CHAPTER 2
BENNETT and his REALIST STANCE

To frame a comprehensive definition of the realistic vision of Arnold Bennett, whose literary work is of diverse character, is by no means an easy task. This task becomes all the more difficult when he claims at the other to be a romantic writer and an aesthete rather than a realist, or a naturalist. He writes at the outset of his literary career, "The day of my enthusiasm for 'realism', 'naturalism', has passed. I can perceive that a modern work of fiction dealing with modern life may ignore realism and yet be great." And, later in his career he writes: "No novelist has yet, or ever will come within a hundred million miles of life itself." This is because the realist "convention chosen by an artist is his illusion of the truth." However, the full implications of this self-characterization appear to hinge on the broad question of realism, which is similar to or different from what we have discussed; since there remains considerable scholarly disagreement regarding the nature of Bennett's work. Add to this the difficulty of sorting out his convictions from his pocket-philosophies, journals, letters, reviews, and prefaces, for Bennett's work has puzzled critics: "it seemed impossible to believe that such a man could ever have been sincere." Bennett's realistic theory has to be distilled from his impressions which are strewn all over his work. Thus, to coin a comprehensive term from a criticism that has been sparse is indeed formidable, even more so because Bennett
has also written ephemeral works — fantasias, pot-boilers, and sensational stories — in addition to his serious novels. Moreover, he has been a journalist throughout his life. James Hepburn has summed up the difficulties as follows:

This display of his art offers problems for the literary historian. It is not only the problem of a close connection with the romantics but also the problem of an immediate connection with the French, Russian, and English novelists from whom he learned his craft and alongside of whom he practiced it. The nature of the so-called realist tradition, the elements of the heritage from the past, and the relationships among the writers who figure in it are problems that will vex the historian for years to come. And the answers will affect and be affected by another problem: that of the relationship of the realists to the novelists. . . . Then The problem that besets the definition of realism may be the same as that which besets the definition of romanticism: the boundaries of its influence have not yet been measured. 4

What precisely this realism is, it still remains a problem to a great extent. One may, however, simplify this extremely difficult task, by gleaning Bennett’s otherwise scattered assumptions on literature and life and their relationship. Such suggestive titles as 'How to Live on 24 hours a day', 'How to make life yield maximum', how to make progress in life, by 'Self-Help' and 'Self Management', reveal that Bennett has a profound interest in life. The point is that Bennett does have a pragmatic philosophy of life, conveyed to his readers through his varied work. We shall frame this pragmatic theory and bring out its implications a little later and test its validity in the subsequent chapters of this enquiry wherein we have a detailed study of Bennett's novels, with
specific attention to his romantic, naturalistic, empirical and realistic attitudes toward life. In order to solve the riddle of realism, I propose to introduce the category of epistemological realism in Bennett, with some related notions — experiential realism, realism of assessment and realism of life. Let us first see Bennett through the eyes of his critics, how and where they have placed him. This placement is essential for the present endeavour, to assign Bennett a proper perspective on the basis of a viable realism.

I

Arnold Bennett, it is now generally acknowledged, has been more grotesquely misunderstood, misrepresented, and in consequence denigrated, than any other of his contemporary writers. In his time, as historians of novel tell us, the accredited critics and writers of the day criticized him ruthlessly. Virginia Woolf attacked him perpetually with a fury that seemed inexhaustible; so readily she labelled him as 'materialist' and tradesman, without having really read him. Others did so with preconceived notions of and prejudices against what he wished to impart through his prolific work. Lawrence could not even bear his rising reputation and called Bennett "an old imitator" and in another letter to Huxley he expressed his wish to write an essay on Bennett, referring to him as a "sort of pig in clover". Wells, stunned by Bennett's tremendous industry, remarked that "he was like a child at a fair." Only Forster's objection seems to be milder: he said
that Bennett's novels missed "greatness". With Harvey, "one is quite likely not to think very highly of Arnold Bennett". According to Bradbury — among the novelists, notably, Beckett Joyce, and Virginia Woolf — Wells and Bennett "were reinstating materialist and liberal realism . . . they celebrated their own provincialism". James is also critical of Bennett's provincial life: "But is this all?" He asks: "These are the circumstances of the interest — but where is the interest itself, where and what is its centre?" Obviously, because of such difficulties Bennett remains an object of condemnation.

