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THE GROUP DYNAMICS  
IN THE PLOTS OF IVY COMPTON-BURNETT

The writer of fiction and the critic of fiction both function within the limits of contemporary human problems and follow the everchanging stream of contemporary thought.

No matter how far the original writer chooses to reach back into the past or forward into an imagined future — his handling the subject cannot fail to be influenced by the general trend of beliefs and prejudices of his time. Out of a host of conflicting ideas of his day the writer will choose the ones that are nearest to his heart — and give them a suitable expression. The critic, following closely on his heels and influenced by a similar, though just as extensive background of ideas, will appraise the writer's work according to the current norms and standards — philosophic, aesthetic, scientific. A sensitive writer will make most of the means that the contemporary world puts at his disposal and will choose those which connect tradition and progress in a significant way; he will thus find himself in the main stream of contemporary ideas and will, consequently, be appreciated by a sensitive critic as writer of consequence; a progressive writer, one who proved himself able to feel and anticipate rightly the "spirit" of his time by an accurate selection of his subject matter and his technique.

However, while the creative writer is free — in theory — to choose any subject and to handle it in a manner totally his own, in apparent unconcern with the contemporary set of problems and trends of knowledge, the critic is more obviously bound by actual ideas and opinions; while estimating a literary work he cannot afford to ignore the wider philosophic and scientific background of his time. It is his job to decide if the writer's vision conveyed by the writer's proper technical means is adequate when measured by the standards of our common knowledge so far acquired. Even if the critic's knowledge of the contemporary concepts and theories concerning the human world is sometimes superficial, it is indispensable that he should be roughly acquainted with at least the basic concepts and tendencies in philo-

sophy, psychology, sociology, aesthetics. How else would he find the means of understanding, and the standards of estimating the literary work — sometimes highly sophisticated in its choice of references?

Thus criticism becomes a meeting point of various branches of knowledge related in various ways. The more theoretical a critic's approach to his subject, the greater the requirements of his equipment, and the more pronounced the interdisciplinary quality of his craft.

The subject of this paper introduces certain problems connected with the interdisciplinary character of literary research — namely the problems of the psychological and sociological background of ideas underlining the criticism of fiction. However it should be mentioned that the discussion does not refer to the general approaches and methods of literary research inquiring into the nature of a literary work, which are termed "psychological" (those examining a literary work as the author's mental product), or "sociological" (examining literary work as a product of the author's specific sociological situation and the reflection of the wider social scene of a given period). The paper is concerned only with the scope offered by the fields of psychology and sociology to the critic setting out to analyse and estimate a particular work of fiction.

A primarily "sociological" estimate of such a work does not preclude the use of other tools of the critic's craft, drawn from the store of his general knowledge. Within a main assessment of a literary work on Marxist lines the critic can, and in practice does introduce the generally accepted aesthetic standards of his day, as well as the concepts of contemporary psychology in the description and interpretation of a given work. Thus for instance, a crude or clumsy characterization, failing with regard to our contemporary knowledge of the workings of human mind, will be probably criticised in view of the concepts of modern psychology. A faulty construction of a novel will be judged as a failure according to the clearly defined norms in the modern theory of fiction. A full critical appraisal cannot omit the references which are particularly relevant to the work under consideration, e. g. no significant statement can be made with regard to James Joyce's work by a critic unaware of the dominant trends of psychology of those days.

In the common enterprise of a creative writer and his critic the first plea for the direction of the critical assessment is made by the original author. His work determines, to a great extent, the stock of critical terms in which his work should be described and estimated. In case of highly original writers the stock of ready standards and notions with which the critics had been equipped may prove insufficient, and this may compel us to look for additional references to make the appraisal adequate. Until such references have been found the author's work may remain misunderstood, puzzling, open to contradictory criticism — unless the author himself has decided to become his own critic and interpreter, as is the case, for instance, with French novelists of to-day.

Ivy Compton-Burnett, considered by some outstanding critics the greatest English

novelist of our times<sup>1</sup>, belongs to the class of highly original writers, but in her infrequent commentaries on her novels she offers little help — if any — to the critics. She does not create a new theory of fiction, does not give a significant explanation of the strange cast of her novels. Nevertheless these novels seem to call for a new set of critical references, and possibly even for some re-definition of the scope and function of the novel: they seem to point out that — so far — something has been left out of the consideration given to the works of fiction.

The modern writer's awareness — and the corresponding awareness of the critic — of the psychological problems of an individual human being on one hand, and of the wider social issues on the other, is the effect of the common knowledge of the basic statements of modern psychology and sociology. But, considering the contemporary critic's equipment, it seems striking that between these two points of approach, the psychological and the sociological — the two poles of the human world — something has been missing in the terms of the critical statements, something which is none the less inherent in the works of fiction. This missing link is represented by the critic's unconcern with the data supplied by a branch of knowledge whose subject is the study of a small human group.

The subject of small groups is the common field of research of both, psychology and sociology, reflected respectively in the two closely encroaching disciplines, i. e. sociology of small groups and social psychology. It is a common area where either is in its own rights<sup>2</sup>.

The world of fiction is precisely that of a small group. Along the extensive scale of individual cases there will be found at one extreme the novels with one character only: the examples of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* — and A. Robbe-Grillet's *Jalousie* might be quoted. At the other extreme a wide, panoramic crowd of characters will people the scene — as in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* or L. Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Between those two extreme points innumerable works of fiction are to be

<sup>1</sup> e.g. Angus Wilson, Robert Liddell, Nathalie Sarraute.

