs --wisely never referred to as the living-room [had] a fireplace with a mantleshelf of iron. When Father bent down to poke the coals he cautiously rested his hand on the shelf above. Mostly he misjudged the distance and straightened up too soon, striking his head in the

> process.. . . When we were old enough my brother and I went out as much to stretch our limbs as anything else. He went to the church, the youth club and the bowling green. I went to the pinewoods and the sea. My mother sat and read a library book at the bedroom window. Downstairs my father listened to the wireless or paced the garden in the dark, so that years later in a theatre, watching with tears, the play Death of a Salesman, I recognized the set, the light in the upstairs window, and Willie Loman -- a dead ringer for my dad -- stumbling about the yard in a dream, muttering of business deals. [71]

Bainbridge endows the fictional characters in this book with the same particularities that she ascribes to her real family. Her father's volatile temperament and her mother's imperiousness have frequently been referred to by the author. [72] It is easy to imagine that the wayward Madge who notices textures and shapes (60) is the counterpart of the young Beryl and that the quiet, sensitive Alan is the brother who had a nervous breakdown at eighteen. [73] Bainbridge also has amusing recollections of the Sunday afternoon visits of her grandparents which she incorporates into this novel. She notes the abrasive relationship between Father and his father-in-law:

> When my grandparents came for Sunday tea

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[71] Facing Backwards, p. 14.

[72] e.g., Brown, p.

[73] Petschek, p. 9.

> we played cards. . . . Father went to his room and brought down his cotton bag full of pennies. He enjoyed the thought of winning a few pence off his father-in-law. He gave them back when the game was over. He enjoyed that even more; He said Mr. Baines was a rotten skinflint and it gave him pleasure to show him up. It made me unhappy watching Mother gazing beady-eyed at Grandfather, hoping he'd refuse and being disillusioned time without number.[74]

The ordinary little events such as the card game, school-meeting night, a trip to town, piano lessons and a teen-age love affair form the background of family life. Within the limits of these inconsequentialities, Bainbridge explores the nature of life as it is determined by personal relationships and the innumerable trivia of everyday existence.

As in The Dressmaker, Bainbridge's portrait of family life denounces the myth of the stable family and the happy marriage. In A Quiet Life, the family consists of Father (Dick), Mother (Connie), Alan and Madge, who rattle around their small house at cross purposes. Life becomes a battle to assert oneself. As in all her novels, lack of communication among characters is painfully evident. Each one is interested in what he himself has to say, and has absolutely no interest in what others are saying. As everybody talks and nobody

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[74]'Facing Backwards,' p. 15.

listens, the title gathers ironic force. Life within this family is a turbulent affair where the individual must raise his voice in an attempt to be heard. The wireless is switched on full volume to drown out the noise of the quarrelling in case the neighbours hear, so things get noisier and noisier. Each faces the challenge in his own way.

Alan, the protagonist, reacts by worrying, which takes precedence over everything -- young love, companionship, sports, fighting the establishment, experimentation with smoking, drinking, sex; his anxiety colours his whole existence. His self-expression is suppressed in his attempt vicariously to live the lives of the rest of the family. He has the same possessive concern for his loved ones as Nellie but lacks the powerful will to correct or influence their actions. Madge, slightly reminiscent of Margo, is less sensitive and oblivious to the finer nuances of family relationships, or, if she recognizes them, she ignores them, being more concerned with her German prisoner-of-war. Unlike Alan, she is free of inhibitions and can 'jolly up' her parents very easily, so that most of her transgressions are overlooked. She suffers less than Alan because she is less concerned about what other people think; she knows exactly what is going on and is especially astute at judging moods and tempers.

Father is a fractious person who falls out with everyone; and Mother bears a grudge against Father for having come down in the world. There is a secret battle of wits going on between the two. Father's bullying ways do not have much of an effect on his wife, who tries to ignore him and practices little cruelties of her own. She will not admit that he could be ill, or ask him if he is feeling well, nor will she save supper if he is late returning home. It is through the small unkindnesses that family members hurt one another, though their selfishness is a form of self-defence. Each person is afraid to show sympathy for the other because, in doing so, he may forfeit his own claim to attention (110). On the other hand, they may, like Norman, [75] fear to extend sympathy lest more should be demanded.

Bainbridge delineates the hurly-burly of family life in the manner of her previous novels. Cryptic conversations are often of an argumentative or insulting nature. Questions are asked but never answered. Sometimes the exchange consists of a series of disconnected remarks:

> 'It's been beautiful,' said Mother. 'The last few days.'
>
> 'Have you been anywhere nice?' asked Nana. 'Been for a run in the car, have you?'

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[75] A Weekend with Claud, p. 142.

> 'Cold but not windy,' said Mother. 'Until today.'
>
> 'In Spain,' recalled Grandpa, 'it was mild this time of year. The sun on the mountains . . . the white houses in the villages . . . '
>
> 'Beautiful,' murmured Mother, gazing at him with love. 'There was nothing to disturb the eye, no blot on the peaceful landscape. You could hear the bells. While in the distance the --'
>
> 'What's wrong with the lad's neck?' asked Aunt Nora.
>
> 'Boils,' said Father. [76]

It is typical of Bainbridge characters to jump from sunny Spain to boils in the neck. As in real life, assertive individuals butt in and change the subject to suit their own interests.

The passage also tells us something about the relationship between Mother and her parents. It is notable that she ignores her mother's question but affectionately responds to her father. Bainbridge's description of her real grandparents indicates that she is modelling Mr. and Mrs. Drummond after them:

> Mr. Baines, my mother's father, was tall and portly.. . . He'd bettered himself with a vengeance and he collected butterfly specimens. My father hated him because my mother loved him. Before the war my Grandfather went on cruises leaving my grandmother behind. She had failed

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[76] Beryl Bainbridge, A Quiet Life (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1976), p. 35.

Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

> to rise with him.. . . My mother treated her with contempt and was always telling her to pull herself together.[77]

In emergencies, members of the family think of the most irrelevant things. Mother is worried about what the doctor will think about being called out on a Saturday; Madge cries because she will not be able to meet her lover; Alan, although concerned about his father, is more worried about the decision he has made to call the doctor, hoping that Father will remain ill long enough to justify asking him to make a house call. Unaware that Father is about to die, Mother and Alan are most anxious not to offend anyone, especially anyone as important as a doctor. In most Bainbridge novels one finds characters who have a deep respect for authority.

Objects and possessions are tyrannical. Instead of making life more pleasant for their owners, they make it downright uncomfortable. Things are always stuck in the way. The car is blocking the driveway, so Alan has to scrape his bike off the fence, angering his father. He must move carefully while hanging up his coat or he will catch the net curtains and tip the vase of flowers from the window-sill. The statue of Adam and Eve is shaky on its pedestal. The row of decorative

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[77] 'Facing Backwards,' p. 15.

plates might roll off their shelf above the door and bounce on the carpet. Madge compares the house to a minefield (48). Furniture and coverings have to be protected at all costs, taking priority over the comfort of those who use them. Nellie has killed for her furniture and we feel Mother would do the same. The lounge has to be kept in apple-pie order for infrequent visitors. Alan cannot lay his books on the table for fear of damage; and when Father has his fatal heart attack, Mother worries about the carpet.

With objects taking precedence over people, life becomes difficult. Space is very limited and cramped quarters make it impossible for anyone to have a quiet corner of his own, causing more frustration. A large part of the house is a 'reserved area' where no one is permitted to go; it is too cold in any case, so Mother sits down at the station reading in the waiting-room. Madge goes out to keep a rendezvous on the beach and Alan thinks she does so because there is no room in the house. The most ordinary, correctable circumstances seem to keep the family apart. The catastrophic nature of the house is a metaphor for life itself, which is like the rooms in the house in which one hardly dare move for fear of upsetting order or breaking some rule. Alan has grown up with the idea that enjoying life is somewhat sacrilegious. His passion for order is producing a stringency of spirit which precludes the notion of

any joy in living.

The constraints of life are emphasized by the type of clothing worn by individuals. Clifford Gay [78] observes that the school uniform, A.R.P. uniform, and P.O.W. uniform formalize the restricting convention of all garments, the liberty bodices, woollies, headscarves, boots, trousers, coats and macs that envelop the wearer and deflect contact. Janet, like Brenda in The Bottle Factory Outing, wears layers of clothing which discourage Alan's advances:

> It was the thickness of her vest, the sensible stockings, her hat and gloves that put him off. She was more like a female relative than a sweetheart. (p. 74)

Clothes are all-important. Not only are they an encumbrance, they also define the wearer and match a mood. In cheerful humour, Mother and Father leave for town. She wears her dark grey costume and jacket of silver fox, while he is dapper in his best suit and Homborg hat (11). When engaged in domestic warfare, Father is clad in his battledress (an old A.R.P. uniform) and Mother has changed into a faded jersey and satin underslip. Madge, never concerned with appearances, turns up in her school raincoat when she meets Alan nearly thirty years

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[78] Clifford Gay, 'All in the Family,' The New Review, London, December 1976, p. 48.

later.

A Quiet Life is structured around Alan's experiences. Events are recorded as they affect him. Because he is such a sensitive young man, he is alert to every change of mood and sign of trouble. He directs all his efforts towards keeping peace in the family, which usually means covering up for the defiant Madge and appeasing Father and Mother. Sometimes he flees the scene for self-protection:

> All that mattered was that he should get away from the house. Try as he might to shut out the voices, he heard them arguing still.. . . He felt wretched . . . How could he possibly enjoy himself at the youth club? (p. 17)

He often denies unpleasant facts, hoping to avoid the anxiety they cause. 'I don't want to know' is one of his favourite phrases (50).

Bainbridge's portrait of Alan remains consistent throughout the novel. In middle age he still finds it difficult to face facts. He cannot bear to think Madge is growing old, to see the threads of grey in her hair. He is still trying to cover up to keep the peace, turning his back as he throws away the flowers so his wife won't make a fuss (156). It requires skill on the part of the author to elicit sympathy

for a character as self-effacing as Alan, but Bainbridge handles her compliant characters with a lightly ironic touch which rescues them from dullness.

A very inept adolescent lover, his affair with the inhibited Janet furnishes some of the lighter moments in the book. At least on one occasion, he comes very close to asserting himself. He who has been brought up to see men as inferior beings is now in the unusual position of being admired. To Alan, this is a revelation:

> He knew she was chasing him -- he was afraid to ride too fast lest she should lose him; but then he didn't want her to overtake him. It would be too cruel to get clear away. Never before had he been the cause of such a scene -- he was consumed with guilt and excitement. (p. 82)

She even likes his haircut, so he dreams of what his future will be married to Janet. He modestly envisions himself as an extension of his parents: he intends to step a few paces further on, but not too far. He would always be polite, watch his manners and vote Conservative. He would want his house decorated nicely. As Janet becomes more possessive, making loving overtures, Alan runs into problems with the constraints in his background:

> It wasn't fair blaming him for not knowing what to do. If he had known and tried to do it, she wouldn't have let him. (p. 74)

When it is established that they are going steady and Janet does not expect him to behave in a demonstrative fashion, the worst is over for Alan. The love affair progresses but the reader is left in doubt whether Janet ever reaches the altar with him, as his wife is referred to as 'Joan' in the final paragraph. Perhaps she shortened her name or Bainbridge made a slip here as she did on another occasion.[79] It seems more likely, however, that it is one of the author's deliberate little mysteries.

Although Mother and Father often appear thoughtless and insensitive, it is readily understandable as their lives hold many difficulties and disappointments. Ever aware of a sense of loneliness as a natural part of life, Bainbridge imparts those qualities to Father's life especially. Mr. Bainbridge, upon whom the fictional character is based, is quoted as saying:

> Family life was an illusion fostered from infancy to the grave, to fox a man into thinking he wasn't alone. . . . But when death came the illusion was exposed. Though the room be full

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[79] In The Dressmaker Margo is referred to as 'Madge'.

> of people, they were merely watching. At that final passing-out parade you were a company of one.[80]

The noisy assertions we make in the midst of family life tend to mask our awareness of isolation. Father, in A Quiet Life, is a violent man, given to outbursts of rage which alienate him from the rest of the family. They react with hostility so that he gets no affection or sympathy even when he deserves it. One may judge Father's temper to be too easily aroused but Bainbridge also evokes our sympathy for him by underlining his essential vulnerability, as well as that of all human beings regardless of their having a hard exterior:

> Father had one or two business calls to make before midday. They visited a paint firm and asked to see the managing director. The chit of a girl in the office said he was too busy. Father looked startled at the affront; he threw his visiting card on the desk. In the lift he slammed the wrought-iron gates viciously, descending with shoulders hunched, smarting under the rebuff. At the metal box manufacturers, Mr. Wilkinson the manager came into the corridor and stood drumming his fingers against the wall. From time to time he took out his watch from his waistcoat pocket and studied it. Father rubbed his hands together unctuously and spoke of his contact in South Wales. Of mutual advantage to both of them, he implied. . . . When the talk petered out, he clapped Father on the shoulder, relieved to see the back of him.
>
> 'It's been a pleasure,' he said, his voice overwarm, as if he was praising a child.
>
> Father looked diminished . . . (pp. 62-63)

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[80] 'Facing Backwards,' p. 13.