Certainly there seems to be no critical consensus and comprehensive view about Bennett's complex and enigmatic personality. But, these doubts and criticisms, on the contrary, make Bennett's reader more curious to make a judicious assessment. Reading through the range of his work we find that it is his prodigious output that won him notoriety. But, very recently, one of the most discerning modern critics, David Lodge, has defended Bennett in significant terms. He refers to Mrs. Woolf's and James's ruthless criticism on Bennett and Wells and says that James was impressed by the extension of subject matter Bennett and Wells had achieved in their novels, and by their comparative freedom from the evasions of Victorian prudery and sentimentality. He adds further that James's own literary career was almost over, giving him neither fame nor fortune on any significant scale. As compared to Woolf and James, Bennett and Wells were popular, successful.
and also enjoyed the reputation of serious artists. Therefore, Lodge concludes that "the most likely reason . . . is that at the time, early in 1914, a direct attack by Mrs. Woolf and James on Bennett and Wells would have looked like an instance of sour grapes." In the recent years, John Lucas, in his role of rescuer of Bennett, ends his book with the sentence: "It is high time that things began to go right for so fine a novelist." There is, however, a substantial amount of material available in support of Bennett's greatness as a novelist.

Realist criticism of Bennett has verged into several incompatible directions. His novels have been analysed in terms of "trifles", "farce and melodrama", "comedy", "romance", "epics", "social conscience", and "classicism". Some scholars have analysed Bennett's serious fiction in terms of "primitivism and taste", "Image and Imagery", "Curious Realism", "Symbolism" and "Psychological Realism". Despite great individual differences these approaches hold in common the basic assumption that Bennett's central concern has not yet been ascertained, although Frank Swinnerton claimed in 1978 to have written 'a last word' on Arnold Bennett. Surprisingly, however, it is not often that a writer of prominence has left the world more direct information about himself, his life, his hopes, and inmost desires, than Bennett has done. His autobiographical works—Truth about an Author, Things that have Interested Me, Journals, Letters—and other fragments are revelatory of all that the average reader would feel he
has right to know about Bennett. Even though it is true, we cannot resist the temptation to quote the summary account of various facets of Bennett, his upbringing, tastes and temperament, that guided or complicated his realist vision.

Any assessment of Bennett's work is complicated by the problems of his versatility and capacity to perform at different levels of seriousness. In part his versatility was due to conflict between his temperament, his early training, his later artistic enthusiasms, and his unlimited sense of fun. Temperamentally, he was a puritan; intellectually, he was a liberal; personally he was a humorist. In addition, he was naturally diffident; from childhood he was handicapped by an impediment which was not so much a stammer as a total inability to utter the word which he proposed to use, which word, nevertheless, owing to pride and determination, he would never abandon. As a child he had suffered from the rigors of a strict religious upbringing in a denomination which he several times harshly derided ... he had little taste as child, boy, and man, for violent physical activity. He claimed to be incapable of allowing it to master him. He might be grim, or sardonic; he was always restrained; and the fun to be seen in his happiest works lightened all that close observation upon which realists depend for the effect of veracity.

The present chapter does not attempt, except by occasional incidental remarks, to refute the ill-based accusations made against Bennett. It would perhaps be useful at this stage, therefore, to seek out the dominating influences that went to make him a realist writer. First among these are the varied cultural environments that formulate his interests in literature and life. This chapter surveys, briefly, Bennett's cultural experience and learning in three environments—Potteries (Staffordshire), London and Paris—and places him in the proper perspective. Bennett is temperamentally imbued
with an exuberant zest for 'romance', 'beauty', 'grandeur', and 'interestingness' in life. It is this inexhaustible interest in 'What Life Is' that guides Bennett in different environments. Bennett develops a lively historic sense, acquires an intensely alert knowledge of literary movements that surge around him, and inculcates a strong feeling of tradition and individual talent. For all his intellectual vigour, he aims at a valid grasp and interpretation of perennial human experience. It is in this sense that Bennett distinguishes himself and makes his realism viable.

II

Thus far we have seen the diverse and divergent views and we are likely to be baffled by the censure from his biased or prejudiced critics on the one hand, and lavish praise by his ardent admirers on the other. The diversity of verdicts on Bennett and his work and the possible sources of critical bafflement can be attributed to a lack of comprehensive study. Thus, before we accept Bennett's novels as realistic, we must define our premise. It is essential, therefore, to trace the influential factors that guide Bennett's apprenticeship, learning, and growth in various cultural environments, primarily in the nature of his personal acknowledgement or through the eyes of his biographers.