<sup>2</sup> "Small group research provides a most fruitful meeting ground for psychological and sociological thinking. Few fields of study lend themselves so easily to this dual perspective" (P. E. Slater, *Role Differentiation in Small Groups*, [in:] *Small Groups. Studies in Social Interaction*, ed. by A. P. Hare, E. F. Borgatta, R. F. Bales, New York 1955, p. 498). Cf. also: "[...] social psychologists regard their discipline as an attempt to understand and explain how the thought, feeling and behavior of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined or implied presence of other human beings [...] this definition has an obviously psychological cast. By contrast, we may refer to the following sociological type of definition. Elwood (1925) writes: 'Social psychology is the study of social interaction. It begins with an interpretation of group-made types of human reactions, of communication, and instinctive and habitual actions' [...] it would be invidious to designate each and all of the texts in the accompanying list as either psychological or sociological in approach. Some authors would be sure to protest against the typing" (G. W. Allport, *The Historical Background of Modern Social Psychology*, [in:] *Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. by Gardner Lindzey, Reading, Mass., 1959, vol. I, pp. 50—51).

found with varying number of characters but most of these numbers fall under the definition of a "small group"<sup>3</sup>.

Even in the extreme case of a novel with one character only, the small group is involved and implied, and the subject lends itself to a discussion in sociological terms of small groups<sup>4</sup>. On the other hand, in the panoramic or chronicle novels or in a *roman-fleuve*, crowds of characters are seldom introduced in one scene at a time. Usually particular scenes deal with a restricted set of characters selected for the scene; still — one might argue — the general statement of this type of novel is carried out in terms of wider social phenomena, and the statements of the small group field could only be of secondary importance in their interpretation. But for most of the remaining novels the introduction of certain concepts and categories of this field of research, if not unduly pedantic, seems a justifiable and helpful procedure.

Undoubtedly it would be helpful in some cases: Certain writers of fiction could be marked out whose work actually invites the critic to make use of the angle of vision supplied by the small group investigators. Single instances of including the small group approach as a significant clue in the interpretation of a literary work may be found in recent criticism<sup>5</sup>, and there are occasional mentions which provide the evidence that something of this kind is dimly realized by the critics<sup>6</sup>. However, there is not much awareness of this being a special subject of a wide field of research, capable of bringing some new and meaningful contribution to our knowledge of man, and the reflection of this knowledge in fiction.

Ivy Compton-Burnett is obviously one of those writers whose work cannot be analyzed correctly without some rudiments at least, of the knowledge of small group problems. The main subject of her novels are human interrelationships in

<sup>3</sup> "We mean by a group a number of persons who communicate with one another often over a span of time, and who are few enough so that each person is able to communicate with all the others, not at second hand, through other people, but face-to-face" (G. C. Homans, *The Human Group*, London 1957, p. 1).

<sup>4</sup> "The numerically simplest structures which can still be designated as social interactions occur between two elements. Nevertheless, there is an externally even simpler phenomenon that belongs among sociological categories, however paradoxical and in fact contradictory this may seem — namely, the isolated individual [...] The mere fact that an individual does not interact with others is, of course, not a sociological fact, but neither does it express the whole idea of isolation. For, isolation, in so far as it is important to the individual, refers by no means to the absence of society. On the contrary, the idea involves the somehow imagined, but then rejected, existence of society" (G. Simmel, *The Significance of Numbers for Social Life*, [in:] *Small Groups*, pp. 11—12).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. for example the essay of Z. Łapiński about the work of W. Gombrowicz, *Ślub w kościele ludzkim* in „Twórczość” 1966, no. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ch. Burkhardt on Compton-Burnett: „I do not know of any novelist who is as thorough in the presentation of interrelationships, by which I mean each character's special attitude towards and relationship with every other character [...] There is an intricate network of relationships, and they of course add a lifelike depth to the characterization, as well as being of interest in themselves” (Ch. Burkhardt, *Ivy Compton-Burnett*, pp. 65—66).

a small group. Each novel brings some new aspect of the subject, some new variation of the interpersonal pattern.

This is not only the question of thematic definition: With creative artists the subject-matter and form are inseparable. In Compton-Burnett's novels all the particulars of technique are determined by her subject-matter: The choice of dialogue for the leading medium, the restriction of the features relating to a wider physical and historical background, a special way of treating character, the plot construction — all of these can be traced down to the writer's underlying purpose — an exhaustive analysis of immediate human interrelationships.

In the critical appraisal it is the analysis of the technique, of the way in which a writer conveys his vision, that helps to understand his "message", to judge of both — the value of the message and the value of artistic expression. If the underlying foundation of the subject-matter which determines the final shape of the literary work is disregarded, the abstract aesthetic standards of estimate may lead to faulty statements. In the case of Compton-Burnett one might quote a number of similar statements. One instance of this may be the unceasing controversion of the critics as to whether her characters are "types" or "characters", "flat" or "round" — and the resulting, inevitable praise or blame<sup>7</sup>. Or, in this case the critics' clearly defined, preconceived notions of "type" seem to obscure the fact, easily detectable with the help of a mere reference to certain concepts of the small group investigation, that Compton-Burnett's characters are conceived, above all, in terms of role — a highly complex notion involving three interdependent factors of self, role and interaction<sup>8</sup> — while the idea of "type" is based on the reduction of a literary character to one, or very few, dominating qualities<sup>9</sup>.

Not the least puzzling of the features of Compton-Burnett's novels are her plots. The critical opinions in this respect seem unanimous in the verdict that the plots of those novels are melodramatic and improbable, their redeeming feature being their similarity to the plots of the Greek tragedy<sup>10</sup>. However, no explanation has been offered, so far, as to the specific purpose which those unaccountable plots are to serve in the author's general — and presumably serious — statement. For there is no doubt — by this time — that Compton-Burnett is both, a serious writer and a moralist.

If one tries to give the summary of the plot of any Compton-Burnett's novel from

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Burkhart, *op. cit.*, Ch. IV.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Handbook of Social Psychology*, p. 223 ff.