Father's rejection recalls Willie Loman's in Death of a Salesman. Bainbridge acknowledges Willie was 'a dead ringer' for her dad upon whom her fictional character is framed. In Father's moment of defeat, Alan is precoccupied with his own problems:

> 'That fellow Wilkinson . . . when I think what he was before the war -- '
>
> 'I won't get a good report this term.'
>
> 'that Wilkinson was no more than an office boy.'
>
> 'I've fallen back in Latin,' Alan said.
>
> (p. 63)

He is not listening with all his attention to what Father is saying. He feels sympathy but does not express it:

> He felt sorry that it wasn't before the war, the big-shot time, doors opening and secretaries bobbing up and down with respect. Father was a good man, hasty tempered but just. He had never owed a farthing. It couldn't have been easy, telling Mother he had lost all his money. (p. 64)

Bainbridge novels are invariably ironically prophetic. At the beginning we learn Father is bankrupt. The house belongs to Madge and Auntie. 'He's bankrupt. He can't have things of his own,' says Madge (99). Throughout the novel his life becomes more bankrupt in a broader sense. He loses love and respect, even life itself is threatened:

> Alan closed his eyes, retaining the image of his father's corpse-like countenance, white and shrunken above the knot of his silken muffler. (p. 97)

Father's bad temper sets the tone of the book, but his belligerence generally has comic implications. In disposing of the arm that has fallen off Grandfather's chair, he is like an absurd warrior:

> It was too much for him to bear. He ran to the back door and hurled the offending piece of wood clear over the privet hedge on to the lawn. . . . He was like a demented saboteur swooping down on a faulty hand grenade.
>
> Father's legs were buckling as he passed the pagoda. Somehow, lurching and pursuing a zig-zag path . . . he managed to reach the greenhouse. (pp. 88-89)

After Father burns the chair, Alan rescues his dentures from the ashes.

A ridiculous figure in his temper tantrums, Father's illness has its foolish aspects too. He is always being blamed for eating too much. Chest pains are explained by the black pudding being 'off'. He dies as he lived -- bad-tempered, clad in his battledress and A.R.P. hat. He would have died with his boots on only Mother insisted they be removed to prevent damage to the carpet. Father's death

is a repetition of the pantomime that was his life. He is bundled on to the cold lino, doctor straddling his stomach to the accompaniment of a silly rhyme. Surprisingly, his last words are an apology, one of those ironic twists that Bainbridge relishes. Bainbridge deaths are not momentous occasions, they are as ordinary and absurd as life.

Viewing the family with Bainbridge's vision, one appreciates how changeable and unpredictable people are. Each incident presents a different impression. Most of the time it is Father who determines the family atmosphere, so that conditions change as often as his moods. Sometimes he is a domineering monster who seems to be ruining their lives, at other times he is a kindly man interested in his family's welfare, taking his son into town to be fitted for a new suit and drumming up business to support his family. Occasionally he is presented as a very vulnerable individual who is rebuffed and diminished, who is ill but rejects the concern that is offered to him. He is seen at different times as bigoted, sociable, jealous, pathetic, ridiculous and violent. Mother, too, presents different faces to the world. She can be selfish and vain, even cruel, but also considerate and kind when conditions are right. Neither paragons of virtue nor all-out villains, family members are touching in their eccentricities, their child-like

behaviour, their isolation and their pain. [81]

Bainbridge proves in A Quiet Life that closeness is the most distressing thing about family life. The novel satirizes the idea of the close and happy family. With customary irony and meticulous attention to structure the author reinforces her theme. The first chapter begins with Father backing his car out of the driveway with little room to manoeuvre between the posts, an action which suggests they are coming out of a compound. As Alan travels home in the train and looks out the window years later he sees another car backing out, associating the family home with army huts:

> There was a car moving backwards out of a metal gate. . . . They must have taken the huts apart and rebuilt them. In the old days they had stood in the sand, surrounded by barbed wire. (p. 9)

Bainbridge invariably closes her narrative with one final irony which encompasses the whole concept:

> It wasn't her fault. She'd had an unhappy childhood. She didn't come from a close family, not like him and Madge. (p. 156)

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[81] Edith Milton, Yale Review, December 1977, -. 260

The passage is a humorous reminder of how faulty memory is and how we tend to glorify the past. To the observer, life has seemed awful, but Alan is apparently unaware of any deficiencies in his formative years and that, in the final analysis, is the important thing.

Norma Rosen's remarks exemplify the general trend of reviews of A Quiet Life:

> The polish on her masterful story-telling is extraordinary. The style is very high, the price paid is -- characters must be diminished, atomized, freeze-dried. The pleasure is Hans Brickenish . . . the pessimism that blooms forth touches something very deep in the reader. Part of us believes the world is so but there are grace, redemption, renewal, or return or 'revelation' not to be found in this novel or in any other Bainbridge books. Hers are elegant constructions where the devil always wins. [82]

Other reviewers have brought up the point that Bainbridge's style is perfected at the expense of her characterization[83] and it is true that the pithy nature of her writing leaves little room to dwell on the rewarding things in life which renew the spirit. With her strong emphasis, too, on the odd, the unpredictable and the eccentric in human nature, there is

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[82] Norma Rosen, Ms., August 1977, p. 36.

[83] Gay, p. 48 and Jonathan Raban, 'Taking Possession: New Fiction,' Encounter, February 1975, p. 82.

a temptation, as Sage has pointed out [84] to say that her characters aren't normal; yet is is precisely her mastery of style and humour which makes them believable. With unsurpassed skill and veracity Bainbridge captures those ordinary little incidents and exchanges which make up life. Her characters fight against the small irritations with an intensity that is honest and admirable. Bainbridge world is often a bleak one but her characters are not beaten by it, they find the courage to rail at inadequacies and survive within its limitations, which, after all, may be the only 'renewal' possible in some quiet lives.

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[84] Lorna Sage, 'Home Horrors,' Observer Review, 3 October 1976, p. 24.

CHAPTER VIII

INJURY TIME

Injury Time is a novel about middle age and some of the problems of an illicit love affair. Binny, the central character, likens the period to the second half of a football match when the players are bone weary and aware that the final whistle will soon blow. This sense of weariness permeates the novel. Passion is not the all-consuming affair experienced by the young and energetic: in middle age it is something which alleviates the tedium and causes some worry about getting 'caught'. Binny remarks at one point that only Edward VII could invest the word 'mistress' with real meaning,[85] that fidelity is just a matter of fashions changing. Her despair about the flatness of things is humorously conveyed:

> All the big issues were over and done with -- it wasn't likely now that she would get pregnant . . . she didn't hanker after new carpets . . . [or] anything -- certainly not Edward with a block of soap in one hand and that pipe spilling ash down her spine. (p. 44)

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[85] Beryl Bainbridge, Injury Time (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1977), p. 75.

Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

Life has also become stale for Edward who no longer experiences the present or looks forward to the future: he is desperate 'to blot out the shrill blast of that final whistle' (12). Since neither he nor Binny has much to contribute to a romantic affair, their alliance is one of those dull and unpromising situations within which the ingenious Bainbridge delights to create the preposterously funny moments which are a prominent feature of all her work.

Edward is a pompous and self-centred individual who keeps looking in mirrors as if to establish his identity (28). He knows he serves some purpose in Binny's life but he is not sure what it is. With a traditionally British sense of fair play, he realizes he is not playing the game:

> It was rotten for her, reeling out of the dentist's alone, unable to depend upon him at Christmas . . . he denied her the simple pleasures a wife took for granted -- that business of cooking his meals, remembering his sister's birthday, putting little intricate bundles of socks into his drawer. (p. 10)

Edward's chauvinistic tendencies are in evidence here. The joy he feels he is denying Binny is the pleasure of ensuring <u>his</u> comfort. Most of the situations that he finds himself

in are very much at odds with the image of a great lover:

> Once the youngest child's hamster started to die the moment Edward entered the house. Edward had been required to spoon brandy down the animal's throat until it passed on. The sight of those delicate paws, tipped with pink, feebly scratching the air, reminded Edward of his own inner conflict. There were some doors that would never open. (p. 12)

Binny sees herself a victim of the changing times: 'The world was less predictable now. The guard was on strike and the communication cord had been ripped from the roof' (22). Brought up in an age of strict parental discipline when husbands and wives stayed together even though they hated one another, she now lives in an age of permissiveness and is starting to drift with the current. She believes it is fashionable to have an affair with a married man and that nobody is supposed to get hurt. In fact it turns out to be like a football game with husbands, wives, children and friends the penalties which lessen the chance of reaching the goal of happiness.

Binny and Edward are not particularly close. She is not part of Edward's comfortable middle-class world and it is difficult for the privileged Edward to enter Binny's world of troublesome children and dirty dishes. Edward's

time is limited, Binny's is usurped by her family; yet it is precisely because of the briefness of their encounters that the love affair survives. Binny's hectoring never has a chance to build into anything sufficiently awful to end the relationship, because of the many interruptions. For Edward, the affair is an escape from the reality of time passing: for Binny, it is an escape from the demands of the children.

The contiguity of boredom and violence is a recurring theme in Bainbridge and nowehere has she exploited it more overtly than in this novel. In A Quiet Life it was a faint echo of wartime pervading family relationships, in The Dressmaker and The Bottle Factory Outing violence was almost an accident. In this book she presents the most recent form of social violence -- the invasion of a home by gunmen who hold the inmates hostage.

Bainbridge based her fictional account on a newspaper report of a similar event. Paradoxically, as violence becomes more manifest, it also becomes more acceptable. The author is always aware of the increasing frequency of criminal acts and violence as one of the more serious ills of modern society:

Perhaps my mother had a point all those years

> ago when she hinted it was the beginning of the end. Eating food on the front step, and not hanging up curtains led us all inevitably to laughing openly and without much malice at the goings-on of the upper and authoritative classes when the Profumo affair was disclosed.
>
> Two weeks ago, so the story goes, a black youth was arrested off Park Road for doing nothing. His friend . . . intervened and a scuffle broke out. People describe that first night of rioting as a moment of madness, so to speak . . . the second night was more organized. 'They were playing cops and robbers. They broke into the milk dairies and drove the milk floats at the police. The third night was just looting, like. Kids jumping on the band wagon and little old ladies not saying no to a toaster.' [86]

In Injury Time, the vandalism of the children is a symptom of the larger problem. Binny wonders if it is a case of insufficient discipline:

> 'I wonder . . . if we should hit the children more?' She never had, not even when they punched her or broke something valuable. . . . Somewhere along the line mistakes had been made: the way everyone accepted those telephone calls in the night from the police holding the children in the cells for disorderly behaviour; the way the children lolled about the house, refusing to go out until the pubs opened. . . . Only the other day her son had called her a fascist pig. (p. 23)

Bainbridge treats the serious situation mockingly. Binny is still wondering if she should hit the children when they have

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[86] 'The lullaby sound of houses falling down,' p. 36.

already punched her. Those in authority are in a fog:

> She couldn't think where they learned such behaviour, though she suspected it was being taught in the schools. They couldn't spell and they didn't read and they had little respect for property. Like a vast army on the move they swarmed across the city playing gramophone records and frequenting public houses. (p. 40)

Even the effectiveness of gaols has been undermined by the laissez-faire attitude towards crime:

> 'It must be terrible to be shut away. It must finish a man.'
>
> 'Get off, . . . you don't know what you're talking about. Our Billie never looked fitter in his life. When I went to see him you'd have mistaken the blokes inside for the visitors. It was me and me sister looked half dead.'
>
> . . . 'Stands to reason, doesn't it? They put him to bed at eight o'clock and he had a bath three times a week. He got into music and foreign languages. He sat up half the night with his earphones.. . . 'You ask our Billie anything about Mahler and Stravinsky and he'll tell you. (pp. 112-113)

Despite the turbulent background, individuals complain about the dullness of things. As Binny prepares for the dinner party she feels 'despairing inside' with nothing to 'hanker after'. She longs for a row with Edward to stir things up so that they both might feel something, some emotion that would

nudge them closer to one another. Mrs. Papastavrou in her lunacy shows more emotional vitality.