Arnold Bennett (1867-1931), born and brought up in "The Potteries" district, inhabited by pottery-making,
iron-smelting, and coal-mining people, is subjected to the stern character shaping forces of Wesleyan Methodism. According to Reginald Pound, Bennett's biographer, he "possessed more delicate sensibilities" therefore, Wesleyanism creates an "atmosphere of social discouragement and economic struggle". But "the social ignominies of his earliest years left in him no deposit of bitterness, no corrosion of spirit.\textsuperscript{20} The characteristic shaping influence of this paradoxical environment is that Bennett "took with him some of the harshness of the surroundings into which he had been born, the pride, the fortitude, the severity of judgement, which life had stamped into his Five Towns make-up.\textsuperscript{21} "We are of the North", Bennett says, "outwardly brusque, stoical, undemonstrative, scornful of the impulsive; inwardly all sentiment and crushed tenderness.\textsuperscript{22} Bennett admits in Things that Have Interested Me that "on one side Puritanism undoubtedly did help to form and stiffen the character, to give strength of mind and the ability to do without\textsuperscript{23} but on the other, "its obscure mutual antipathy which separates one generation from the next\textsuperscript{24}", embarrasses him.

As far as Bennett's intellectual development is concerned, he himself writes he "never set foot even in the towns of Oxford and Cambridge" because "destiny had deprived him of the advantages and peril of a University education.\textsuperscript{25} Bennett develops his acquaintance with English translations of Quide, and some novels of Flaubert, Zola and Maupassant. And if we trust what he says in The Truth about an Author, he had by 1888\textsuperscript{26} read almost nothing of Scott, Jane Austen,
Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontes, George Eliot, Wordsworth. He wants first to make himself "independent, observant, concerned with literature", but he is "appalled by the uncivilized row" of the puritanical farmers, the town dwellers, drapers and potters. But he is aware of the fact that he must toil to inculcate a sense of "immense self-confidence", "practical intelligence and pugnacious common sense". In this, we discern, there is a strong hint of his pragmatic attitude towards life.

By 1890 Bennett is able to read widely in the works of Maupassant, Huysmans, the Goncourts, Turgenev and George Moore. He notes at this time: "I know I haven't got the creative impulse for a big theme, but I fancy I can by sheer force of concentration and monotony do something effective in a small way." In his 'small way' Bennett writes in conventional vein to satisfy the local interests. Later on he says, "I am a writer, just as I might be hotel-keeper, a solicitor, a doctor, a grocer, or an earthenware manufacturer." He learns with astonishment from his friends that he is destined to become a writer. He writes in 1893:

Then, one day, one beneficent and adorable day, my brain was visited by a Plot. I had a prevision that I was about to write a truly excellent short story. I took incredible pains to be realistic, stylistic, and all the otheristics, and the result amazed me. I knew that at last I had accomplished a good thing—I knew by the glow within me, the emotional fatigue, the vista of sweet labour behind me. 31

Bennett's London career is characterized with "a powerful wish to escape from the uncongenial early surroundings" and a desire to
emulate not an intention to excel" Balzac, Zola, Dumas and other writers. His voracious reading and varied acquaintance in London deepens his ambitions and now he is absorbed not so much in dissociating himself from the milieu as in establishing himself in another more congenial. Bennett's creative effort up to 1895 "displays the range of humorous, sensational, and realistic writings of the later novels", and he also "achieves something of the style that will mark his best novels", notes Hepburn. Another significant development in his romantic attitude towards the grim originality of the Five Towns is evident in his letter to Wells, "It seems to me that there are immense possibilities in the very romance of manufacture" of the Potteries. And Pound comments that "the practical object" of Bennett's escape from Potteries to London — to it is added a short tour to Paris — makes him "a kindred spirit."

By 1898 Bennett claims to have studied Jane Austen, Keats, Stevenson; and of foreign authors he is familiar with de Maupassant and the de Goncourts. Under the combined impact of these authors Bennett sets forth his aim as a naturalistic artist: "An artist must be interested primarily in presentment, not in the thing presented". For this purpose the "novelist of contemporary manner needs to be saturated with a sense of the picturesque in modern things . . . The novelist should cherish and burnish this faculty of seeing crudely, simply artlessly, ignorantly; of seeing like a baby or a lunatic, who lives each moment by itself and tarnishes the present by no remembrance of the past." Significant developments in his artistic endeavour are discernible in the following entries:
I believe in the course of a few years I could write such a history as would cast a new light on English fiction considered strictly from the craftsman's standpoint. As regards fiction, it seems to me that only within the last few years have we absorbed from French that passion for the artistic shapely presentation of truth, and that feeling for words as words, which animated Flaubert, the de Goncourts, and de Maupassant. None of the (so called) great masters of English nineteenth-century fiction had (if I am right) a deep artistic interest in form and treatment; they were absorbed in 'subject'. Certainly they had not the feeling for words in any large degree, though one sees traces of it sometimes in the Brontes, — never in George Eliot, or Jane Austen, or Dickens, or even Thackeray or Scott.