<sup>9</sup> The confusion of this kind is visible in Burkhart's words: "There are indeed types of character — the tyrant, the governess, the butler, the sophisticate, and so on" (Burkhart, *op. cit.*, p. 65). The governess or the butler can indeed be conceived by the author in terms of "type", but not necessarily. No two Compton-Burnett's butlers or governesses are alike. There is a superficial similarity springing from their mode of functioning in the group but the differences of characterization are fundamental.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. for instance F. R. Karl, *The Intimate World of Ivy Compton-Burnett*, [in:] *A Reader's Guide to the Contemporary English Novel*, New York 1962, p. 204.

the point of view of the experience of the chief character, such a summary, though apparently accurate, does not convey an adequate idea of the essentials of the story-stuff — even in terms of plot happenings, since the plots were not meant to present the experience of a single character (even when mentioned in the title of the novel). They depict the fates and common experience of a whole group of people, and if they are analyzed in terms of the fates of the “hero”, the critic is bound to denounce much of the stuff as superfluous.

The group structure with Compton-Burnett is not a rigid frame or static background for shaping the fates of particular characters through the successive stages of the plot. Her groups are living things, changing and re-shaping, suffering from crises, threatened by destruction. These changes involve — as a matter of course — the changes in the fate of particular group members but the changes are never limited to one or two “main” characters.

This kind of treatment puts the writer well ahead of her time: Compton-Burnett’s first novel, *Dolores*, appeared in 1911; her first mature novel, *Pastors and Masters* — in 1925. With the next novel, *Brothers and Sisters* (1929), her method was already formed, and has not changed since that time in any essential points. The corresponding subject of scientific investigation, i.e. the “life” of groups referred to as “group dynamics”, was fully developed only after the second World War<sup>11</sup>, and it marks a significant turn in modern psychology and sociology:

“Lewin’s first writings in the area of group dynamics [...] occurred at a time when psychologists commonly denied the existence or reality of ‘groups’. Only ‘individuals’ were real, and to refer to characteristics of groups — e.g. ‘group atmosphere’, ‘group goals’ etc. — was viewed as being ‘nonscientific’ or ‘mystical’. One of Lewin’s major contributions was to help make the concept of group acceptable to psychologists, that is, to lead psychologists to accept the notion that groups, per se, have characteristics, and that the behaviour of an individual is greatly influenced by the various groups to which he belongs”<sup>12</sup>.

Although in most works of fiction the events that make up the plot affect not only the fates of individual characters but also the group structure, the main stress, especially in the fiction following the tradition of a prominent chief character, seems to fall on the experience of individuals which invariably take the foreground even in those works in which the author’s deliberate intentions point out to a primary interest in the society depicted<sup>13</sup>. With Compton-Burnett the stress seems to have been shifted more radically than with most writers from the individual to the group: With the dialogue as the main medium the characters come to life only through

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Handbook of Social Psychology*, p. 430.

<sup>12</sup> *Handbook of Social Psychology*, p. 213.

<sup>13</sup> Thus e.g. in *Vanity Fair* with its significant sub-title *A Novel Without a Hero* where the author’s chief purpose is to expose primarily the social changes of the period, Becky and — to a lesser degree — Amelia stand out clearly as chief characters, even if only as a means of focussing, for greater expressiveness, certain social phenomena and values.

their contacts with others, in interaction; they always act as group-members, and are never really isolated, never seen out of the context of the group. This seems the most fundamental feature of her novels. Her technique seems to be specially devised for putting into relief the essential factor of group life, i.e. the fact of the group members' mutual interdependence. This is characteristic for the sociological approach:

"The essence of a group is not the similarity or dissimilarity of its members, but their interdependence. A group can be characterized as a 'dynamical whole'; that means that a change in the state of any subpart changes the state of any other subpart. The degree of interdependence of the subparts or members of the group varies all the way from a 'loose' mass to a compact unit"<sup>14</sup>.

These sober, matter-of-fact statements of social psychology seem to reflect accurately the essence of Compton-Burnett's plots. The mutual interdependence of the group members in what concerns their personal fates may be more or less strongly emphasized in particular novels; there are certain characters from the marginal circle whose life is not significantly changed in the process of the general changes; but usually the changes involve the majority of the group members.

This is best seen in one of the early novels of Compton-Burnett, *Brothers and Sisters*. The effects of the heroine's disobeying her father's last wishes and marrying in defiance of his clearly expressed injunctions Christian, the adopted son (who turns out to be her father's natural son, and consequently her own brother) begin to operate when their children are already grown up; they grow in compass when the shameful truth gradually becomes known to everybody, until at last the initial impulse, leading directly from incident to incident, effects the changes in the lives of all the characters of the story. At the final stage the central group has ceased to exist, and the characters from the satellite circle, after different attempts to form closer ties with the central family, finally settle themselves in entirely new situations. Even the characters the most marginal to the plot will find their lives changed. This is specially emphasized in one of the utterances of the dialogue:

"Shall we be able to bear the spectacle of all our best friends normal and prosperous and married to each other?" said Andrew. "Can we be so great?"

"We need not be quite," said Dinah. "We shall have some comfort. Cousin Peter will find a great difference here, now that he is not to be related to the Manor. And Tilly will simply have to be happy in her own way. And she did so want to be happy in o her people's. [...] And Latimer will have to share our greatness, and no other of our advantages. [...] And Sophia lived and died, without ever finding out that her name meant Wisdom"<sup>15</sup>.

Dinah's ironic commentary on the destruction of the family is evidently meant to convey the range of effects brought about by one reckless step of Sophia, her mother. Sophia's rash decision to marry Christian is not depicted here in terms of guilt and punishment: the last orders of her dying father might well appear to

<sup>14</sup> *Handbook of Social Psychology*, p. 214.