The boredom is shattered by the entrance of the gunmen and terro reigns for a short time. Objects take on ominous properties as the doll and the pram become the 'props' in a Hitchcockian scene:

> Muriel moved then and in a dream bent and caught hold of the rubber tyres and helped to lift the pram over the top step and into the hall. She was flung bodily towards the stairs. A bicycle rode ahead of her along the carpet and crashed against the bannisters. Hands tore at the hood of the pram; something white, intricate as a paper doyley and patterned with light, drifted through the air. She clawed her way down the hall to where the creeper swayed in the wind. In slow motion, it seemed, she saw an infant, entangled in a crocheted shawl, bounce upon the railings. She screamed. A dimpled knee shone for an instant as a beam of light hurtled across the step. Scooping the limp bundle to her breast she was seized by the hair and dragged brutally backwards. Falling with arched spine over the hood of the pram, she lost her balance and rolled to the floor. (p. 83)

Bainbridge describes the incident dramatically. The nightmarish quality of the scene is underscored by the use of several intransitive verbs: 'flung', 'crashed','drifted', 'clawed', 'swayed', 'was seized'. Muriel has no control over what is going on here, she is at the mercy of an unseen power. The

unreal quality is emphasized in the words, 'dream' and 'slow motion'. Horror is evoked by the description of the baby bouncing upon the railings.

It is part of the irony of the novel that when a terrifying event occurs, the stimulation that it affords is of short duration. Bainbridge recognizes that even the most intense emotions are ephemeral. Once the first frightening moments are over, the victims gradually accept the presence of the intruders. There is no fight, no heroics, only appeasement. They even begin to see the criminals' side of things. Alma remarks, 'They've just got caught up in an everyday problem that's gone a teeny bit wrong' (93). When Simpson is shot at, it is the general opinion that it was his own fault, that he was not playing the game. Progressively, the episode takes on the atmosphere of a tea-party with argumentative guests. Adults assume the role of children playing games. To avoid the penalty one must not get caught. Edward has to avoid his wife, Simpson has to outwit the income tax department as well as his wife, and the gunmen have to evade the police.

The author creates a sense of disrupted order throughout the narrative by continued concentration on the unexpected in respect of the trivial as well as the major incidents in the

novel. When Simpson feels he is going to be bored to death with Alma's inane chatter, she remarks, 'Would you mind if we didn't talk? . . . I'd like to read the newspaper' (144). When Ginger takes Binny aside she thinks it is for a sisterly talk and it turns out to be a rape. The rape itself is an innocuous rather than a violent act, instigated by an inhibited young man with thom Binny does her best to cooperate:

> She supposed she was being raped . . . she wasn't feeling hurt or humiliated -- he didn't do anything dirty or unusual. . . . It was unreal, of no account. That's why she cried -- though she wondered why it was only in one eye.
>
> She wasn't even young enough . . . to feel sorry for herself. It hadn't mattered that much. He was an ineffectual young man.
>
> (pp. 131-132)

When Binny anticipates a repetition of the act with Muriel, the gunman only wants a little first-aid assistance. It is the scatterbrained Alma who reminds the robbers that they have left their loot behind after they have made elaborate plans to escape.

Continuing emphasis on the unexpected invests the incident with a sense of unreality. Binny equates the experience with watching a television show:

For many years in the privacy of her own home,

> she had been a voyeur of murder, arson and war. Sitting passively on her sofa she had followed in the wake of tanks and ships and planes. . . . Between placing the kettle on the gas and the water coming to the boil, whole cities disintegrated, populations burned. A thousand deaths, real and fictional had been enacted before her eyes. Once in real life, she'd been an innocent bystander when a woman was attacked with an axe. Head elongated, wearing a bloody rag of a towel like an Indian turban, the victim was helped from the house. Binny found the moans simulated, the sufferings unconvincing; the scene lacked reality, the woman lacked star quality. Ginger's voice, and that bowed head theatrically lit by moonlight, were familiar to her. She could believe in him. He was the wayward young man in Westerns and gangster movies and war films who at the end, sickened by his less stylish companions, proved to have a heart of gold. (pp. 101-102)

The imaginary seems real, and the real imaginary to Binny. The reverse is true for Edward. In the midst of the fear and confusion he starts to face some truths about his life, realizing that he now has nothing to fear from 'that rotter Muldoon' or his domineering father. 'Everything's so real now. It's all so real,' he states (138).

Society's standards in the Seventies have provided Bainbridge with an abundance of material for satirical comment and although she is the least didactic of novelists and her emphasis is not strictly on the malaise in society, the picture of London she presents is a tacit condemnation of falling standards. The central scenes in Injury Time take place in

a shabby house, part of the sordid background which is a familiar part of Bainbridge's novels. With her usual flair for catching the pervasive seediness of the city, she describes the wretchedness of London streets:

> On the pavement outside the British Rail warehouse, lying in disorder across the rusted springs of a double bed, sprawled several elderly men and women drinking out of a communal bottle.
>
> Bouncing in excitement on the dilapidated bed, unsettling her geriatric companions wrapped in sacking, the old woman laughed and leered her approval. Two men struggled upright into a sitting position and spat violently into the gutter. Their eyes, half averted, were those of animals existing in darkness. (p. 19)

Scenes of depravity are a fact of modern life which the author includes to provide substantiality as well as a point of reference. Typically, she pinpoints a well-known landmark. The British Rail warehouse is the meeting-place for the tramps and the idlers while the Wimpy bar with its slipshod waitress underscores one of the common little irritations of daily life:

> . . . they fled inside the Wimpy bar for a cup of coffee. The waitress was affronted at the bold way they expected service. After five minutes of hostile inactivity she relented and left two cups of pale yellow liquid at the edge of the table.

> 'I wouldn't mind a doughnut,' called Alma, but the waitress had better things to do. (p. 20)

A familiar experience, it is presented here with characteristic Bainbridge wit; there is mock exaggeration in, 'the waitress was affronted at the bold way they asked for service. The neat, expressive phrase 'hostile inactivity' is also typically Bainbridge.

Streets are sordid, service is deplorable and living quarters are equally unpromising. The view from the window of Binny's house reveals a yard full of refuse. Eggshells and betting slips mar the privet hedge.

> Below the window was a strip of earth dangerously littered with strands of barbed wire, intended to discourage cats from doing their business on the stunted daffodils. Wrought iron railings ran from the side of the front door. (p. 36)

Bainbridge frequently includes barbed wire and railings in her descriptions of houses and buildings to suggest enclosure. Her characters are held captive in the wider sense by the severe limitations of their lives. The squalor of surroundings is further underlined in the description of the insect-ridden walls:

> He was disgusted to see small insects crawling between the floorboards and the wall . . . He was shifting the fridge on its base to uncover some verminous nest. (p. 153)

The image of crawling insects recalls an earlier one of the activities of the children:

> Behind the barbed wire netting of the play centre, children crawled along concrete pipes, screaming. (p. 17)
>
> Like a vast army on the move, they swarmed across the city. (p. 40) (italics mine)

Bainbridge associates Binny's pudding with the insects. Cooking apples stuffed with raisins constitute the 'verminous nest' which Edward is searching for.

A common feature in all Bainbridge novels is the importance of objects. They generally obstruct and injure people. The bicycle in the hall 'stabs' Simpson as he enters the house. Binny is practically shoved out of her bedroom by a ping-pong table on which she is always banging her hip. The boon to household cleanliness, which is literally and figuratively misplaced in Binny's house, becomes a weapon against the unwary:

> Simpson was lying at the foot of the steps

> clutching the hose attachment of a Hoover to his chest. He was swearing like a midshipman. (p. 123)

Periodically, reviewers have brought up the question of whether or not Bainbridge is writing thrillers. Since crime is a salient part of Injury Time, the novel is the best example of her work upon which to base an opinion. Any type of mystery story or thriller centres on a criminal act with the crime as the pivot. That is not true in Injury Time. The intrusion by the bank robbers is not included for the interest inherent in the criminal act itself: it is only another incident in the lives of the characters. It is their reaction that becomes the focal interest in the novel. Binny was irritated by Edward's chauvinistic tendencies from the beginning. She resented the privileged way in which he lived, she was easily aroused to jealousy when Helen's name was mentioned. Vacillating between love and irritation towards both Edward and her children, before the hostage event, she continues to do so during the period the gunmen are in the house. Edward is still irritating her with thoughts of his hunger instead of her safety:

> 'I'm so damned hungry,' he complained miserably. 'Can't you think where you put that pudding you lost?'
>
> 'It's in the carrier bag,' said Binny . . .

> 'You're not worried about them taking me with them are you? You couldn't care less.'
> (p. 150)

She is still telling him that he does not know how the other half lives (151). Binny's parting thought is, 'Liar'. Edward, too, is occupied with the same thoughts as always: he is afraid of getting caught and he is trying to work out some vague guilt feelings originating on the cricket field in his schooldays. Alma's sympathies are still with the criminal classes, while Mr. and Mrs. Simpson, bogged down in a dull marriage, remain in a state of armed truce. Criminality is a transient irritation in any of their lives.

Superficially, Bainbridge's novels have something in common with the ordinary 'whodunit'. Those entertaining books are usually very tightly plotted, often colourful with zany and eccentric characters such as Bainbridge creates. The thriller is full of clues and false leads and usually has a twist at the end: the murderer, conventionally, is the one we have the least reason to suspect. The morality of the criminal is not the chief point of interest, the emphasis is on finding out who committed the crime. In the 'arsenic and old lace' type of mystery, the murderer is likely to be a harmless old lady, the essence of propriety, who has been somewhat provoked and has done away with the offender in the most

innocuous way. That one so ordinary should commit such an extraordinary deed is the idea that engages the reader's curiosity.

Some of Bainbridge's novels are similar to the thriller in that they are highly plotted, sustain an air of mystery by the inclusion of prophesies or ominous hints of the future, involve a suspicious death, and usually have a twist at the end. The Dressmaker, as already stated, has an arsenic and old lace aspect. The resemblance is confined to a superficial likeness, however, as the focal point in Bainbridge is human relationships and the problems in communication. Her mastery of wit and irony, her evocation of setting, the sense of immediacy which her work elicits, and the consistency of her characterization are all factors which separate her from the conventional thriller writer.

In the more sophisticated type of crime story, the question of morality is examined. Characters are faced with moral choices as motives, consciousness, attitudes and conscience are explored with a view to probing the complexities of good and evil. Judgment is implicit in novels of this type, it is their raison d'etre. There is neither time nor space for philosophical meandering in Bainbridge. People simply act and react according to the demands of the moment. There is

little space for elaboration, motivation, or authorial judgment. In dramatic mode, she lets her characters speak for themselves through action and dialogue.

Injury Time was awarded the Whitbread prize for the best novel of 1977 and was received with enthusiasm by reviewers. James Brockway [87] thinks it is not too preposterous to say that Bainbridge is our 1970s Oscar Wilde, displaying the comic absurdities of her characters and satirizing the society which has produced them and the situation they find themselves in. Peter Ackroyd comments that Bainbridge has taken the best qualities of her earlier work into a different and much larger world in this novel to great effect:

> Here, the violence seems real and it strengthens the impact of the book. The comedy she manages to elicit from the horrifying situation is as funny and sharp as anything she has ever written, but also it is now exact and well-defined.. . . characters . . . actually emerge as complete creations. By facing recognizably real events, Beryl Bainbridge has saved herself from whimsy. And, paradoxically, by keeping even the nastiest parts of her narrative close to comedy, she manages to avoid gratuitousness or melodrama in the handling of her theme. [88]

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[87] James Brockway, 'Penalty Areas,' Books & Bookmen, 23 December 1977, p. 52.

[88] Peter Ackroyd, 'London Life,' The Spectator, 1 October 1977, p. 23.

The novel enhanced Bainbridge's reputation as a highly skilled and original novelist. She has used her wit and humour to greatest effect in satirizing the comic absurdities of English middle-class manners and morals and deserves the right to be classed among the leading humorists.

CHAPTER IX

YOUNG ADOLF

Young Adolf, Bainbridge's ninth novel, is based on The Memoirs of Bridget Hitler. It has not been established whether the Memoirs are totally authentic, but the intriguing material provides the raw stuff perfect for the talents of Miss Bainbridge. According to the Memoirs, Bridget fell in love with Adolf's half brother, Alois, whom she met at the Dublin Horse Show in 1909. They settled in Liverpool, where Alois worked as a waiter, nurturing ambitions to make a fortune selling the newly invented safety razors. Hoping to interest his sister Angela in the venture and perhaps persuade her to invest some money, he invited her to England. Her troublesome younger brother, Adolf, however, was on the run from Austrian authorities for evading conscription. Having already spent one miserable winter hopping from park bench to poorhouse, Adolf was not anxious to face another, and so he coaxed Angela into financing his trip to Liverpool. He obtained a passport made out in the name of his dead brother, Edmund, and arrived as a very unwelcome guest at the Lime Street Station in November 1912. Adolf Hitler, prime mover of a world war which cost something like forty million lives, an all-powerful dictator who held the fate of

the Western world in his hands for a time, arrives in Liverpool as a shabby, starving, hunted, and unprepossessing individual at the mercy of a hostile brother and an unsympathetic sister-in-law.