To find beauty, which is always hidden; that is the aim. If beauty is found, then superficial facts are of small importance. And although I concede that in the past I have attached too high a value to realism, nevertheless I see no reason why it should be dispensed with. My desire is to depict the deeper beauty while abiding by the envelope of facts. At worst, the facts should not be ignored. They might, for the sake of more clearly disclosing the beauty, suffer a certain distortion. The achievements of the finest French writers, with Turgenev and Tolstoy, have set a standard for all coming masters of fiction.

Bennett's likes and dislikes of Potteries, his escape to London, and enthusiasm for realism and naturalism — transformed into romance and beauty — are interpreted differently by Wilfred Witten. He finds Bennett "between two worlds, the one he had not quite left and the one he had not quite entered." Another influential factor in Bennett's formative years is "The Desire for France", the "Unknown Southern France", as he terms his articles. In following the example of George Moore — who has been to Paris — Bennett leaves London for Paris, to have firsthand knowledge and
experience. In 1903 Bennett claims that he knows all the first class French novels of the nineteenth century, in addition to Smollett, Butler, Taine and Dostoevsky. This fulfils Bennett’s romantic desire “to escape from the world to which he physically and mentally owes so much”. But from “his practical sense, his shrewdness and efficiency”, he knows that “Longing for Paris reigns supreme.” The first thing that Bennett learns in France is a sense of romance; and Quida is perhaps the first novelist who teaches him romance (“Yes Quida was the unique fountain of romance for me”, writes Bennett). And then Bennett’s desire for France is transformed into an “acute aesthetic sensibility”. Bennett’s craving for ‘truth’ and ‘beauty’ is expressed in The Truth about an Author, where sometimes, in his writing periods he addresses himself as:

You may be richer or you may be poorer. You may live in greater pomp and luxury, or in less. The point is that you will always be, essentially what you are now. You have no real satisfaction to look forward to except the satisfaction of continually inventing, fancying, imagining, scribbling. Say another thirty years of these emotional ingenuities, these interminable variations on the theme of beauty.

With this aesthetic sense Bennett aims to transform romance of the Five Towns into “a lofty nobility”. The development in Bennett’s attitude towards life and existence is manifest in the opening lines of the novel Whom God Hath Joined (1906):

When I was young the road leading out of the heart of the Five Towns up to Taft End was nothing to me save a steep path towards fresh air and
far horizons, but now that I have lived a little it seems the very avenue to a loving comprehen-
sion of humanity, and I climb it with a strange
overpowering, mystical sense of the wonder of
existence.

In Paris Bennett expresses his nostalgia for England. "I am
an Englishman and become daily more English." "I am a tremendous
admirer of England. I have lived too long in foreign parts not
to see the fineness of England." And after some years he writes:
"For several years there had been germinating in my mind the
conviction that I should be compelled by some obscure instinct
to return to England. . . . I had a most disturbing suspicion
that I was losing touch with England, and that my work would soon
begin to suffer accordingly. . . . I suppose I have a grim passion
for England." 44

What we may conclude from these citations is that,
although Bennett apprentices to French art and aestheticism to
a practical degree, he cherishes the romance of the prosaic and
dreary Five Towns with a living sense. The following pages are
devoted to examine his realism, its nuances and development in
various phases. Precisely, the influences of the first
environment—Provincial—makes Bennett a historian of the life
of the Five Towns, a regionalist novelist. In his own words,
the background of Potteries "opened my eyes to the romantic
nature of the district that I had blindly inhabited for over
twenty years." 45 His London experience teaches him various
literary trends. The third environment not only enthralls him
but also makes him a serious writer. In Margaret Drabble's words:
Paris represented a peculiarly appropriate combination of attractions — it was the city of Balzac, the Goncourts, Zola, and de Maupassant, and therefore it was for him intellectually respectable, a place of inspiration. He knew working-class Paris through their writings — one of the reasons why he was so attracted to the French realists was that they could reveal the interesting in the dull, the beautiful in the squalid, the passionate in the daily, a revelation which he, as a boy from the Potteries, had so badly needed. 46

III

He published his The Truth about an Author in 1902 and it is in this book and his essays in Fame and Fiction (1901), Evening Standard Years and Books and Parsons (1926–1931) that he got an opportunity to express his fundamental views about literature, life and his realistic credo. We may cite some of them to frame a definition.