<sup>15</sup> *Brothers and Sisters*, Ch. X, p. 269.

her one of many whims of an unpredictable autocrat. But — an autocrat herself, Sophia had never considered the needs or feelings of other people and thus she has become the cause of the destruction of her own family. The case is presented in terms not so much of moral, as of sociological laws. The point of the story lies in the social effects of a reckless and selfish action of a group member.

The plots of Compton-Burnett are not only melodramatic; they are also dramatic in more than one sense: also in the sense that they are rigorously built on the lines proper to the structure of drama, and are easily analyzed along these lines. There are clearly defined stages of introduction, exposition, successive complications of the rising action, a turning point or crisis, a falling action speeding towards a climax, a big scene and a clearing up at the end. Moreover, the plots are invariably built around a central conflict. This may be the conflict between an individual and his group, as for example in *Men and Wives*, *A House and Its Head*, *Manservant and Maidservant*. The opposing forces may be also represented by respective sections or cliques of the group as in *Daughters and Sons*, *Elders and Betters*. But in either case the other group members are not inactive. A conflict started in the first place between two individuals gradually includes other characters and gravely affects their personal life.

#### INITIAL EQUILIBRIUM

If the beginning of the plot usually means a disturbance of a certain state of equilibrium, in Compton-Burnett's novels it means the disturbance of the equilibrium of the group life: a specific kind of equilibrium, highly relative and incessantly threatened with breaking up<sup>16</sup>. It is precisely this kind of equilibrium — uncertain, kept up by the actual situational field — which is presented at the outset in Compton-Burnett's novels. But the opening scenes usually create a mood of an apparently total equilibrium. With the first sentences of the first chapter the reader is often invited to contemplate an idyllic image of a group at an exceptionally high level of stability, a quiet family scene. This is sometimes conveyed directly with a few words, as for example in *Men and Wives* where the optimistic Sir Godfrey appears on a sunny morning conversing with his butler before the other members of the family turn up at the breakfast table:

“Well, Buttermere, this is a day that is good to live and breathe in, that makes a man feel in his prime. Standing here in front of my house, I feel as young as when I moved into it thirty years ago, in the year eighteen hundred and fifty nine [...] I feel a different man when the sun

<sup>16</sup> “[Lewin] [...] began his analysis of change by pointing out that the status quo in social life is not a static affair but a dynamic process that flows on but still keeps a recognizable form. He borrowed the term ‘quasi-stationary equilibria’ from physics to apply to such on-going processes, which are kept at their present level by fields of forces preventing a rise or fall” (*Handbook of Social Psychology*, p. 217).

is at work. I feel proud of my home, of my wife, of my sons and my daughter, my menservants and my maidservants, and the stranger that is within my gate. I take a satisfaction in my possessions"<sup>17</sup>.

This is the beginning of the most tragic of Compton-Burnett's novels.

But even if the initial situation is anything but pleasant (as e.g. in *A House and Its Head*) the prevailing atmosphere is that of stability and order. The reader is not yet aware that this kind of opening already contains the elements which are in themselves a potential source of disturbances — as if the same factors that helped to build the group equilibrium were destined to bring its destruction. Thus in *Men and Wives* the naive, blind self-satisfaction of Sir Godfrey, his lofty clichés, his bragging intended to hide his weakness, and revealing his stupidity are the danger signal: all this will eventually prove as fatal to the family life as his wife's mental disturbances.

Anyhow this first cheerful image lasts only for a moment. The next scenes, though the mood of stability is still predominant, bring in small touches of unease, disturbances of little importance as yet, but constituting a real threat to the *status quo*. Such a first discordant note in Sir Godfrey's sunny morning is the appearance of his wife and their first trifling quarrel.

Those first jarring notes usually occur in the first chapters of Compton-Burnett's novels, the chapters full of apparently harmless little family squabble and bickering introduced, so far, in purely comic spirit. As the chapter develops the tone of the altercation becomes harsher, the discord is revealed with increasing force, the weak points in the apparently solid structure of the small society are exposed, the dangers — distant as yet — hinted at. But at this stage the equilibrium is still maintained; this continues until the introduction of the whole group has been concluded, i.e. usually for the first three chapters. At the end of this stage the reader gets a full view of the group in the initial situation. At this point the image, especially when viewed in retrospect, is similar to a *tableau vivant* or — to borrow from the language of the film — to a "still" — a photograph which is sure to come to life in a little while but for a moment the group presented in it, because of the immobility unusual in a motion picture, becomes singularly expressive, with the element of mutual situation of the persons, their postures and attitudes vividly enhanced.

In the group thus presented one can easily distinguish the patterns of inter-relationships which are consistently described and examined by experimental research in sociometry<sup>18</sup>. The group is divided, consequently, into parties and cliques and also into pairs, triangles and chains. Of course each novel brings different patterns and their combinations. To illustrate this point one of the more complex novels, *Elders and Betters* (1944) can be considered in detail.

The group introduced in the first three chapters includes two families: the Calderons — the "central" group, and the Donnes, closely related to them, who have

<sup>17</sup> *Men and Wives*, Ch. I, pp. 5—6.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Handbook of Social Psychology*, p. 411.

just settled in the neighbourhood. The opening chapters introduce a comparatively large number of characters — eighteen in all, nine persons for each of the households. The novel begins with the presentation of the newly arrived Donnes, carried out in the first two chapters. By the end of chapter II the “photograph” of the Donnes is completed. The group leader is — to all practical purposes — the bustling, efficient eldest daughter Anna, aged 30, in apparent alliance with her father, the nominal chief of the clan. Benjamin Donne, remaining obviously in strong opposition to his sons, is tolerant to Anna who has won his respect by her independence and force of will, but at heart Benjamin is attracted mainly to the group of Calderons since the only persons he loves are his sisters, Jessica Calderon and Sukey Donne.