It is little wonder that Bainbridge remarks, tongue in cheek, that she has never felt the necessity for invention, life itself being stranger than fiction. Bridget confirms the author's belief:

> Looking back now, it would be very satisfying to say that my Irish second sight, or even my woman's intuition had helped me to recognize unusual qualities which might explain why the young man we met would one day become one of the most notorious figures in history, but there was certainly nothing about the pale, unsteady-eyed youth who began agitatedly whispering to Alois that distinguished him from thousands of others.
>
> . . . a less interesting or prepossessing house-guest I cannot imagine. At first he remained in his room sleeping or lying on the sofa . . . I had an idea that he was ill, his colour was so bad and his eyes looked so peculiar.[89]

Bainbridge describes the fictional Adolf in similar terms in the opening chapter of Young Adolf but throughout the narrative there are darkly suggestive signs which reveal this timid

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[89] Bridget Hitler, The Memoirs of Bridget Hitler, ed., Michael Unger (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1979), p. 29.

young man to be the infamous dictator in embryo. She bases all her prophetic ironies on the fact that readers are aware of the tremendous importance of the central character in world history. The punishment he suffers and the ludicrous situations in which he finds himself are all the more outrageous because we realize they are happening to an evil genius who will become world renowned.

Young Adolf spends a gruelling time in Liverpool, rather like Alice in a nightmarish Wonderland: those dreadful characters he meets, hairy Mary O'Leary or Dr. Kephalus with 'the baleful stallion eyes', are akin to the ogres in a fairy tale. His arrival by rail is like a journey into Hell:

> The train, buffeted by wind, was swaying over the steel lattice of a bridge, high above the silted estuary of a river. In the distance some kind of tower, complete with battlements rose into the sky. . . . torrents of rain, spilling from the ramparts above, fell on the carriages ahead.
>
> . . . he woke to darkness and confusion. The carriage was swaying so violently that he was forced to cling with both hands to the edge of the seat. Outside the window, a wall of rock, lit at intervals by flickering gas jets, towered above him. Just when he thought he must be dashed to the floor, the train rumbled out of the tunnel and slid beneath a vaulted roof of iron and glass into Lime Street Station. [90]

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[90] Beryl Bainbridge, Young Adolf (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1978), pp. 9-11.

Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

With a combination of realistic and mythic modes, a commonplace train journey is described in plausible psychological terms as a terrifying experience for the imaginative Adolf. At the same time, there is symbolic allusion to the fact that this train is bearing disaster; the rain hitting the red gravel and spraying the carriages is highly suggestive of a blood bath. The train is depicted as having a fiendish life of its own, uncontrollable, swaying and thundering on, causing darkness and confusion. Adolf finds escape reading of the fictional victory of Karl May's Old Shatterhand. 'I am great,' his hero cries, 'I am glorious.' Those are prophetic utterances, words which will be used by the dictator himself in the future. Incidental to this victory, however, is the ominous image of Nantaquond staked out in the dust with bloodstained limbs.

Young Adolf is an amalgam of fact and fantasy. Hitler's biographers [91] report that he was an enthralled reader of Karl May, who wrote skilled boys' thrillers on cowboys and Indians. In fact, in creating Shatterhand, Karl May gave the imaginative youth a model to follow:

He would become Old Shatterhand, the lord of

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[91] Robert Payne, The Life and Death of Adolf Hitler (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1973), p. 141.

Colin Cross, Adolf Hitler (London: Hodder & Stroughton, 1973), p. 28.

> the horizons, with power over all living creatures, perpetually at war with the inferior races and consigning them to their doom. Long after his boyhood was over he continued to read these novels, and he was reading them again while he fought the war against Russia. . . . talking about the Russians, he would refer to them as "Redskins". [92]

Payne also points out that the moody boy who read May's novels and failed in his lessons was entering a world of fantasy which gradually closed around him. From time to time he would break out of the circle, but the world of fantasy was the only place where he felt completely at home (28).

Bainbridge cleverly brings out this trait in her characterization of young Adolf. It is well known that Hitler placed a great deal of confidence in astrology. His sister-in-law, Bridget, takes credit for introducing him to it:

> Not long before, I had met a Mrs. Prentice, who cast horoscopes . . . from the moment Adolf first heard about it he kept after me for more details . . . He asked Mrs. Prentice to do his horoscope again and again. [93]

Bainbridge portrays Mrs. Prentice as a poor woman with a large family who attends Mr. Meyer's Christmas party and

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[92] Payne, pp. 27-28.

[93] Memoirs, p. 34.

tells fortunes with playing cards. Of course, an illustrious future is hinted at for Adolf. He draws the king of clubs, the card which stands for Alexander the Great. Of all the kings in the pack, he alone holds the globe in his fingers. According to Mrs. Prentice

> . . . his path through life would be strewn with broken hearts . . . Tall Nordic maidens, built like trees, would fall at his feet. They would die for him, blow out their brains for him. (pp. 123-124)

With the wisdom of hindsight, we know these things came true, though not in quite the amatory context hinted at by the fortune teller.

For Hitler, mythology was always more real than history. Payne points out [94] that the dictator was deeply influenced by Hoerbiger's theories about the fabulous Nordic civilization which had perished under the ice. With the new ice age about to come into existence, godlike supermen would emerge, with the power to shape the cosmic fire and ice: they would revive the lost magnificence of that mythical Nordic civilization, assuming command over the whole earth and the entire universe. Bainbridge's Adolf dreams of a Germany inhabited by just such a race, speaks and writes about the 'adulteration of the blood and racial deterioration thereby' as the determining causes

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[94] Payne, p. 141.

in the decline of ancient civilizations. He wants to purge Germany of these impurities:

> 'It is my belief,' Adolf told him, in a voice querulous with despair, 'that European history is merely the history of racial struggle. The decline of the Roman Empire is a classic example of historical decadence resulting from contaminated blood. Like Rome, Europe is sinking under the burden of bastard peoples . . .
>
> 'Impure blood,' shouted Adolf, 'spawns impure ideas and creeds. We've not only the Jews to contend with but the Slavs, the Socialists, the Hapsburg Monarchists, the Roman Catholics, the Croats . . . (pp. 62-63)

Bainbridge has encapsulated Hitler's creed in the short passage. It is introduced plausibly enough, spat out under duress in response to Meyer's questioning him about how much longer he will be staying in Liverpool. But his Jewish interlocutor does not take him seriously:

> 'My dear boy,' said Meyer kindly, concerned by the whiteness of his face. 'You are too sensitive. You shouldn't upset yourself so much.' . . . 'It will be no comfort to you . . . but we have all felt the same at your age. Over one obsession or another. With me it was music. I wanted to be a success. I dreamed of being famous. (p. 63)

The above is a good illustration of how the book works, mingling the serious and the inconsequential, and exploiting

our knowledge of Hitler's and Europe's future.

The author takes full advantage of the familiar mannerisms and character traits of Hitler: endowing him with a passionate nature which can be roused to near hysteria, she hints at his developing megalomania and demagoguery:

> 'During the grub years of my miserable childhood,' thundered Adolf, 'and during the miserable caterpillar years of my young manhood when I was repeatedly denied entrance to the Academy, I held fast to the belief that one day I would undergo a metamorphosis of the spirit. On that cold hillside my patience was rewarded. Had I not long since renounced the faith of my boyhood, I would have compared my exalted state to that of Christ's in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is useless to denounce such an experience as adolescent and commonplace. That night I struggled free from the dusty membranes of both grub and caterpillar and emerged finally, an airborne creature soaring on irridescent wings above the earth. (pp. 119-120)

The passage is an excellent parody of the tone of Mein Kampf, where Hitler, in Chapter Two, sees adversity as a blessing:

> . . . I appreciate the fact that I was thus saved from the emptiness of a life of ease and that a mother's darling was taken from tender arms and handed over to Adversity as to a new mother. [95]

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[95] Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf (London: Hurst & Blackett Publishers, 1939), p. 31.

The two passages are one of a kind, with the emphasis on the self adrift in a hostile world, but with tremendous inner resources, it is implied, to rise above calamity and emerge victorious. Young Adolf's powerful oratory is lost on his audience, however, Bridget has no idea what he is talking about, Mrs. Prentice has heard the word 'Christ' and asks if he is going to be a priest, Mary O'Leary believes that he has been talking about bugs, and Kephalus concludes that he is an hysteric.

In the crazy Liverpool world, Hitler is totally impotent. He is, though, paranoiacally quick to take offense. When Meyer asks him if he is in trouble with the police, he becomes indignant:

> 'It is Alois who has the criminal tendencies, not I.' . . . 'I am the innocent victim of a failure in postal communications.' . . . I notified the authorities of my new address . . . I was acting with the strictest correctness. Unfortunately I didn't have the same address for very long, or any other address for that matter. Circumstances forced me to spend the next few years wandering the city like a tramp . . . The postman doesn't deliver mail to doss houses or park benches. (pp. 103-104)

Meyer calms him down by referring to his artistic temperament and assuring him he is not being followed by Michael Murphy. Adolf's hysterical nature is captured skillfully by Bainbridge:

> [There was] an absurd expression of rage on Adolf's face. He was holding his head at a curious angle as though an invisible hand was pulling his hair out by the roots and sneering so ferociously it was almost comical.. . . Adolf began to snarl like a fox . . . [Alois] was staggered by this rather effeminate display of snickering frenzy . . . Adolf started to shout incoherently . . . he half raised his fist, prepared to burst those pink ballooning cheeks. (pp. 37-38)

Symptomatic of his condition is the semi-hallucinatory nature of his thoughts. Reality and fantasy blend together so that one is barely distinguishable from the other in the young man's mind. In Chapter Eight, Bainbridge depicts a scene in which Adolf is just waking from a dream. He sees a series of images which have a fantastic quality about them, yet they are all real events. The time sequence is disrupted, however, which endows the images with a surrealistic air:

> A series of images flickered in front of him-- a girl in a cream blouse, an old woman waving her arms in anguish, a man with hair the colour of silver, wagging a solemn finger -- and Alois holding a wine glass up to the goose-necked lamp on the wall.
>
> The room was empty save for a rusted bath-tub in the corner; . . . draped over the tub was a little red towel, scarlet as a poppy . . . panes of blue glass set in the door, leading nowhere . . . a man standing on a wooden crate urinating . . . the man with silvery hair, dwarfed by the girl in the creamy blouse . . . waltzing sluggishly about the landing. (pp. 47-48)

There is an explanation for everything he is imagining. The vision of the silvery haired man waltzing sluggishly about the landing with the girl towering above him is Bridget being jiggled in Meyer's arms. The room with the rusty bath-tub is the lavatory on the second floor which has a panel in the wall set with blue glass, like a door leading nowhere, from which you can look down on to the street into the roof-less urinal below. The public house on the opposite side of the street furnishes the rest of the scene. The little red towel is a piece of Mary O'Leary's petticoat, which Meyer uses as a polishing rag for his shoes.

A similar sense of unreality is created when Adolf goes up to the empty third floor of the house. He is dreaming of moving in to the newly decorated room:

> Adolf crouched dreamily against the door, building shelves in his mind and stacking them with books. He didn't care for roses, but none the less . . .
>
> Without warning a section of the newly decora-ted wall collapsed inwards and, as if fired through a paper hoop, a man with a bandage about his temples shot into the room. Lifting Adolf by the lapels of his coat he flung him aside and was out of the door and running down the stairs in a matter of seconds. (p. 86)

Later, when Adolf is fleeing from the police, he also experi-ences the trauma of being hurled through the wallpaper. In

his wildest hallucinations he will not be able to visualize a weirder scene than this; but there is always a perfectly logical explanation for bizarre events in Bainbridge. The wallpaper panel is useful for evading authorities after outwitting the 'night people'.