Everyone is an artist, more or less; that is to say, there is no person quite without that faculty of poeticising, which by seeing beauty creates beauty; Every work of art must have a moral basis; The realism of one age is the conventionality of the next"... from life at its meanest and least decorative... be drawn material grand enough for great fiction; In its curious mixture of worldliness and passionate feeling for pure literary art, it is as exact an expression of myself as I am likely to arrive at. I... am so morbidly avaricious of beauty that I insist on finding it where even it is not. ... Moreover I think that... in order to be happy I must have a fair supply of money. 47

The spirit of the sublime dwells not only in the high; it shines unperceived amid all the usual meannesses of our daily existence. To take the common grey things which people know and despise, and, without tampering, to disclose their epic significance, their essential grandeur — that is realism. 48
And again, when Bennett hears a lecture on French School of Surrealism, that he translates as "super-realism", he writes in his chapter "'Comic Bunk' About Super-Realism":

I am now aware that the super-realists do not describe phenomena from without, that they enter into phenomena feeling them from within, that they are at one with phenomena, that they practise unity, that they adore emotion, that they utterly despise intelligence and knowledge.

The English novel, when it is realistic, treats of the relations of male individuals and female individuals, and usually attempts little or no social synthesis. It is the tale of the eternal triangle or the eternal pentagon. Its scope is narrow, its curiosity about life is circumscribed. . . . The True-to-Life Novel is not the Best. . . . To say that a novel gives to the reader the illusion that it is a faithful report of actual occurrences is the highest praise. . . . The business of fiction, as of poetry, is not to report life but to transform it, heighten it, make it more shapely, more beautiful, more harmonious in design, while avoiding the impossible and adhering to fundamental truth. 49

Bennett, later on, reads A High Wind in Jamaica by Richard Hughes and praises it for its "realism (in the decent sense)". He says:

There is no super-realism but plenty of realism (in the decent sense). Richard Hughes makes no attempt to achieve 'unity' with his youthful characters. He has emotion, but it is governed by intelligence and knowledge. And as his book has no super-realism, so it has no sentimentality.

Zola was a realist; he gave a complete picture of an entire epoch; he strove to be impartial; his novels are epical. Unfortunately he lacked taste. He is frequently crude. His mind, high though it was, turned too often naturally to the obscene. Worse than this he lacked sympathy. If he explained the weaknesses of human nature, he
did so with a certain chill, disillusioned
hostility towards human nature. . . . Balzac
saw life whole and over-romantically. . . . 50
Chekhov: . . . is greater than de Maupassant.

Bennett keeps Maupassant as his model but admires Chekhov for
his "absolute realism". He says:

As you read him you fancy that he must always
have been saying to himself: 'Life is good enough
for me, I won't alter it. It will set it down
as it is'. Such is the tribute to his success
which forces upon you.

He seems to have achieved absolute realism.
. . . His climaxes are never strained; nothing is
ever idealized, sentimentalized, etherialized;
no part of the truth is left out, no part is
exaggerated. There is no cleverness, no startling
feat of virtuosity. All appears simple, candid,
almost childlike. 51

Coming back to Bennett's nostal-giac concern with
English writers, he calls Dickens "a great creative genius"
but says that "his sentimentality is nauseating". Thackeray
has "more taste" than Dickens; the Brontes have "a sense of
beauty . . . and a sense of the romantic quality of life".
"Wuthering Heights" by its beauty, grandeur and romance hold me
as no novel by Scott could", writes Bennett. 52 George Eliot
exhibits her "fine mind" and her "knowledge" of philosophy
and psychology in her realistic fiction. Trollope is a "realist
and a non-sentimentalist", and he knows "what life is". His
pictures of Victorian manners "are far more exact and various
and complete than those of either Thackeray or Dickens". 53
"The true greatness" of Hardy lies in his "aesthetic taste"
because he can write "beautifully". Bennett admires Hardy for
his "range, power, insight, historic sense, fundamental realism, pity, and consistent beauty." Bennett praises Forster's way of examining the difference between characters and real people. According to Bennett Forster "is the first person to note this important difference between 'life and fiction!'" George Moore has "courageous search for beauty, and a more logical detachment in the selection of material." Bennett Summing up the achievement of George Gissing, Bennett writes that his aim is "to take the common grey things which people know and despise, and, without tampering, to disclose their epic significance, their essential grandeur — that is realism as distinguished from idealism or romanticism." Precisely, Bennett's judgement of these selected writers concerns with their attitudes towards romance, beauty, realism and life. These viewpoints also define his own realism, as similar to and different from theirs. In comparison, to him realism means "the business of attaining grandeur while not departing from truth to nature." Here, 'grandeur' is the keynote of Bennett's definition of realism. He says that sometimes a "work is true to certain aspects of life, but it does not once define realism." "No matter how sordid, squalid, ugly, repulsive its raw material", a first class book "must give an effect of beauty. It must cause the reader or the listener to see beauty where he could not have seen it before."