Benjamin's sons are not linked by any ties of affection, their alliance is purely circumstantial. The relationships between the three grown-up men in this family are tersely outlined in authorial summary report. The synthetical quality of the passage is typical of Compton-Burnett's manner of handling the interpersonal subject:

The brothers lived together in rooms in London, always wishing that they were apart, but held from the change by Bernard's lack of initiative, and Esmond's leaning to the cheaper course. They took their holidays in brief and frequent spells, in order not to break their life at home. Esmond's dislike of this life was extreme, and his father's dislike of his part in it appeared to be on the same scale; but he did not dare to break away, and Benjamin contrived without work or look that he should not dare<sup>19</sup>.

The youngest, Reuben (aged 13), is a cripple and would remain solitary in this group if it were not for Jenney, acting as housekeeper, companion and the tutelary genius of the family. Reuben finds in this alliance affectionate acceptance and protection. Another solidary pair (not directly connected with the plot) are Cook and Ethel, the maid. The person not allied to anybody is a cousin of Benjamin's, Claribel, who finds compensation for her solitude in building rosy illusions as to her unique personality and unusual qualities.

Generally speaking, the relationships in this group are not marked by a high degree of solidarity. Besides the two solidary pairs (and the pair Reuben-Jenney is temporary since Reuben is only a child), all the remaining alliances are merely due to circumstances. Five persons, i.e. Benjamin, Anna, Bernard, Esmond and Claribel, do not satisfy their need for affiliation. Out of the three grown-up women (not counting Cook and Ethel separated from the rest of the group by their social status) only Jenney, who is besides the object of positive affections of the whole group, has got, at the stage of exposition, an associate based on real choice. The three sons of Benjamin form a classical circumstantial triangle, with Reuben as the third person<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> *Elders and Betters*, Ch. II, pp. 24—25.

<sup>20</sup> The phenomenon of splitting the triangles into a pair and an “isolate” is well known in sociology. Cf. for instance: “No matter how close a triad may be, there is always the occasion on which two of the three members regard the third as an intruder [...] it is usual for just such a finely tuned

The group of the Calderons introduced in chapter III is of a markedly different character. The ties of affection in this group are very strong, the pattern well defined. There are three pairs joined by mutual choice: Thomas Calderon (aged 62) and his elder daughter, Tullia (age 22); Thomas's wife, Jessica (age 54), and the eldest son, Terence (age 24); and the youngest children — Julius (aged 11) and Dora (10). Sukey Donne, the sister of Jessica Calderon and Benjamin Donne, is a figure apart: she is the object of special regards of all the group members (though their feelings are mixed) as an invalid, a tyrant, a charming woman and — last but not least — the possessor of a private fortune to be inherited by the Calderons. In the triangle of the middle-aged characters (Thomas, Jessica, Sukey) the sisters are more closely bound by affection, and Thomas is the third person, looking for the satisfaction of his emotional needs in the alliance with the elder daughter. The governess, Miss Lacy (counterpart of Jenney in the Donne group), is the isolate in the triangle which she forms with the two younger children.

Those two family groups — one settled peacefully for a long time, the other coming to live in the neighbourhood — resemble, at the final stage of the exposition, two armies even in numbers, ready for encounter. The encounter is supposed to be friendly but there is a feeling of an ominous suspense. The reader familiar with the technique of Compton-Burnett is rather expecting a clash. The Calderons — apparently well entrenched — are the attacked party, the Donnes — the invaders. But the only characters who imagine the meeting of two families in terms of invasion are the silly children, Julius and Dora. Chapter III in which the Calderons are introduced opens with a prayer addressed to an imaginary god devised as part of their childish games:

“O great and good and powerful god, Chung,” said Theodora Calderon, on her knees before a rock in the garden, “protect us, we beseech thee, in the new life that is upon us. For strangers threaten our peace, and the hordes of the alien draw nigh. Keep us in thy sight, and save us from the dangers that beset our path”<sup>21</sup>.

But so far it is merely a childish whim, a funny vision entertained by two foolish kids, of a prospect which is anything but gloomy: a promise of tightening the family bonds, pleasant and beneficial for both sides. Ironically, out of the two groups it is the Calderons who are more optimistic as to the future relationships. Jessica and Sukey are especially happy to have the company of their beloved brother. Such is the initial situation of the two groups, both of them formed and settled in a state of comparative equilibrium.

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combination of three at once to result in three parties of two persons each, and thus to destroy the unequivocal character of the relations between each two of them” (*Small Groups*, pp. 14—15). In the inner pattern of groups in Compton-Burnett's novels this situation is often depicted, as has been pointed out by Burkhart (*op. cit.*, Ch. II, part III: “Structure: the triple pattern”, pp. 43—46).

<sup>21</sup> *Elders and Betters*, Ch. III, p. 37.

## DISTURBANCE OF THE INITIAL EQUILIBRIUM

The first complication to put the story under way is, in Compton-Burnett's novels, equivalent with the disturbance of the initial equilibrium of the internal group pattern. It invites further comparisons with the statements of sociology since the usual factor of such disturbances in her novels is invariably the same factor which is considered essential for any such disturbance in the sociology of small groups:

"States of equilibrium are characteristic not only of individuals but also of groups of individuals. In other words, the individuals of whom a group is composed adjust their interaction rates to each other; as they separately attain equilibrium, the group attains it likewise. Therefore a disturbance which upsets the equilibrium of one member will affect the others also [...] Since the equilibrium of an individual depends upon the difference between the interaction rates of the persons with whom he interacts, one of the commonest phenomena which can disturb his equilibrium is a change in the personnel of his group. Changes of this type include the loss of a member, the substitution of one member for another, and the addition of a new individual to the already existing personnel"<sup>22</sup>.