There are rare occasions in the novel when young Adolf has eminently sane thoughts:

> The English, thought Adolf, are a nation of eccentrics and fearfully dangerous. No wonder they ruled an empire. (p. 150)
>
> Never in all my life, thought Adolf, under torture or interrogation, will I mention that I have been to this accursed city, visited this lunatic island. (p. 172)

Nearly all the incidents in Young Adolf are related to actual events or known facts of the dictator's life, with Bainbridge humorously offering an explanation for some of the trivial ones. At the end of the novel, when Adolf flees from the police, he stumbles into a theatre where he is dressed like a woman to avoid recognition. It is after this episode that he resolves to grow a moustache so that 'never again would he be mistaken for a woman.' His distinctive hair style, combed straight down over one side of his forehead, is instituted by Bridget in an attempt to cover up a cut (157). Mary O'Leary provides a piece of brown linen

from which Bridget fashions his first brown shirt. His experience as an errand boy for M. Dupont at the Adelphi Hotel, when he runs up Brownlow Hill with a parcel under his arm, is somewhat like a rehearsal for his role of dispatch rider in World War 1.

From the trivial to the more significant, Bainbridge hints that Adolf's political and psychological acumen may have derived from his Liverpool experience. He becomes involved in an intrigue with Kephalus and Meyer, social meliorists, who make an unsuccessful attempt to thwart the City Corporation in their efforts to remove children from their terrible homes. The incident teaches Adolf two important lessons. Firstly, that fear is a betrayer:

> At that moment a boy some two years old, clinging to his mother's neck, uttered a piercing shriek of terror. Adolf remembered . . . a dog chasing . . . rabbits . . . There had been no reason to suppose that the dog would be swift enough to catch any of them and then one rabbit . . . as if sensing it had been chosen for death, froze in its tracks and screamed. Pouncing, the dog was on it and breaking its back in the grass. (p. 146)

Secondly, he learns from Meyer the cardinal rule for dictatorship:

> 'Let the minority act with enough authority,'

> cried Meyer bitterly, 'and the majority will walk like lambs to the slaughter.' (p. 147)

Bridget Hitler comments in her memoirs that during Hitler's stay in Liverpool, he had not picked up enough English to ask directions to the station (36). The fictional Adolf gets very little opportunity to learn English either. Those with whom he is most closely associated, Alois and Bridget, Meyer, Kephalus and Dupont, all speak German. When he is exposed to the endearments of the Liverpudlian idiom, the results are comic:

> He was outraged at the way she had continually referred to him as a portion of meat -- either a sausage, or a chicken leg or a lamb chop. It was a mercy, he thought, she lacked her teeth. (p. 124)

Young Adolf has the last word, however, and it is German:

> Leaning out of the window, Adolf shouted . . . 'in Zukunft werde ich es dir zuruckerstatten.'

It is a nice parting shot. Bridget reads the literal meaning and believes he is saying that Alois will get what he owes him; but Alois, with superior knowledge of the language, recognizes the double entendre, the threat that he will get what's coming to him. Bridget confirms that those are indeed the last words

of the departing young Hitler.

As Bainbridge herself has explained, Young Adolf was written for the fun that could be created out of the situation:

> I had no intention of writing an in-depth study of Hitler. I never envisaged a psychological portrait of a youthful monster in the making. I was merely obsessed with the city of Liverpool and with all my father had told me about the past.
>
> . . . It could not be a solemn book about a penniless foreigner, deeply interested in politics; it had to deal with young Adolf in Liverpool and his involvement in such ludicrous and embarrassing situations that he would never, in the whole of his life, breathe a word of his visit to anyone.[96]

Certainly the novel is full of farcical situations. The author could well have obtained her inspiration from one of the Chaplin movies. The protagonist is a fairly meek individual and almost an esthete compared to those with whom he associates. Bainbridge makes a veiled prophesy in the opening chapter to the effect that it would be better if he never reached his destination (10-11) which is a harbinger of what is to come. When he arrives, he suffers the discomforts of many Bainbridge characters. He is frightened, cold, hungry,

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[96] Beryl Bainbridge, 'Bringing Hitler to Liverpool,' Times Literary Supplement, 3 November 1978, p. 1276.

wet, bewildered, nearly asphyxiated by Alois, borne away on a luggage trolley, dragged in and out of a pub, humiliated by the smell of lysol permeating his old clothes -- and all this before he even arrives at Bridget's house.

His introduction to the grotesque Mr. Kephalus -- a fitting character to handle all the atrocities that Hitler perpetrated -- is equally disturbing. Mr. Kephalus is six foot tall with a fist like a sledge-hammer, rainbow tinted eyes like those of a sick horse left out in a field, his hands thick and swollen with nails so deformed and shortened that they must have been trapped in a door at one time. His clothing emits an overpowering smell of perspiration and tobacco, and his dwelling is falling down around his ears. The effect of this awful individual on sensitive Adolf is devastating. It is Alois's Jewish neighbour, Meyer, who has introduced the gruesome doctor to Adolf and the young man finds it difficult to understand Meyer's fascination with such a character:

> . . . it was painfully obvious that Meyer actually preferred to talk of first-degree burns or the effect on a human body of a ton of grain dropped from a height, rather than ponder the more subtle impression made by art and philosophy and music. He too was a lunatic. (p. 69)

As Dr. Kephalus continues with his gory tales the squeamish youth becomes more and more upset until he finally passes out. Bainbridge derives strong ironic force from the absurd situation since historians have made it clear that Hitler did not like to be connected personally with the bloodier aspects of his regime. He squeamishly avoided becoming closely involved with the details of mass killings, preferring to leave it to Himmler and the specialized S.S. units to carry out the atrocities which he engineered.[97] The focus of the novel is not on the serious, though, and Bainbridge rests lightly on these points.

Mary O'Leary is another grotesque character to whom Adolf is introduced:

> Two months after her fortieth birthday, while working as a skivvy for her uncle Reub in his watchmender's shop on Brownlow Hill, she had been approached by an Irishman, taken to a two-penny hop, briefly courted and unexpectedly married. On her wedding night her husband had protested that she was both old and hairy, and had departed in the morning, nover to be seen again. (p. 44)

Twenty-five years later, Mary is no longer sure of what he looked like, but she is far from convinced that his absence

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[97]Cross, p. 303.

is permanent. Every male visitor is scrutinized by her to make sure he is not her delinquent husband. The missing Irishman puts in an appearance at the end of the book: he has been following Adolf, trying to find out if he is his son or not. He does not want to make himself known to Mary as he has a common-law wife in Blackpool. In the meantime, he has caused young Adolf a great deal of anxiety as he imagined he had been followed all the way from Vienna.

The weird characters, the bewildering situations, the slapstick violence, and the improbable coincidences are the elements of farce which pervade the novel. But the more sober glimpses of Liverpool life gleaned from the portraits of Alois, Bridget and Pat and the skillful penetration into the facts of Hitler's life and character raise the book to a higher level. As with other Bainbridge novels, Young Adolf cannot be written off as farcical nonsense, nor can it be taken entirely seriously. It is disconcerting, for example, to hear young Adolf making a speech which is an almost perfect imitation in style and content of the real Hitler's oratory in circumstances which at first appear to be so lacking in verisimilitude. One wonders if he has spoken in German, which seems likely since he has had little opportunity to become fluent in English; and if he has spoken in a foreign language, would Mrs. Prentice and Mary O'Leary be likely to understand

him? However, Mrs. Prentice has only recognized the word 'Christ' and Mary O'Leary has had a long association with Meyer and is a Russian by birth, so it is credible that she could translate some of the words. Another barely plausible incident occurs when Mrs. Prentice is reading Adolf's fortune in the cards. She forecasts that tall, Nordic maidens will fall at his feet and mentions Alexander the Great. While it is conceivable that Mrs. Prentice could have heard of Alexander in her history lessons at school, it is unlikely that she would be acquainted with the Nordic race. Standards of verisimilitude hardly apply to downright fantasy or farce, yet in the midst of these elements, which comprise the greater part of the novel, an authentic portrait of the infamous dictator begins to emerge, and the disturbing thoughts which it generates makes the comedy less light hearted.

Characteristically, Bainbridge makes no attempt to gloss over the nastier aspects of her subject. Just as she presents glimpses of the real Hitler and his creed, she also makes no attempt to glorify social conditions in England in the early twentieth century. It was not a very pleasant place:

> Adolf had heard stories of the fearful happenings in this sector of the city -- the drunkenness, the fights, the suicidal women who ruptured their wombs with the tip of a broken bottle.

> There wasn't a single inhabitant who wasn't destined for the workhouse, the prison, or the infirmary. (p. 140)

In typically ironic mode, working conditions are described:

> Everyone agreed the young had an astonishing time of it now, what with health and public education and generally being treated as persons of some importance. The boy sipping his drink, who was nearly thirteen, had been employed for two years . . . in the soap works in Blundell Street and wasn't allowed to work after seven o'clock at night. (p. 116)

Hitler's farcical mishaps, his paranoiac character, the eccentricities of the Liverpudlians, and the appalling social conditions of the time are all presented with the author's usual clear and confident manner and understated comedy. Young Adolf is similar in style and method to the best of Bainbridge's earlier novels.

Young Adolf did not enjoy the uniformly enthusiastic reception of its predecessor, Injury Time. Selden Rodman faults the novel because Bainbridge's exploration of Adolf's character does nothing to explain the enigma of what he became and accomplished between 1912 and 1945:

> There is not a hint in this novel of the qualities that enabled the historical Hitler to come so

> fearfully close to conquering the world. Is it possible that the supreme self-confidence, the understanding of mass psychology, the mesmerizing rhetoric, the physical courage and that intellectual ability to organize brilliantly within the boundaries of his prejudices which so impressed Sir Hugh Trevor Roper and others -- is it possible that all those attributes . . . appeared for the first time during World War 1? If so, any fictional . . . attempt to throw light on Hitler's character would have to focus on these crucial years. As it is, Beryl Bainbridge succeeds only in making the phenomenon of Adolf Hitler more incomprehensible than it was before.[98]

Bainbridge herself answers Rodman's charge[99] when she states that it was not actually Hitler as such that interested her but his possible visit to her native Liverpool:

> If you know a place very well, houses, rooms, views from windows, it is difficult to make the people who inhabit that place unreal. Bricks and mortar give scale to people. For that reason alone, if you take my meaning, when I wrote Young Adolf I deliberately forgot Mr. Jaffe and remembered only Mr. Browning from beyond the level crossing.

The Nazis were reputed to have beaten Mr. Jaffe with a truncheon in 1938 leaving him with a hollow above the left temple. A Polish Jew, he fled Berlin at the outbreak of war and was a well-known figure on the streets of Liverpool. Mr. Browning, on the other hand, was known locally as a man of

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[98] Selden Rodman, National Review, 22 June, 1979, p. 816.

[99] 'Bringing Hitler to Liverpool,' p. 1276.

valour. One night while on A.R.P. duty, he had seen by moonlight a mine drifting down on a parachute. Fearlessly, he had run towards it and leaping upwards in his tin hat, butted it over a hedge and into a field of mud, where it landed harmlessly and failed to explode. Bainbridge in her article explains that a legend developed around the heroic act, and when courage might fail, one was reminded of Mr. Browning's bravery.

Blake Morrison sees Bainbridge working a kind of comic historical revenge, with the slapstick purging of old resentments freeing the author from the task of 'explaining' Hitler psychologically:

> . . . Young Adolf is a disappointment -- a brilliant idea, but one too sketchily carried out. Bainbridge is good, as we'd expect, on Liverpool . . . but remains a novelist more at home with the 1940s and the present than with 1912. Not only are many of the usual narrative tensions absent, but Bainbridge can't quite prevent herself from getting Adolf on the analyst's couch (persecution mania, fits, hallucinations, anti-Semitism and all) and when she does analyse . . . the results can look disconcertingly vapid.[100]

Again the criticism is directed at the veracity of the psychological portrait of Hitler, which is really beside the point, for Bainbridge as a novelist is interested in her character's

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[100] Blake Morrison, 'Looking Backwards,' New Statesman, 10 November 1978, p. 630.

personality only in a marginal way insofar as it serves her comic purposes.

John Naughton's remarks, however, are typical of the majority who complimented Bainbridge on her extemely imaginative and comic portrait:

> This is a highly comic book, but one that also has a cutting edge. It is, for example, an extraordinarily emaginative recreation of the young Hitler, with pathetic overtones which are echoed in Albert Speer's portrait of the man. And it contains a vivid evocation of the immigrant misery and urban squalor which characterized Liverpool in its prime. Munich may not have been much but it would have been a welcome bolthole after Merseyside. [101]

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[101] John Naughton, 'Leavisites in Yorkshire,' The Listener, 16 November 1978, p. 659.

