

CHARLES EDWARD EATON

The Case of the Missing Photographs

New York: A. S. Barnes, 1978. Pp. 239.

These dozen short stories, the third collection by the American, Charles Edward Eaton, who is also a poet of some note, owe their existence to the good offices of the literary quarterlies in the U.S. and Canada. To say that they bespeak their origins is not to disparage, but to describe. It is difficult to imagine under what other aegis these closely-crafted, allusive, tales of manners—all of them about reduplicated types of wealthy Connecticut exurbanites—could possibly have appeared. To credit *Southwest Review*, *The Malahat Review* and their like with keeping alive a rare kind of good writing in hard times is worth the grateful nod, but more than that is due the publishers of the collection, for it is the collection that allows us to cogitate upon the man and his artistry. For Eaton's fiction, especially, the whole is more than the sum of the individual stories.

Readers of his two previous collections, *Write Me from Rio* (1959) and *The Girl from Ipanema* (1972) will be familiar with his working and reworking a limited number of themes and presenting essentially similar characters in different guises. The capable, handsome American, possessing all social graces and having gone to the right schools, for instance, who figured so largely in the Brazilian stories, now appears in a less exotic setting—a far less exotic setting: the small town of Meadowmount, Connecticut, where a round of parties among the monied and the artistic test the mettle of the Eaton hero, be he Evan Harrington, literary critic, Wade Hill, businessman, Jason Warren, novelist, Rudd Graves, poet, Ned Hinshaw, stockbroker, and so on. Each has a good grip on both power—money and position—and artistic sensibility. Most are blessed with witty and handsome wives who share a love of beauty, kindness, and, most of all, tact, with their appreciative mates.

It goes without saying that in most of these stories Eaton risks annoying his readers with these near paragons, but what distinguishes him from dozens of other chroniclers of small-town Connecticut high life is his ignoring the easy satirical thrust. For the sake of story, not stereotype, we are asked to grant the existence of such as Jason Warren who informs us, with only slight irony, "I am a good-looking man, tall, blond, with a faint, vigorous glow of red in my hair, muscular, big-boned, turned out, it would seem, by the best genes in America, and my self-assurance may be rooted in nothing more than this." Here is the confessional tone of first-person narration, not mere self-portraiture of a snob. Let us then for the sake of the story take Warren at his word. What happens? Warren is beset by the maudlin, self-pitying, failed composer, Adrian Clarkson, who has landed in Meadowmount as an inept music teacher at a nearby private school.

A list may be made: Harrington, who writes successfully for quality journals, is beset by an oddly neurotic female tuft-hunter; Wade Hill, the richest man in Meadowmount, is beset by a pathetic, failing writer of radio serials; Rudd Graves, a poet of comfortable means and impeccable tastes, is beset by a coarse house guest; Ned Hinshaw, stockbroker and art collector, is beset by the barbarisms of a dying painter and his hapless wife. In three of the stories the comfortable Connecticut citadel is threatened by the embarrassment of ghostly friends and lovers of a past that took place elsewhere.

The favored, the good, the handsome, the assured, the artistically sophisticated, the tactful are in nearly every one of these stories beleaguered by losers of one kind or another. And the losers remain losers, while the favored are tweaked because of them into greater or lesser insights into themselves. Because Eaton is a poet, and poets are given to alertness to the multiple means whereby meaning happens, symbolic and emblematic versions compact this single, fascinating, obsessive story. A Hopper painting of an empty room filled with light is admired by the loser, owned by the winner. A misfit friend from former days grotesquely wills his body to a happy Connecticut couple. The coarse house guest departs, and the hosts discover that their swimming pool has been invaded by a skunk, whose maximum efforts at depositing filth are insufficient to be more than an annoyance. In "The Naked Swimmer," one of the shortest and most interesting of the stories, a husband whose wife has imbued their modest swimming pool with incalculable personal meaning, hires a young man to invade this emblematic possession and jolt his good wife from her wandering wits to her good myth-accepting self again.