James, whom Bennett regards a perfect artist, knows "much more about the technique of the novel than any other novelist (save Turgenev)". His "style" is "organized" and "distinguished." About James's realism, Bennett writes that he knows "a lot about the life of one sort of people, the sort who are
what is called cultured, and who do themselves very well both physically and intellectually, and very little indeed about life in general... he rather repudiated life." In his "A Candid Opinion on Henry James", Bennett praises James for the "supreme excellencies" of his "taste" and "delicate perceptions" but laments that James perceives things with "insufficient emotions" and is "morally afraid of being vulgar." What the English novel wants, like the French, he says, "is a more various observation, a fresher observation", 37

Bennett's reviews and essays in The Author's Craft, The Evening Standard Years, Books and Persons, may, in a way, be cited as his indebtedness to widely variegated sources to the meaning and power of realism before it becomes a systematic revelation of his own credo. Whatever Bennett's aim of writing about these writers is, he touches one way or the other their type of realism, in terms that he may formulate his own ideals of realism. These viewpoints also offer Bennett's reactions to their realism to justify his claims and define his own principles and methods of literary realism. The inference is also of their influence on him. From such reviews we can ascertain Bennett's alliances with and departures from other realists. With Levin, by so doing "we can relate them to our comparatively realistic book and specify its new departures more precisely. We can define realism by its context." 58 This is because a "novelist finds it harder to introduce fresh observations than to adapt the conventions of other novelists, easier to imitate literature than to imitate life". 59 But in Bennett's case, Howells's advice is more appropriate; with him a realistic writer
needs experience and observation, not so much of others as of himself, and he will need to know motive and character with such thoroughness and accuracy as he can acquire only through his own heart. A man remains in a measure stranger to himself as long as he lives, and the very sources of novelty in his work will be within himself; he can continue to give it freshness in no other way than by knowing himself better and better. 60

Swinnerton tells us that he wrote an article on "Modern Realism", which he finds preserved by Bennett who, it is believed to have written to Swinnerton: "I know by my own experience that one of the last things learnt by a writer who tries to be realistic is to let himself go a bit lyrically in the larger crises. The fact is, he is afraid of his own criticism." Swinnerton believes that Bennett "used his close observation, and even his own character, as a basis for all his 'serious' fiction." In the light of Bennett's apprenticeship, learning and knowledge gained through his reading and experience, we may enumerate the salient features of his realism.

IV

Bennett has traditionally been regarded as a mere historian and a chronicler of the Five Towns. However, in matters of truth to historical facts, dates, names of places, and changing reality Bennett shows a great degree of social conscience. In other words, he is not a mere interpreter or recorder of external reality; he concerns himself with the lives of men and women living in a specific historical period, struggling in a historically defined provincial environment. Through this "social conscience", as Kinley Roby puts it, Bennett comes "to elaborating
a social philosophy" and "his historic sense". He consistently illustrates the evolution of life and character in the cultural transformations within the schemes of historical development. In this Bennett views man as a part of the evolving historical process and as a vital element in the social organism. Thus, Bennett becomes deeply and centrally engaged with individual experience which leads ultimately to the collective experience of his region. It is as a regionalist that Bennett makes his early fame and which stimulates "his gusto for metropolitan and cosmopolitan life". As a historian of life, Baker points out, Bennett's "principle is, to show life going on but not to analyse it." Epistemologically, such a concern serves the purpose of knowing places, persons and things in realistic details.

Historically, the latest years of the nineteenth century are a period of transition, "which yet possesses its own certainties, its own permanent achievement", but on the other side, in the early decades of the twentieth century, "we are faced with something fundamentally different from anything that precedes it." It is, therefore, in the larger perspective that the position in time of changes brought upon by Darwin, Freud, science, psychology, and philosophy that enable Bennett to give a larger dimension to provincial experience. Although, himself a product of Victorian culture, Bennett does not owe allegiance to Victorian philistinism. In addition to it, in the later years of the nineteenth century, subject now to French and Russian influence, Bennett along with other English writers seeks "to discard or transcend Victorian conventions and limitations and
to establish through literary experiment, or through naturalistic reproduction of experience the truths that Victorianism obscured. In an essay William observes that the "novels of Thomas Hardy reflect this process at a deeper level, but it is clearly working in the fiction of George Moore, of George Gissing, of H.G. Wells, and Arnold Bennett." In this context, then, the realism of Bennett, along with that of Wells and Galsworthy is "primarily concerned with post-cultural crisis, with the existential predicaments of individuals living beyond the cultures which nourished them." And, according to a reviewer, Bennett's "novels endure as descriptions of vitality, of the individual's struggle to impose himself against those factors of family and station in life that stand against the face of happiness." Through such a revolt Bennett reveals his romantic insight into the life of man and seeks to unearth the motives and whims that shape man's outlook on life. In Baker's words, Bennett aims "to bring into daylight the invisible complex of motive which would explain the working of cause and effect."