CHAPTER X

WINTER GARDEN

Bainbridge's tenth novel, Winter Garden, is the first to be set outside England. Her characters leave English shores to embark on a trip to Russia as guests of the Soviet Artist's Union. There are four of them in the party:

> Enid didn't know Nina all that well . . . she knew Bernard very well. She wasn't sure how well Bernard knew Nina. Neither Bernard nor Enid had met Douglas Ashburner before. 102

With an introduction framed like this, there are certain to be misunderstandings and confusion. Indeed, Bainbridge uses style to augment theme throughout as the book is written in a manner which appears designed to confuse, mirroring the contradictions of Marxist totalitarianism. Ashburner, an Admiralty lawyer, is the central figure in this story of love and intrigue. A born loser, literally and figuratively speaking, he is also an individual with an easy facility for disrupting order, which challenges the resourcefulness of Olga and Mr. Karlovitch in their attempts to maintain a rigid surveillance over the English party.

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[102] Beryl Bainbridge, Winter Garden (New York: George Braziller, 1981), p. 12.

Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition.

Mother Russia with her vast territory becomes a grim adversary to Ashburner who, like young Adolf in Liverpool, is facing problems long before he sets foot on foreign soil. In Chapter One we are introduced to him taking leave of his wife and finding it a bit nerve-wracking. He has told her he is going fishing in Scotland when actually he plans to spend a couple of weeks in Russia with his paramour, Nina St. Clair. His wife is rather nonchalant about his leaving, which in itself is rather ominous as far as Ashburner is concerned. 'Sporting and unnerving' is the way he describes it:

> 'Two weeks in the open air,' said his wife, 'drifting in an open boat will undoubtedly set you up for the winter.' He had never been a man to feel the cold. (p. 8)

Infidelity is weighing him down and he cannot afford to be too nonchalant: he is worried to death that the television might break down, or his wife might not be able to get the fire started (he himself is quite an expert at starting fires), or the bulb may burn out in the socket while he is away. Like Ulysses, Ashburner is setting out on a journey fraught with perils but he is unnerved before he leaves and is desperately looking around for an excuse not to take this dangerous step. His bewildered uncertainties on home ground

foreshadow the deeper bewilderment into which he is plunged in foreign parts.

As is typical in a Bainbridge novel, the opening chapter is full of hints and prophecies which only make sense as the narrative unfolds. Ashburner's introduction, as Paul Ableman [103] has pointed out, is a deliberate echo of 'a man called K' in Kafka's masterpiece, The Trial, which is perhaps a harbinger of the spiritual and mental turmoil of the central character. The description of the miserable patch of a backyard as a 'winter garden' becomes a metaphor for the entire Russian landscape and for the bleakness of life itself. The vision of another austere winter garden, similar to the one at home, confronts Ashburner as he looks down from the room in which he is imprisoned by the Russians.

As he leaves home his own dog ignores him, but he gets a lot of unwelcome attention from its Soviet counterpart which rips the sleeve out of his shirt and tears his jacket:

> He had thought he'd outpaced Betty, but as he ran she overtook him. Booted by Bernard, she flew through the air and bounced squealing from a snow-covered bush. Ashburner had time to

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[103] Paul Ableman, 'Fancy Free,' Spectator, 1 November 1980, p.24.

> observe that she appeared to have only three legs. Someone on a previous occasion, he presumed, had sensibly kicked off the fourth. (p. 77)

Even the dogs are hostile and mutilated in this forbidding land. Never a man to feel the cold, his ears turn purple outside St. Basil's (60). He thinks to himself that he has never had any flashes, but that, too, changes when he is abroad.

Walking along the hall at home, he sees his image in the wardrobe wobbling towards him as if he were Alice about to step through the looking-glass. The analogy is apt since Ashburner's experiences are not unlike Alice's in their mysterious and dream-like quality. In Young Adolf there was a new element in Bainbridge as she portrayed the central figure in a semi-hallucinatory state, somewhere between a waking and dreaming condition, seeing objects in his surroundings without being able to attach them to a logical sequence of events. The reader, however, was informed of the circumstantial details and found that the hallucinations were more apparent than real. Adolf's confusion was a normal reaction to a series of incredible incidents beyond his understanding. In Winter Garden, Ashburner's psychic experiences are frequent and intense and not based on conscious observation:

> No longer conscious of the cold, he had the oddest feeling that he was all head, that his body had floated somewhere further off . . . he stood in the attitude of a man straining to detect the enemy that stalked him. . . . Then out of the silence in which he was so peculiarly suspended he heard the faint, high ring of steel on steel and louder, closer, the half-choked cry of a man run through. (p. 101)

The trance-like state is induced at the site of Pushkin's fatal duel but the sound of swords clashing is not in keeping with the historical event as the combatants fought with pistols. A similar physic event occurs when Ashburner visits a dark monastery in the mountains:

> . . . he was beginning to experience that same catatonic state of helplessness which had seized him on the bridge at Leningrad.
>
> . . . Making a tremendous effort he flicked the flint, and as the spark caught the petrol and the small flame leapt he saw Nina, her face and shoulders not a yard from him, her eyes looking at him with such an expression of entreaty and desperation that he let fall the lighter. At the same moment the electricity came on; he found he was facing Enid who also looked at him, her mouth open in shock. (p. 152)

Winter Garden is one of Bainbridge's most mysterious novels and it is impossible to find a logical explanation for some of the events in the book. This is unusual in Bainbridge who does not, as a rule, deal with the inexplicable, mysteries generally being revealed before the end of the narrative.

She makes a very slight and tentative attempt to explain Ashburner's psychic experiences by lack of sleep (102) and, simply, lovesickness (153). The midnight express episode is one of the small mysteries of the novel and provides a good illustration of the method Bainbridge uses to combine intrigue and comedy with great effectiveness. Enid's attraction to Mr. Karlovitch is gradually and discreetly established. The Russian has his arm about Enid's waist (90) and is fascinated by her theory about Captain Scott's attachment to his wife. After the luncheon is over the couple are again seen together ascending the Gothic staircase to look at some paintings (92). Later, Karlovitch makes a bid to get the single berth at the end of the corridor (98). He falls asleep in a drunken spree, however, and Ashburner has to go to the single bunk and believes himself to be dreaming:

> . . . his wife was caressing him in a violent manner. In his dream he had rolled on top of her, penetrated her and it had all been over in the flick of a cow's tail. He had only known he was awake when he heard the door sliding shut and found himself lying on the floor with his vest rolled up to his navel. (p. 99)

The reader is quite uncertain at this point if Ashburber's seduction is real or imagined. Some time later Enid is saying to Ashburner, 'I hope you didn't think it was me?' 'Good Lord, no,' he cried (138). Casually, at the end of the next

chapter, the truth comes out:

> 'He didn't seem the type,' Enid said, at last. Remembering his ineptness on the midnight express when she had mistaken him for Mr. Karlovitch, she wondered if the fault lay in herself. (p. 153)

The incident is of typical Bainbridge design. Ashburner's image as a sophisticated philanderer is diminished even further and he is firmly established as a man who is quite out of his league with his 'arty' companions. The author has created an aura of mystery about her central character so that the sexual encounter is only one more of the unexpected things that is happening to him. The culprit, Enid, slips under the net while the reader's attention is elsewhere. It is a favourite device of Bainbridge to focus strongly on the dominant figure while the mischief is taking place on the side, so to speak.

Some of the mystery of the novel centres on the fact of Nina's venereal disease. When Bernard reveals the truth about Mrs. St. Clair, some of the earlier little perplexities are cleared up. It accounts for the pills Ashburner has received and for Nina's indisposition, as well as being a possible reason for her continuing absence (Olga refers to her being in a sanitarium for a few days). Like the midnight express

incident, the knowledge of Nina's promiscuity proceeds from mystery to farce. Everything the Russians say at the formal lunch is invested with a double meaning. Their remarks are an example of the typical faux pas which often attends those formal functions as they inadvertently condemn her with every word:

> 'I would like,' the stockbroker said, 'for us to remember our absent guest. We have each of us known her. And to know her . . . is to love her. (p. 91)

As the stockbroker reads a dreadful poem in Russian, Olga translates:

> Nina, Nina, you window is always open.
> Oft have I waited in the hours that are small,
> waited for the light that will shine through
> the trees. Drawn through the darkness to that
> port of call in Holland Park --'
>
> 'My God,' exclaimed Ashburner, 'She has a studio there.'
>
> 'I have not been let down. The heart's warmth
> like a candle flame, is not easily extinguished.
> For Nina, Nina, your window is always open.'
>
> 'See what I mean?' said Bernard. Candle flames go out all the bloody time.' (p. 92)

Ashburner feels those stanzas are totally suspect, more like a rendition of Eskimo Nell than an ode to a visiting dignitary. Bernard sees it as 'bloody nonsense' yet seems to be as unaware

as the Russians of the innuendos. The absurdity of the situation is neatly accentuated by Olga's dignity, Bernard's lack of imagination and Ashburner's uneasy indignation.

Not all the mysteries in Winter Garden, however, can be taken so lightly. There are constant intimations of the ominous watchfulness of Soviet agents who are brought into the open by any unusual movement. When Bernard decides to lie down on the floor for a moment in the airport he is immediately picked up and marched off for investigation (?0). His plans to sketch the surroundings of a swimming pool are thwarted by a squad of soldiers (61). Their unseen investigative activities are exposed when Ashburner finds his luggage has been ransacked (97).

The novel has some of the ingredients of a spy thriller. The only thing that is established with certainty is the fact that Ashburner's fishing rod is wrapped in sheets of paper with drawings of ships, docks, and palaces and that Ashburner himself has been taken into custody. How he will extricate himself from the compromising situation is impossible to guess. One wonders who is the spy. It it Ashburner after all? Perhaps his comic buffoonery and his clandestine love affair were an elaborate ruse to cover up his real activities. One also wonders if it is by accident or design that his name is

reminiscent of Maugham's Intelligence agent, Ashenden.[104] It is also noteworthy and significant that Ashenden's fellow agent is called Bernard. As an Admiralty employee perhaps Ashburner has come to Russia, as Nina jokingly suggests, to spy on their shipping fleets in the Baltic (22). But the evidence against Ashburner is slight and circumstantial. It seems more likely that he is being framed.

Bernard is the prime suspect as he has insisted on carrying the fishing rod (normally he hates carrying anything) when the party leaves Tblisi, so it is established that the fishing rod has been in his possession for a time. Bernard is a specialist at sketching and is particularly interested in fortresses located in strategic places:

> [Ashburner] couldn't think why Bernard was so keen on fortresses, particularly after his experiences in Red Square.
>
> 'It's on the Neva,' explained Bernard. 'It was built to guard Russia's access to the Baltic. (p. 107)

Again, the evidence is far from conclusive. Any or all of the English party are suspect in one way or another and the

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[104] W. Somerset Maugham, Miss King in Collected Short Stories, v. III, (London: W. Heinemann, Ltd., 1951).

mysterious man with the briefcase is also an unknown quantity. Bainbridge's chief concern in this novel is to show the uncertain and unpredictable nature of life rather than to work out an elaborate spy plot. The spy adventure, like the Russian background is simply the vehicle to reinforce her theme.

Bainbridge again demonstrates an extraordinary flair for evocation of atmosphere and setting in Winter Garden. She captures the austere, forbidding and sinister properties of a totalitarian state as efficiently as she renders the tadpole ponds of the Lancashire terrain in Harriet Said... or the seediness of a London flat in Injury Time. The disquieting experiences of her characters in the Soviet Union are presented in her usual terse and ironic style as part of the world of uncertainties, errors and faux pas. Without being in the least didactic, Bainbridge suggests the mechanical absurdity of a system which depersonalizes the individual. Everything must function according to a fixed scenario and under the strictest surveillance. The vigilance of Fiodorovna and Karlovitch is unremitting. Ashburner mentions that he has no watch so he gets four phone calls during the night informing him of the time (56). Enid gives a child sweets and upsets the formation of a kindergarten procession, so all the children fall down (58). An Englishman has been invited to witness a

brain operation so one must be present (122). Any action set off a chain reaction.

The austerity which is a strong feature of Russian life is underlined humorously as Bainbridge describes a block of flats:

> Bernard peered out of the windows and was depressed to see a penitentiary made of reinforced concrete, twelve stories high, with icicles fringing the windowsills.
> (p. 36)

The airport restaurant is as big as an aircraft hangar. 'The colours, the gloom! It was a work of art' (41). Bainbridge characteristically covers a wide spectrum ridiculing everything from the primitive washrooms (133) to the diminutive Faustus (116).

Hermione Lee describes Winter Garden as a brilliant novel with its tour de force being the marvelous comedy of Soviet cultural hospitality; but she also feels that so much has been touched upon -- state patronage, the re-writing of history, the incalculable in human behaviour -- that the novel seems too short and elusive for its own potential as a major work.