A story such as "The Naked Swimmer" stands well alone, but read in the context of the collection it becomes a "version," a gloss, as each of these stories is upon the others. If Gus Morrison, one of the few main characters who seems ever to have to concern himself with how to pay for luxuries, must hire a harmless young lad to invade their constructed Arcady and threaten it a tiny bit, one is led to observe how others, less bluff and likeable than Gus, arrange for comparably managed threats. Cultivating artists and patronizing them seems to work pretty well. So also does keeping in touch with awkward friends from less prudent youth. Most of all, though, it is Meadowmount itself which provides a sufficient number of striving, unpleasant, competitive types at cocktail parties and dinners to populate the garden with real toads. The lovely protagonists—Evan and Marjorie, Wade and Mary, Jason and Laura, and so on—seem graciously to accept Meadowmount as kindly angels would accept a fallen world. One has the feeling that they have no real reason to stick around to descend into the petty maelstroms of Meadowmount socializing. But they do, and therein are the tales.

Enough has been said about fictions of manners to make the category dubious as simple category. The term seems most useful, however, for eras when shared assumptions about conduct existed—rounds of visits, for example, to James's characters were seldom matters of choice, really. A round of twentieth-century cocktail parties is another matter, however. Since there are innumerable alternatives, each accepted invitation has the status of an existential act. That Eaton's characters keep choosing as they do alerts us to their complex and mysterious motives, most of which have to do with the artful and gracious construction and management of one's own reality. In his earlier stories Eaton's Americans in Brazil were there because they were posted there and were constrained by their profession to function well. In a way, Embassy life with its codes and rituals provided him with a subject in keeping with traditional manners fiction. With the abandonment of this absorbing but easier ground, Eaton has successfully taken on a more truly central twentieth-century subject.

What Eaton knows, as all good tellers of tales know, is that we must forever be interested in what the wealthy and powerful do, because of their apparent freedom to act as they please. Etherage's Doriment, "the Man of Mode," once responded to his footman who had said, "You may have a hackney coach if you please, Sir," with these words: "I may ride the elephant if I please, Sir." What an odd emblem of independence—riding the elephant! Perhaps a twentieth-century

equivalent is pleasing to alight in Meadowmount, Connecticut, and partake of the rounds of visits that may be made there. The very oddity of the choice makes us observe, not the fiction of manners in the traditional sense, but a fictional locale where manners must be reinvented daily by the alert and sensitive. Anything less, and Meadowmount would rapidly lapse into the unrelieved barbarity it constantly threatens to be for the protagonists, and what it must really be for denizens less gracious and artful than they.

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Paton's Narrator Sophie: Justice and Mercy in *Too Late the Phalarope*

On its publication in 1953, *Too Late the Phalarope*, Alan Paton's second novel, was greeted with praise.¹ With increasing focus on civil rights, not only in the Union of South Africa but also in the United States, the novel has become even more timely than when it was originally published. Further, Paton's continuing participation in politics and harassment by his own government have focused public attention on his works as social documents. Certainly, his novels are reflections of social injustice. Their importance as social criticism, however, should not blind us to their worth as literature. While traditional standards of literary criticism have been applied to *Cry, the Beloved Country*, *Too Late the Phalarope* has been especially neglected since the publication reviews.

Like *Cry, the Beloved Country*, Paton's second novel reveals a skillful use of traditional techniques of fiction, including point of view. In *Cry, the Beloved Country*, the first-person narrator in the first and third sections is Stephen Kumalo, a Zulu minister who leaves his rural Ixopo to search for his lost son in Johannesburg. In the intervening second section, the narrator is James Jarvis, a wealthy European farmer who is Kumalo's neighbor and whose son Kumalo's son has killed. This double point of view serves to emphasize the two men's parallel spiritual growth, their movement through suffering to self-knowledge and knowledge about their nation. In *Too Late the Phalarope*, Paton also uses a first-person narrator, Sophie, the beloved maiden aunt of the main character, Pieter van Vlaanderen. The novel is composed of Sophie's reflections about her family as she reads sections of a diary Pieter has left her while he is in prison. The novel concerns both the nature of obedience, questioning the morality of a nation's requiring obedience to man-made laws which conflict with God's laws, and also the nature of love, recognizing the unity of body and spirit. Throughout the novel the mercy-justice dichotomy, as it affects obedience and love, is repeatedly dramatized in the action or examined in commentary by either Sophie herself, Pieter's diary, or the young dominee's sermons.

¹(New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953). Subsequent references to this edition are cited in the text. For publication reviews, see Gilbert Highet, "New Books," *Harper's*, 207 (1953), 94, and Edward Weeks, *Atlantic Monthly*, 192 (Sept. 1953), 70; for a more detailed treatment, see Chapter 4 in Edward Callan's *Alan Paton* (New York: Twayne, 1968), pp. 67-84.