Compton-Burnett's novels almost seem a deliberate illustration of these statements: In these novels the first impulse for a change in any *status quo* comes invariably from the same source: the arrival of new persons in the group, the loss of a group member, the substitution of one member for another. In this context the purpose of some of her typical devices often denounced as crude and melodramatic will become clear — like for instance her common device of arbitrary removal of certain important characters from the scene of action. This is usually done in a way highly offensive for the critics' sense of plausibility. Characters may be snatched from their homes with a few words of excuse for their going to "cross the seas", then the news of their death may be announced, and when the ensuing complications of the group life have run their course, the missing persons come to life — again with a paltry excuse for this ridiculous behaviour (e.g. in *Parents and Children*, *A Father and His Fate*). But it is just their obliging absence which is the motif of primary importance for the development of the plot. The sociological intuition of the author suggests this device as a simple starting point for the psychologically convincing changes in the group life. Such temporary absence becomes an impulse for a succession of incidents. The return of the absent group member restores the *status quo* up to an extent, but it is never a return to a situation identical with that of the initial stage. In the novels in which the loss of a member is of permanent character (e.g. a person's death) the changes in the group pattern are of course deeper. The same can be said of the case of introducing new characters into the group.

With the first faltering of the initial equilibrium a torrent of successive complications — successive changes in the interpersonal pattern — has been released. In some of the novels the events are less violent, the changes less drastic or of temporary

<sup>22</sup> *Small Groups*, pp. 54—55.

character (e.g. in *Parents and Children*, *Manservant and Maidservant*). In other novels (*Brothers and Sisters*, *Men and Wives*, *Elders and Betters*) the consequences of such disturbance are disastrous. The events tumble one upon the other; there is something almost compulsive in the closely knit causality of action, a veritable "stream of action", or rather interaction. We are in the presence of a powerful destructive element responsible for the cumulation of successive events.

Although the main purpose of the first chapters is a detailed introduction of the group, it does not mean that the first glimpses of the changes to come appear only after these preliminaries. They may appear as early as the opening paragraphs though they are not yet recognized as destructive forces already in action. In *Mother and Son* for instance, the opening sentence of chapter I is the first impulse, in disguise, of the coming changes: "The person has arrived, ma'am"<sup>23</sup>. At the moment this is merely a woman applying for the post of a companion and quickly rejected — seemingly never to return. But eventually she will turn up as one of the chief sources of disturbances in the family life.

Nevertheless, it is usually in the IV<sup>th</sup> chapter that the first changes in interpersonal situation actually occur. Thus in *Elders and Betters* chapter IV — the longest chapter in the novel besides that of the climax — opens with a significant *tableau vivant* in which the two families meet — the first, rather solemn forecast of future relationships:

Sukey took her seat by the fire, but on second thoughts rose and stood with her arm on the chimney-piece, as if this showed her to advantage. Her niece and nephews came up the drive and entered the hall, that was used as a room by the family. Anna led the way with her quick, short steps, and with her eyes fixed on the remembered faces, as if to appraise any changes in them. Jessica stood with a smile that welcomed and exalted the motherless<sup>24</sup>.

None of the critics complaining of a lack of visual element in Compton-Burnett's novels could possibly deny its existence in passages like this. The composition of this picture marks the direction in which the plot is to develop: The full array of both families has been suggested, and three characters explicitly named — three nodal points of the group life around which the main incidents of the plot will be centred: Sukey (the passive centre of the conflict), Jessica (friendly, unsuspecting) and Anna, the aggressive attacking party.

#### RISING ACTION

At first temporary pairs and alliances are forming. The most significant at the moment is a sudden friendship of Sukey and Anna:

"Perhaps one aunt will have some feeling over for the niece," said Anna.

"Let me be that one," said Sukey, making room at her side. "You and I must support each other. We are not used to being left out in the cold." [...]

<sup>23</sup> *Mother and Sons*, Ch. I, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Elders and Betters*, Ch. IV, p. 51.

Jessica observed the pair, in relief that Sukey should find this companionship. She had not thought of a bond between her sister and her niece, but welcomed it as an advantage and solution [...] That Anna might expect return for what she gave, did not enter her thoughts. Such things did not strike people with regard to Anna<sup>25</sup>.

The last words of the passage point out clearly to the trend of future events, indicating the danger of Anna's machinations. Gradually Anna wins her aunt's sympathy by cleverly insinuating that Sukey's family neglects her, by singing Sukey's praises and professing to have fallen under her reputed charm. The tone of all these utterances rings false; it does not fit in well with Anna's usual dry, matter-of-fact behaviour, her lack of imagination and affection. Anna is specially at pains to undermine Jessica's authority and to turn against her the minds of other members of the family. Thus, to the accompaniment of loudly professed family sentiments two parties are temporarily forming: Jessica with her loyal family, and Anna trying to win over some of them, and to separate Sukey from the Calderons — prospective heirs of Sukey's fortune. At the same time other interpersonal relationships begin to form, changing the old bonds. Terence — so far in alliance with his mother only — becomes the tutor of Reuben Donne who adores him with a youthful zeal of hero-worship. Reuben also tries to come into closer contact with the two youngest Calderons, Julius and Dora, and becomes their unwelcome third party. Miss Lacy, the governess, and Jenney, the Donnes' housekeeper, have restored their previous friendship.

In the next chapter another new character appears, intruding into the family life: a pretty young niece of Miss Lacy, Florence. Like all the newly arrived persons in Compton-Burnett's novels she immediately finds her place in the existing interpersonal pattern; she takes sides, she proclaims her attitude to particular group-members. The fact of her choosing Terence for a confidential talk is in itself a sign of their mutual attraction:

Florence turned to Terence and spoke as if she could not suppress the words.

"What a pity that a name like Sukey belongs to anyone but your mother!"

"Why? Do you like the name very much?"

"It ought to go with a face that has her sort of look in it. It is a look that puts her apart from other people, and yet on a level with them. I have never seen a face like hers."