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[105] Hermione Lee, 'Adultery in a Cold Climate,' Observer Review, 2 November 1980, p. 29.

While the novel is densely compressed and teeming with ideas that could be developed more fully, Bainbridge prefers to deal with the concrete rather than the abstract. Winter Garden is primarily the story of Ashburner and his companions in Russia and typically the author is more interested in human feelings and actions than she is in the complexities of society as a whole, or, in this case, ideological intolerance. Concepts are only important as they immediate touch upon or effect the lives of her characters. Although setting is always an important element in her work, and most deftly conceived, Bainbridge's main concern is the reaction of the ordinary human being when faced with unusual events and circumstances.

The Soviet Union proves to be a compelling force in its effect on Ashburner. It even has enhancing properties:

> Now, alone in a foreign country and inexplicably functioning more or less normally without the support of either wife or mistress -- he hadn't even missed the dog -- he began dimly to rediscover that lost boy who, compelled at school to read certain set novels of Dostoyevsky, had for a brief twelve months feebly wrestled with the notion of divine justice and self-punishment. Can it be, he thought . . . that Mother Russia is a catalyst? (p. 95)

His Russian experience makes him the envy of his companions:

> They both fell silent, a bit put out, and stole glances at the fortunate Ashburner sat slumped against the wall, blessed with visions, tormented by demons. Neither of them could think how Ashburner had stumbled on the art of loving; love depended on the ability to like oneself and required an understanding of eternal regret. (p. 153)

And, most important of all, Ashburner gradually grows in understanding until he learns something about the nature of life itself. He sees clearly that man is not always in control of his own destiny and that, contrary to Bernard's belief, not all of life's peculiarities can be explained by an error in the computer. Life is an enigma beyond human understanding:

> Even the man who is sensible and composed, he thought, must pale before life's contradictions. (p. 157)

Bainbridge ends the book with the symbolic image of her characters arrested in time forever:

> He perceived a man and a woman in a bleak landscape, frozen in their tracks. (p. 157)

In A Weekend with Claud, Another Part of the Wood and Harriet Said... she also captures her characters frozen in time and space, but in photographs. In Sweet William there is a reference to a painting on Mrs. Kershaw's wall, depicting a couple

making love on a railway line, which seems to encapsulate Ann and William. It is as if she, as an artist, has tried to capture life in flux, but that it will always remain an enigma for participant and observer. There is a shadow of Keats's Grecian Urn hovering over her work at times.

Winter Garden is similar in many ways to its forerunners in the Bainbridge canon. Although her scope is wider in that she has moved from her usual domestic setting into the larger territory of the Soviet Union, she is still working with a handful of characters and limiting their movements, since they have little more freedom in the eight million square miles of Russia than they had in their cramped English quarters. It is more marked than ever how much she can do within these self-imposed boundaries. The comedy surpasses all the others as does the ingenuity of plot and unpredictability of characters. She continues to recount the commonplace and the fantastic in her usual, casual, matter-of-fact style so that the most incredible events seem as acceptable as the ordinary. The farcical and the terrifying are, as always, deliberately understated. Bainbridge skillfully exercises the strictest control over her material. As Ashburner undergoes the most terrifying experiences, which threaten to engulf him, Bernard is there with a practical explanation to remove the terror from the situation and reduce it to the commonplace. Bernard,

however, cannot explain everything and the author reaches new heights in the discomfiture of her central figure.

Winter Garden was deservedly commended by reviewers. Paul Ableman [106] and others noted traces of Kafka in the surrealistic qualities of the nightmarish and hallucinatory experiences of the protagonist. Anne Duchene [107] finds a good deal of Stevie Smith swooping along between the real and the romantic, and compares Bainbridge with Pinter at his best in the blandness and delicacy with which the writing excoriates the mind. Peter Conrad [108] refers to Hitchcock's The Lady Vanishes and speculates that the boil detonated by the cymbals in the Albert Hall (72) may be Bainbridge's comic homage to The Man Who Knew Too Much. No one, however, advances an argument that Bainbridge is seriously influenced by any of the aforementioned writers. Looking to the future, Paul Ableman predicts that she should soon achieve full mastery of an essentially lyrical and humorous talent and that we can confidently expect wonders once the conquest is complete.

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[106] Paul Ableman, p. 24.

[107] Anne Duchene, 'The Russian Outing,' Times Literary Supplement, 31 October 1980, p. 1221.

[108] Peter Conrad, 'Losing it all,' The Listener, 20 November 1980, p. 700.

CHAPTER XI

GENERALITIES

The foregoing is far from an exhaustive study of Bainbridge's novels. While it is too early to assess a writing career that is still in progress, there are some generalizations that can be made about her work up to the present.

A writer whose imagination is stimulated by what she finds in the world around her, she describes herself as an author who cannot write fiction. [109] Almost without exception her books are based on personal experiences in her past, or real events that have come to her attention as news items. Her latest novel, Winter Garden, was inspired by a trip she made to Moscow and Leningrad in 1980 at the invitation of the Russian Writers' Union. [110] Many of her characters are patterned after members of her family circle or even herself so that the traits and peculiarities which are theirs become embodied in her fictional characters. Quick to recognize human failings and shortcomings, she makes her characters the focus of her caustic wit. She also extends her observations of the idiosyncrasies within her kinship to include the larger

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[109] Bannon, pp. 6-7.

[110] Valerie Brooks, 'Beryl Bainbridge and her Tenth Novel,' New York Times Book Review, 1 March 1981, p. 27.

area of working and lower middle class society. The unpredictable and inconsistent in human nature transcend sex, class, creed, race and nationality.

Her father appears to have had a strong influence upon her in early childhood and her admiration for this passionate, if ill-tempered, man is evident as she nostalgically recalls how he instilled in her a reverence for the past, an awareness of the transitory nature of life, and a sense of the inevitability of loneliness, separation, and departure. [111] Karl Miller [112] points out how these views of life, which Bainbridge attributes to her father, became her favourite themes in her early fiction. A novelist deeply interested in human feelings and relationships, she is ever aware that true happiness is an ideal state that is rarely attainable in real life. All the characters in A Weekend with Claud, with the possible exception of Julia, feel a sense of alienation. The weekend they spend together brings them no closer to one another: Claud's house becomes a microcosm of the larger world which the friends inhabit, in which the self-same barriers to love and understanding exist.

The same is true of Another Part of the Wood, where the

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[111] 'Facing Backwards,' p. 13.

[112] Miller, p. 26.

emphasis again is on the complex problems involved in achieving true love or real friendship. Bainbridge illustrates that it is often the most foolish little things that hurt the most and keep people apart. A bald head (Lionel) or sloppy habits (Dot) do more damage to a loving relationship than the fiercest argument. Characters themselves are frequently bewildered by their own reactions to such trivialities. An awareness of imperfections in oneself inhibits acceptance of others. On the other hand, more substantial factors divide people as well. Pride and suspicion separate those with different backgrounds. Working-class Balfour cannot understand the middle-class Londoners. Shebah, committed to the old standards, cannot understand Maggie and Claud of a new generation.

These observations about human interaction in Bainbridge's first novels are consistent throughout her work. The basic concerns of her characters are the same, that is, to be loved and accepted rather than aspiring to be successful in the material sense. We hear Ashburner complaining that he is 'out of his league' with the Bohemian Bernard (Winter Garden) and Binny (Injury Time) feels locked away from Edward when she thinks about the privileged way in which he lived.

Themes of loneliness are also implicit in The Dressmaker,

The Bottle Factory Outing, and A Quiet Life. The working-class characters in these novels rarely articulate their feelings of loneliness but they betray their yearning to belong in different ways. The young dream of romance, the middle-aged quarrel in a futile effort to be understood, and the old seek consolation in trying to preserve the past.

In Sweet William, the story of a love affair, we see Bainbridge placing less emphasis on separation, or at least, treating it less seriously -- William always comes back -- but the ever present problem of the generation gap arises in Ann's story. Mrs. Walton, who regards men as inferior beings and essentially family providers, is shocked by her daughter's submissiveness to William, so that the tension between the two women casts Ann adrift from her home environment. As Margaret Crosland [113] observes, Ann is not living a lonely life like Freda and Brenda, but escape from one's parents still seems to be necessary, if painful. Ann can only tolerate the home atmosphere for a weekend. 'She could bear it for the moment -- the torment of being related to her mother and father, the wounding' (27).

In Injury Time, middle-aged Binny has outlived the problems that confront Ann to face the challenge of understanding

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[113] Margaret Crosland, Beyond the Lighthouse (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1981), pp. 201-202.

children living in a degenerate society where toleration has eroded law and order to the point where vandalism and acts of violence are common practice. Binny's alienation arises from her consciousness of an unfamiliar world. She becomes so disoriented at times that the real world is barely distinguishable from the dramatic, violent image of it on television. In her moments of terror, she envisions herself the victim of some terrible disaster. Adolf's experiences in Liverpool (Young Adolf), farcical though they appear, are those of a deracinated character as are those of Ashburner in Russia (Winter Garden). The bewildering, terrifying experiences of the protagonists are a reflection of the nature of modern life which is becoming less and less predictable as the century advances. There is an increasing disregard for the individual in a world where millions starve and the weak are crushed, and those who survive live with the awesome potential for mass death and destruction which creates an uncertain future.

Bainbridge's creativity, like all artists' to a greater or lesser degree, is shaped by the culture and morality of the society she writes about. Although her characters are always from the working or lower-middle class, the problems that confront them in the Forties are, naturally, different from those of the Sixties and Seventies. The war is the

catalyst which changes the lives of all in the Forties. Nellie and Jack are steeped in the old ways and change threatens when Rita enters a social world full of 'foreigners.' Margo is struggling to be free of the old restrictions as she sees the faults of her own age but finds herself powerless to correct them. The old values are too deeply entrenched. It is also impossible for her to enjoy the world of G.I.s, parties and dances in which the youth participate. In middle age they only serve to remind her of the dullness of her own love affairs overshadowed by Nellie's domineering presence and rigid code.

Ann and Binny can take advantage of relaxing social norms. Ann enjoys her relationship with William and has her baby with only the expected censure of her mother. Binny has her affair with Edward, considering thataffairs are becoming 'fashionable' after the Profumo scandal. Far from ensuring happiness, however, the new 'freedom' creates a new set of problems. Ironically, Binny and Ashburner are dissatisfied with themselves for having succumbed to the changes which the permissive society has brought about.

The insecurity that derives from change is a factor that affects the well-being of Bainbridge characters but misunderstandings cause a great deal of unhappiness as well. One of

her strengths as a novelist arises out of the ability to develop a very complicated tracery of feelings in her characters. She is especially aware of human susceptibility to innumerable sudden mood changes, presenting an unusual, if not comical, view of human nature as she shows how these sudden shifts in mood make it impossible for us to understand one another. Misunderstandings are funny in their absurdity but destructive in their effects as they break the bonds of love and friendship.

Although central characters in Bainbridge are usually women, she has not dealt with their most significant relationship, marriage, in any depth. Instead, she portrays casual sexual relationships. Her women are often the victims of a broken marriage or love affair; husbands and lovers have left. Many of her female characters are subjugated creatures, yet few because of marriage. Ann, (Sweet William) under William's spell, feels like 'one of those insect specimens under glass' (67); in A Weekend with Claud Maggie's life is dominated by her lover Billy and driven to the brink of suicide; Brenda (The Bottle Factory Outing) is dominated by almost everyone, with an 'extraordinary capacity for remaining passive while put upon'(23). The author has not depicted a woman who has walked out on her husband.

Marriage is viewed in the superficial and stylized manner of a comic strip. Mr. and Mrs. Walton (Sweet William) tolerate one another while she dominates and he barely knows what is going on. Mother and Father in A Quiet Life are engaged in a constant battle of wits, with violence threatening to erupt any minute. The 'nice' moments are suggestive of Mother's greed and Father's lust. Mr. and Mrs. Biggs's dull lives are disclosed in the Tsar's mournful reminiscences (Harriet Said...). There is no intimation of the existence of abiding love or loyalty. Ironically, in marriages of long standing, it is the women who rule.

Sexual encounters are brief, almost matter-of-fact occurrences in uncomfortable positions with the female participant's mind usually elsewhere. Questioned about sex being a grim affair in her novels,[114] Bainbridge admits her difficulties:

> I must confess that I am rather turned on by guilty fumblings, things I call 'rude sex'. Beautifully written sex is not sex to me any more. In Sweet William I came closest to describing a grown-up love affair but I didn't like that book.

She says that the real William, upon whom the book was based,

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[114]May, p. 50.

was annoyed because she did not portray him as a great lover:

> In fact he was a marvellous lover. But then again, I couldn't write about sex that way.