From a naturalistic perspective, Bennett's realism becomes clearer: he becomes increasingly aware of social, economic and religious conditions that are determinant factors of individual's character. In view of French naturalism the concepts of race, milieu and moment may be compared with the prevailing Victorianism. However constricting Victorian philistinism is, Bennett considers it a part of a larger context of experience. The extent to which naturalistic concerns permeate in Bennett's novels will be recognized and assessed in another chapter. What is urgent here is the suggestion of a
naturalistic realism which gives added dimension to an understanding of provincial life and experience in its evolutionary stage. From the time of his earliest novel many varied aspects of 'real life' occupy Bennett, and the naturalistic questions become inevitable. Like any other naturalist Bennett finds that provincial man is a victim of various forces: his inherent complacency, provincial ignorance, pressures of materialistic forces, thrusts of narrow views of society, institutions, religion and family codes of obedience. Howells's insistence that the "will of the weak man is not free; but the will of the strong man, the man who has got the habit of preferring sense to nonsense and 'virtue' to 'vice', is a freed man"?2 Bennett is aware that his men and women are neither totally free nor completely victimized by environment; they are, at times, enslaved by the prevailing forces of philistinism or they are triumphant over their environments. To this effect Bennett assumes the role of a romanticist — dissatisfied with the drabness and crassness of Victorian complacency — and gives his people vitality enough to fight it back. They acquire a new lease on life when they realize their potential of becoming: a quest for freedom, romance, truth, beauty, grandeur, and experience. It is precisely these factors that distinguish Bennett's naturalism from that of the pessimist naturalists.

Bennett's is, thus, a complex world, full of social restrictions and individual desires; outer pressures and inner diffidence; personal aspirations and circumstantial frustrations; individual lapses, ignorance, stupidity, successes and failures. Bennett, then, apparently, is in search of variety of means to
disengage his men and women from the burden and boredom of provincialism. This he does by inculcating in them a sense of love, freedom, imagination and experience. Whatever the restrictions, Bennett has a firm faith in the "astounding and miraculous possibilities" of life. But before realizing these possibilities man must learn that "life being worth living or nor worth living; and there was naught to be done but face the grey, monotonous future, and pretend to be cheerful with the worm of ennui gnawing at your heart!" This is precisely what Bennett calls the art of living, "out of the fulness of experience", "of conscious adaptation to environment." It is, in a sense, a romantic way in which man seeks escape from his present, constricting world.

The two terms 'romantic' and 'realistic' represent Bennett's ways of viewing life and experience. As a romantic writer he attempts to penetrate the inner truths of the heart, to lead his men and women through a series of romantic trials and sufferings to self-knowledge; as a realist, Bennett views life as essentially sordid but worth living; man is unheroic because of his limitations, ignorance, diffidence, lack of initiative and knowledge. But, by infusing an element of romance Bennett reveals a progressive unfolding of a world-view peculiar to English tradition of realism, growing up from romanticism. In this Bennett's romantic realism asserts essentially the same values which are asserted by Defoe, Fielding, Dickens, Austen, Hardy, and George Eliot. At the same time, there is at least one sense in which he differs from them: Bennett's industrial
districts are full of dust, smoke, grimness and distressing actualities of life; he, therefore, temporarily withdraws his attention from practical mundane affairs and concentrates (imaginatively) upon the inner life; this imaginative escape leads him to a realistic grasp. There may be a difference between the ways in which romanticism and realism unfold the life and world to other writers. But in Bennett, the former means that what has romance and grandeur must be real; the later, that what is real must have romance and grandeur. It is the duty of the writer to discover romance, beauty and grandeur in the commonplace, grim and squalid things. He is aware that man's "struggle is grim" but he discovers that "there is an aspect of these industrial districts which is really grandiose, full of dark splendours." In his letter to Hugh Walpole Bennett writes:

I don't know what you mean by 'romantic'. All the big realists are romantic, no one more so than Balzac or Dostoevsky or Chekhov. The only sense that I can attach to the word as you use it is 'sentimental' — meaning a softening of the truth in order to produce a pleasant impression on people who don't like the truth. It is quite possible to be romantic and truthful at the same time. All untruthful romance is vitiated. There is no opposition or mutual-excluding between romance and realism.