"My aunt is thought to have more beauty."

"Yes, I daresay she has that."

"It is not such a common thing."

"No, but it might belong to anyone," said Florence, resting her eyes on Tullia. "And here it seems to belong to so many people."

"You know my aunt is a great invalid?"

"Yes, Aunt Emma told me, but that is an accidental thing. We cannot think of people in terms of a chance."

Terence was silent, looking into her face<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, Ch. V, p. 83.

In a few words the direction of Florence's choice is shown. She appreciates the spiritual beauty of Terence's mother, she refuses to be won over to the shallow and egocentric Sukey in spite of the two special claims of the general favourite — her beauty and her illness. She is obviously contemptuous of the vain and egoistic Tullia. The last words of the passage show the awakening of Terence's feelings for the young girl.

The next chapter presents the growth of new feelings, the strengthening of new ties, with additional light thrown on particular members of the group. The only pair so far unaffected by the general re-adaptation are Thomas Calderon and his daughter Tullia, firm in their mutual choice.

### THE CRISIS

The crisis occurs in chapter VII in which several important complications are introduced. First there is a conversation betraying Anna's tender feelings for Terence. Then comes the turning point connected, as usual, with a change in the "group personnel": the death of Sukey. The watchful Anna managed to be present at Sukey's last moments and she takes this opportunity to destroy her aunt's original will (leaving her money to Jessica); in this way Anna becomes the heiress of Sukey's money under a new will drawn at a moment of spite, which Sukey explicitly ordered her to destroy.

This is a crucial event in the life of the two families. It means an important victory of the "invaders" who have cheated the lawful heirs out of their money.

### THE FALLING ACTION

The next chapters show the group in the process of adapting themselves to the new situation. Everybody suspects Anna of cheating but there are no proofs. Jessica is also worried by the thought that her sister died with a grudge (most unjust) against her. She is willing to give up the money but she feels she must know the truth about Sukey's last moments, and thus she asks Anna for a confidential talk. However, Anna means to keep both, her money and her reputation intact; moreover she wants Terence, and she is both, ruthless and clever.

### THE CLIMAX

In the great scene of chapter X Jessica is crushed by her niece and deliberately led to a suicide: Anna, taking advantage of her aunt's weakened nervous resistance, persuades the generous and loving Jessica that besides failing in her duty to her unhappy sister, she is actually an evil force in her family, casting a gloom on their "innocent lives", and her family would be happier without her. In this way Anna

managed to defend her "right" to the stolen money, and to destroy the chief obstacle to her plans of marrying Terence.

The effects of Jessica's death for interpersonal relations are immediate; in chapters XI and XII the families start to adapt themselves to the altered circumstances. Anna cleverly persuades Terence that his mother in their last — allegedly friendly — talk had desired Anna to marry Terence by way of compensation for the inherited money. Terence, at first full of mistrust, finally deceived by Anna's diabolical cunning, shows signs of weakening, especially as Anna suggests (a lie again) that Jessica had disapproved of Florence Lacy. Anna's next move is to arrange a conversation between Florence and Terence with herself taking part as a "friendly" adviser; by giving clever turns to their talk she makes Florence realize that the indolent Terence would not mind an easy life as a husband of his ugly but wealthy cousin; the girl proudly gives up the struggle. At the beginning of the next chapter the engagement of Anna and Terence is announced and this immediately gives rise to new interpersonal changes following each other closely in the last two chapters.

#### "CLEARING UP"

Those final chapters are not a mere "clearing up" of secondary interest: the masterly handling of interpersonal scenes with innumerable overtones revealing the complexity of mutual attitudes and motives of interaction is best seen in those last, tragi-comical complications. One of the main features of everybody's attempts to find their place in the changing group-pattern is to rush frantically into some new desirable interpersonal contact. The characters, as it were, seek out one another desperately so as to regain some sort of new equilibrium. At the first stage of the general attempt at re-organization Florence Lacy, freed from her previous engagement to Terence becomes an object of affection of the widowed Thomas Calderon and a new engagement is announced. On the part of Thomas this is a betrayal of his long-standing alliance with his daughter. Hurt and jealous, Tullia provokes and accepts the proposal of Anna's brother, Bernard: it is Thomas's turn to become furiously jealous. Florence then realizes that Tullia will always come first in her father's affections, and she breaks the engagement. Immediately she finds another suitor — Esmond Donne — and becomes engaged to him.

All these kaleidoscopic changes starting with Anna's engagement occur in the last two chapters, and most of them seem to be effected within a few hours. The dyads are formed, broken and reformed; as a final result instead of a thriving, happy family seen in the first chapters only three members of the family are left in the Calderons' home: Thomas and the two youngest children. Thomas had hardly taken any interest in Julius and Dora before the events that destroyed their family life, and he children returned his indifference. Now he is trying hard to form a closer bond with the pair. But the new alliance to which circumstances condemn the unwilling parties is an artificial structure:

"My little ones!" he said, sitting down and drawing them to his sides, in the assumption that his rush of feeling had its counterpart in them. "My little son and daughter! We shall be so much to each other, we three. We have no one else."

The children were silent over this assurance of affection and the ground for it.

"Haven't you got Florence?" said Dora, drawing herself away to look into his face.

"I have given Florence to Esmond," said Thomas, with no thought that he was not speaking the truth. "She is young, and he is young, and they will be better for each other."

There was a pause.

"There is even more difference between you and us," said Julius.

"I am your father, my little son."

"Does having no one else make people fonder of those who are left?" said Dora.

"Well, it concentrates their feeling on them," said Thomas. "It means there is no one to share it."

"But it isn't like the real feeling of choosing someone?"

"There are deeper things than choice, my little girl," said Thomas, forgetting that he had not given his preference to these. [...]

"My poor, little boy and girl, I shall have to be father and mother to you, I see that is to be my part."