The discomfort which attends a sexual relationship extends into other areas of life. The lack of space, the sordid surroundings, the damp climate, the perversity of mechanical things that break down, objects that obstruct and injure, clothes that are shabby or inappropriate suggest human vulnerability and remind us of the many frustrations to which we are exposed. They also reflect Bainbridge's harsh world of unfulfilled expectations, fearful uncertainties, and unfathomable contradictions in which death is as casual as life.

However, characters are not altogether at the mercy of a malign fate but are victims of their own temperaments as well as circumstances. For the greater part, they create and determine their own destinies. Maggie (A Weekend with Claud) is ruled by her emotions, consequently the intensity of her suffering precipitates an attempted suicide: Brenda (The Bottle Factory Outing), who is timid and so afraid to hurt anyone's feelings, spends all her time warding off amorous advances. Freda is doomed by the futility of her

romantic longings.

In Bainbridge, women's happiness depends on men, but the men are, on the whole, a selfish and ineffective lot. The inability to draw a strong male character may be one of the author's weaknesses, or more likely, it does not suit her purpose to do so in that she envisions human beings as becoming more vulnerable and less effective in an increasingly undependable world. Men seem to become less assertive all the time. Claud and Joseph, her earlier creations, are introspective and self-centred but are not dominated by women. Father is perhaps Bainbridge's strongest male creation as he, at least, asserts himself in anger. Jack is a meek character who takes orders from Nellie. One wonders why attractive women are drawn to men like William, who is described as an overweight boy and appears to be too interested in feminine concerns (pains and prams) to qualify as a believable Don Juan figure. Edward is a pompous, selfish and weak individual, while Ashburner, although a likeable character, is lacking in self-assurance. Even Ginger (Injury Time) is an unaggressive rapist. As the world gets tougher, men and women become less sure of themselves.

Life is not only difficult in Bainbridge but also mysterious. There is a foreboding Gothic or grotesque strain

in many of her novels. She exploits Gothic overtones most fully in her first book, Harriet Said..., and to some extent, in all her most successful books she emphasizes incongruity, disorder and deformity. The technique is particularly evident in Winter Garden, where it reflects Ashburner's sense of impotency in a fearfully grotesque world. Looking back, Bainbridge remembers her earliest memories were of fear and anxiety, [115] and her continuing interest in horror may have had its beginnings as she listened to her father recounting fearful incidents:

> Whenever we met Mr. Jaffe, my father would lean across the table and ask him to bend over his cup and saucer. Crushing my hand into a fist my father would guide it to Mr. Jaffe's grey head and tell me to probe for the hollow above the left temple. The Nazis, said my father, had beaten Mr. Jaffe with a truncheon in 1938. [116]

The story of the competition for the most efficient railway engine, held at the Lime Street Station, also involves a horrible event:

> . . . Stephenson's 'Rocket' won, slowing to a halt amidst a cloud of steam and fluttering flags, and William Huskisson, giddy with

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[115] 'Facing Backwards,' p. 14.

[116] 'Bringing Hitler to Liverpool,' p. 1276.

> amazement, [pitched] forward in his silk top hat to die beneath its wheels. 117

Whatever its origins, the 'Gothic' and the grotesque in Bainbridge's work are important in that they present a view of life's disorderly aspects and underscore the author's consistent theme of the incomprehensibility and irrationality of life.

On the surface, however, the emphasis is not on the somber, profound or macabre. The little absurdities and small disappointments which she describes are a recognizable part of everyday life, comfortably familiar to us all, in a comfortably familiar setting where the author in complicity with the reader laughs at the absurdity of human behaviour with a wit and lightness of touch that is disarming.

It is only in the sober undertones and in the darkening of the humour that we glimpse an uncaring society and an uneasy world outside. We can laugh wholeheartedly at William's nonsensical play with its foolish non-communicating characters; but as it becomes clear that they are but a mirror of William himself, who is an expert at breaking off communication to further his own interests, there is some question of whether we still think it funny to see a

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117 'Facing Backwards,' p. 13.

sensitively drawn character like Ann being duped by an irresponsible rogue. Similarly, in The Bottle Factory Outing, it is easy to laugh at Freda's romantic nature and her boisterously aggressive attempts to establish a liaison with Vittorio, but impossible to laugh freely at the manhandling of the dead body of a girl whom we have come to recognize as a likeable human being. It is one of the disconcerting features of Bainbridge's work that she evokes empathy with her characters so that we care what happens to them; then, when they get hurt or awful things happen to them, she stresses the comical aspect as if daring us to laugh. It is her way of emphasizing life's inconsistencies. She gives us no answer to the dilemma of these inconsistencies, but simply affirms an awareness of them.

Margaret Crosland [118] sees Bainbridge's black humour as a response to the conditions in which she grew up:

> After the lights of Europe had gone out for a second time -- and who would have thought it possible? -- there may have seemed even less to laugh at, but since the human spirit is apparently incapable of defeat there was one crucial change -- if it is difficult to laugh in the old-fashioned way at the old-fashioned jokes then you have a choice of three courses: you don't laugh any more,

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[118] Crosland, p. 200.

> which is unthinkable, or you laugh at the old jokes in a new way, or you laugh at what are in effect new jokes -- things that nobody used to think were funny, at least in fiction. Death, for instance, was funny in music hall jokes, and murder was funny in a play like Arsenic and Old Lace, but more than half the century had gone by before novelists began to use death in this new way -- the main incident in a novel that is a funny novel. [119]

Bainbridge herself has a very practical explanation for the black humour in her books, simply that she supplied what was demanded. She thinks that writing about ordinary people in everyday life and inserting a plot from a newspaper about some extraordinary event creates an imbalance which gives the writing a weird effect that results in her novels being described as 'macabre' and 'sinister'. Up to the publication of The Dressmaker she had always thought of herself as a serious writer but reviewers of The Dressmaker mentioned that it was a humorous novel. Pleased with its success, her publishers suggested she write a black comedy. 'It was like taking a cork out of a bottle,' she remarks. [120] Certainly, novelists, to some degree, make concessions to the age in which they write and it may be, as Crosland suggests, that we are now ready to laugh at things that nobody used to think were funny.

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[119] Crosland is referring here to The Bottle Factory Outing.

[120] Petschek, p. 9.

Bainbridge's view of society is a realistic one and she misses none of the nastier things, some of which are not all that new. She sees lawlessness, adultery, rape, venereal disease, abortion and drunkenness as part of twentieth-century life, making no attempt to gloss over any of these things. She observes the wastrel in the ditch, the fornicating cats, the cockroaches in the cracks, the refuse on the beach and the wasps' nest in the woods. She probes into some of the unpleasant corners that women authors of an earlier age tended to ignore. But while Bainbridge acknowledges a world of repulsive phenomena and eroding morality, her characters are not evil. They are not motivated to harm or destroy others, their greatest failing being their meek acceptance of lowering standards and their readiness to change their own lives to accommodate the evil around them. In the later novels in particular, there is a dichotomy between the decaying society and the innocent individual.

Bainbridge's primary interest is always in men and women as individuals and she invariably prefers to work with a handful of characters engaged, for the most part, with the trivialities that absorb most lives. Her work is as entertaining and readable as Dickens's in her unremitting emphasis on the variety and the unpredictability of human nature. The

things that make her odd, and often nasty, fictional world acceptable are the ordinariness of everyday incidents and the people she presents in her matter-of-fact, understated prose. She is devoid of sentimentality and cynicism.

Some read Bainbridge's work, particularly Injury Time, as a scathing commentary on modern British society, [121] and one must acknowledge that satire is implicit in all her work. She is the least portentous of novelists, though, and not the sort of satirist who is infected with a sense of righteousness, there is no indignant comment nor lecturing; she neither accepts nor rejects our present-day standards, she simply shows people in action without drawing conclusions. Her characters as a rule are not aggressively pursuing evil goals or consciously contributing to the evils in society, but are affected by them and passively accept them. Perhaps that is what makes her satire effective. She implies that the little faults and weaknesses build up and create awful results. But Bainbridge takes care to preserve our sympathy with her characters. We find individuals expressing concern that they have yielded to the decline in moral standards. They cannot understand what has happened and trace the origins to the oddest sources. Edward (Injury Time) thinks the trouble

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[121] Michael Wood, 'Nothing Sacred,' New York Review of Books, 20 April 1978, p. 9.

started when men gave up wearing hats and grew their hair longer. After that, he believes, nothing was sacred (62).

> Edward spoke in low undertones of a decaying society, the gradual breaking down of law and order, overcrowding prisons, lack of money. There was no doubt about it, they were living in decadent times. . . . 'Why only last week,' he confessed, 'I was undercharged at the chemist's. . . I pocketed the surplus change without a word. I'm not proud of my action, but I did.' (p. 92)

Ashburner (Winter Garden) believes he 'would never have gone off the rails' in the Seventies if the world had not changed so drastically in the Sixties. He dates the onset of the permissive society as preceding the Profumo affair and following the case of the Duchess of Argyll (94). In Sweet William, Ann also accepts the standards of a permissive society. She has surrendered the old values and is surprised that she did so without being fully aware of it (67).

In Young Adolf, set in 1912, some of the more unpleasant features of life in that era form the background of Adolf's experiences. Bainbridge underlines the misery and hardship of working-class life at the time, touching on the exploitation of children, the terrible working conditions, the poverty, the unhygienic housing, poor health care and the unbelievable squalor that results from this social neglect.

Winter Garden, on the other hand, provides the opportunity for Bainbridge to direct her satiric wit at a Communist state but there, as elsewhere, her sharpest ironies are aimed at the fundamental shortcomings in human nature -- romanticism, timidity, pride, innocence, gullibility, bad-temper and strong opinions. Characters' thoughts are fleeting, inconsequential and inconsistent. We recognize their human fallibility and that is what arouses our sympathy.

Bainbridge has been criticized for diminishing her characters [122] or 'hating' them. A reviewer in Kirkus Reviews comments on Injury Time:

> This is a fine, funny, icily depressing revel -- but, oh what a book Beryl Bainbridge could write if she ever found some people she really liked. [123]

The implication in this statement is that if Bainbridge really liked her characters, she would stop portraying horrible people. Perhaps Bainbridge would acknowledge that some of her characters are horrible, especially in Injury Time

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[122] Norma Rosen, Ms, v. 6, August 1977, p. 36.
Michael Irwin, 'Waiting for the Whistle,' Times Literary Supplement, 30 September 1977, p. 1097.

[123] Review of Beryl Bainbridge, Injury Time, 'Kirkus Reviews,' 1 February 1978, p. 119.

but, for the greater part, it is more likely that she believes their weaknesses are typically human and if they are unpleasant, it is because they have good reason to be. She does not see people as overtly 'likeable' as it does not conform with her view of human nature. Implicit in her fiction is the idea that honesty of expression is an admirable quality -- she admires people who insist on 'being themselves' and that includes being awful at times. [124] It goes without saying that her characters face a grim world where happy moments are few and fleeting, therefore one does not expect overly pleasant characters. It is inevitable that Bainbridge's best novels will be those where she remains true to her own vision.

The writing of a novel is an exercise in compression for any novelist in that the writer is obliged to contain a gamut of life experiences within the limits of the pages of his book. The author attempts to record life by presenting a unique view of a familiar world. In order to maximize this singular viewpoint, it is necessary to select, diminish, or exaggerate for a desired effect but at the same time retain the impression of including everything in an intact world. By including too much, the impact of the author's theme may be weakened; by not including enough, themes may be

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[124] May, p. 52.

strengthened at the sacrifice of verisimilitude and amplitude. The latter presents a danger for Bainbridge. The economy of her style eliminates all that is inessential to her purpose which is to focus on the unusual and the unexpected. She is firmly committed to the idea that people are as inconsistent as they are variable, that humanity is too diverse to categorize. Life, too, is irrational and puzzling. Ashburner sums it up:

> Even the man who is sensible and composed, he thought, must pale before life's contradictions.
> (Winter Garden, p. 157)

Bainbridge is a subtle writer though and writes with compassion about human fallibility. She has an unerring instinct for tempering the elements of farce, absurdity and black humour, which stress the irrational nature of things, with a shrewd sympathy towards her characters which manifests itself in her keen sensibility to human feelings and emotions, so that, in spite of their odd behaviour, they always emerge as wholly human.

Her unique and original views, the lucidity and suggestiveness of her prose, her fine sense of form, the way she captures the essential individuality of those about whom she writes, and her wonderful sense of humour make her a most worthy novelist.

(ii) Short Story

'Bread and Butter Smith.' The Sunday Times, 20 December 1981, pp. 25-26.

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