"You didn't really want it, did you?" said Dora, with a certain sympathy in her tone<sup>27</sup>.

A new equilibrium is forming: the three couples — Anna and Terence, Tullia and Bernard, Florence and Esmond, will build homes of their own. In the Donnes' family Benjamin has been left with the insipid Claribel, thirteen-years-old Reuben and Jenney. Reuben makes a last effort to join his two younger cousins, but Julius and Dora are thoroughly tired of intruders. Having saved out of the ruins of the family life their valuable alliance, threatened by the officiousness of the lonely father, they put up a firm defence. The book ends with a final interpersonal note — the scene of Reuben's rejection.

In view of the sociological cast of Compton-Burnett's theme it is not surprising that the stage of "clearing up" may be more lengthy in her novels than is usual with modern plots of dramatic construction. The following charge of Ch. Burkhart is expressive of the kind of misunderstanding which her novels seem to provoke. Burkhart comments on *Elders and Betters*:

"[...] the novel is also unusual in that it ends with Anna, the chief character, nearly forgotten, our attention instead being concentrated on the marriage of Thomas Calderon, which will not take place, and the marriage of his daughter Tullia to Anna's brother Bernard, which will. The conclusion of the novel seems not so much the formal ending, of marriage and change and the past forgotten, as irrelevant"<sup>28</sup>.

This charge characteristically does not take into consideration the fact that with Compton-Burnett the main character is only a means of contributing to the changes of group life, and that the effects of this contribution are the serious concern of the author. This extension of the final stage of the plot is also one of her often

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, Ch. XV, p. 231.

<sup>28</sup> Burkhart, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

quoted, similarities to the Greek conception of drama: by this kind of construction more space is given to the discussion of the results and general significance of the "action" than is customary in modern drama and "dramatic" novels.

Moreover, Burkhart's standards of estimate which are, so far, the firmly implanted standards of the criticism of fiction, do not admit of a possibility that the main character may become in certain works of fiction, an item of secondary importance. Generally speaking the main character seems to dominate the scene in modern fiction. The solitary individual haunts the pages of the major novels of the decades following the first world war; he inspired the works of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson. The theme of human isolation is an important motive in the works of Faulkner and Steinbeck, it is an important principle in most works of the *nouveau roman*.

On the other hand social theme is firmly implanted in English fiction: A long list could be made of writers dealing extensively with the subject of personal interrelationships, with Jane Austen as the recognized founder of the line. It was the main subject of D. H. Lawrence; the interpersonal note has been sounded repeatedly in the works of the recent novelists like e.g. Elizabeth Bowen, Iris Murdoch, Lawrence Durrell and, in a manner most reminiscent of Compton-Burnett, Henry Green. Thus Compton-Burnett is not alone in this choice of subject; however, of all the writers concentrating on the world of the small human group she seems the most consistent. With her rigid exclusion of all material not directly relevant to this subject, with her keen insight into the processes of human interrelationships, with her technique rigorously suited to convey and interpret every feature, however elusive and hidden, of the interpersonal situation, she seems to have reached an epitome of this kind of novel — which certainly deserves special attention in the criticism of fiction.

#### FABUŁA POWIEŚCI IVY COMPTON-BURNETT W KATEGORIACH DYNAMIKI ŻYCIA GRUPOWEGO

##### STRESZCZENIE

W interdyscyplinarnym zespole nauk pomocniczych wykorzystywanych w interpretacji i ocenie utworu literackiego uderza niedostateczne wykorzystanie koncepcji i kryteriów dwóch ściśle się ząbiających i stosunkowo młodych dyscyplin z pogranicza socjologii i psychologii — tj. socjologii małych grup i psychologii społecznej. Wprowadzenie pewnych kategorii z tej dziedziny wydaje się szczególnie przydatne w analizie i interpretacji utworów powieściowych operujących tradycyjnie tematyką małej grupy.

Ivy Compton-Burnett, współczesna powieściopisarka angielska wysokiej miary, stworzyła wyjątkowo czysty model powieści, którą można określić jako „interpersonalną”, tj. powieści odznaczającej się konstrukcją dramatyczną, skoncentrowanej szczególnie mocno na problematyce związków interpersonalnych. Akcja takich powieści jest przede wszystkim interakcją, reprezentowaną często poprzez przeważającą tu formę podawczą dialogu. W analizie takich utworów kategorii dyscyplin zajmujących się badaniem małych grup nie powinny być pomijane.

W powieściach Compton-Burnett czynniki kompozycji są ściśle spójne z centralnym tematem i przezeń wyznaczone. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą interpretacji fabuły utworów powieściowych tej autorki w terminach zaczerpniętych z psychologii społecznej (socjologii małych grup).

Pierwsze rozdziały w jej powieściach poświęcone są szczegółowej prezentacji całej grupy postaci powieściowych, z uwydatnieniem czynnika wzajemnych powiązań interpersonalnych, występujących w postaci stronnictw, klik, par, trójek itp. Zawiązanie fabuły jest tu równoznaczne z zakłóceniem równowagi życia grupowego; pierwszy impuls wywołujący perypetie fabularne wychodzi zawsze ze zmian osobowych w składzie grupy (przybycie lub ubycie pewnych osób). Zdarzenia — zarówno mniej ważne, jak i te, które stanowią punkty węzłowe fabuły (moment zwrotny, punkt kulminacyjny, katastrofa) — ujmowane są przez autorkę w aspekcie zmian układów interpersonalnych, a efekt końcowy perypetii fabularnych polega głównie na przekształceniu oblicza grupy, przedstawianym w przedłużającym się niekiedy zakończeniu.

Przykłady zaczerpnięto z powieści *Brothers and Sister* (1929), *Men and Wives* (1931), *Elders and Betters* (1944).

Bronisława Balutowa