In Ford Madox Ford's romance, this 'softening of the truth' means "simplifying the world of the present" or "the truth of the human heart" in Hawthorne's. What is remarkable in the romance of Bennett is that it is true of his life too: "My life is an immense romance. It shall continue to be a romance. But I can only keep it in my own way", he writes to John Middleton Murry.
This theory of romantic realism that Bennett advocates owes as much to Keats and Wordsworth as to French realists. In his Wordsworthian view of life he says he finds it impossible to "walk along a common street . . . without being imbued with a deep sense of the majesty and beauty of the whole inexhaustible affair. The older I grow the more keenly I delight in the marvel of life." This pursuit makes Bennett "the possessor of a quality which has been of the utmost value to him as a realist." What other critics fail to notice in Bennett is this "philosophy of the commonplace." In other words, Bennett is "trying in emulation of Wordsworth, to elicit the effect of the marvelous from the familiar," or, with Allen, Bennett "follows the grain of life" to depict man's "natural growth" under the pressure of circumstances. Therefore, as Church suggests, Bennett — along with Dickens, Tolstoy, Trollope, and Wells (who have no "poetic inspiration") — has only to be "examined afresh to be found abundant in poetic sensibility and vision," that define his brand of realism.

But, in general, life in the grim realities of the Potteries is not as romantic and poetic as that. His men and women are pitted against the social, economic, and religious pressures, in which their development is difficult, if not impossible. A Bennett's character is perplexed by his malaise and his position in the cosmos: "Am I, a portion of the Infinite Force that existed billions of years ago, and which will exist billions of years hence, going to allow myself to be worried by any terrestrial physical or mental event? I am
In such a confusing world, Bennett explains that those "lacking boldness and resolution, are trampled underfoot and do not often rise again".⁸⁷ Thus we notice that Bennett's concern is not merely (literary) with "created characters" but with "projections" of people from life, he has "known them as personalities within his experience".⁸⁸ Bennett is interested in the general course of human life, from birth to death — its various stages and developmental patterns, considerations of changes from youth to age, successes and failures, "tragic sense of life" and "stoicism".⁸⁹ And all this, in turn, brings us to an existential concern. The first principle of "existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself, as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence upon his own shoulders".⁹⁰ Bennett's men and women are hampered by social and religious pressures and family allegiance but like an existentialist, he acknowledges their concrete existence and an endowment of personal freedom of choice, action and responsibility. In this sense, according to Spender, Wells, Galsworthy, and Bennett are "visionary individualists" who believe in the "idea of progress" and "do not contemplate the defeat of the spirit, because they think that social revolution, of a communist or socialist kind, will lead to greater happiness, more education, and therefore a new civilization of the Common Man".⁹¹ This means, precisely, that Bennett's concern is with provincial man's evolution: origin, nature and limits of his knowledge and learning.

In view of the complexities of the meaning of experience, it may be proposed, in the course of this discussion, to employ
the term "realism" in its epistemological sense. As it will become obvious from subsequent discussions of novels, the term 'epistemological realism' is manifest in the points of view of Bennett's men and women because it is they who live life and realize its significance. To begin with, they are ordinary people ignorant, stupid, complacent, and inexperienced. Bennett knows them, therefore, before they are taken seriously or entrusted with responsibility they must first be educated in the art of living. They are, therefore, shown 'experiencing', 'gaining experience' and becoming 'experienced'. Their knowledge, or ignorance or the limits of their knowledge being judged in terms of their awareness, learning and understanding of life. Since they are ignorant, their awareness only means a knowledge of their ignorance, and with the lapse of time new ignorance is discovered. In other words, this means the range of their experience and knowledge is enlarged. This epistemological concern of Bennett corresponds to Zola's suggestion on educating characters, by bringing them in touch "with the realities of existence". He writes:

Our French girls, whose training and education are deplorable . . . are the product of this idiot ( la litterature imbecile —the romantic literature) in which a young maiden is deemed the more noble the closer she is to being a well wound up mechanical doll. Oh, educate our girls fashion them for us and for the life they will have to lead, put them in touch as quickly as possible with the realities of existence; that will be the excellent task. 92

In Bennett, young men and women are immature, incomplete, imperfect and diffident. As a result, they make mistakes; they fail and meet with frustration. In Bennett's view the best education is "self-education." Considering it as an education
by experience, that "not even the universities have to give", he declares that it enables man to reconcile "the marvelous opportunity" with an effort to "educate myself". This demand of man's competent thinking, judgement and action. Bennett deplores that multitude "of individuals never think consecutively, and few think consecutively for more than a few minutes at a time!". "The majority of us go through life from one end to the other without once properly exercising the most important and the most interesting of human faculties". In this assertion Bennett shows a strong empirical tendency. Time and again Bennett admits imperfections in his people and accounts for their failure and suffering through their points of view. Man suffers, Bennett says, because of his "pride, ignorance, or thoughtlessness". Therefore he recommends "the supreme virtues of reason" and thoughtful action. Bennett is "convinced that every man fails to be his best self a great deal often than he need fail —for the reason that his will-power, be it great or small, is not directed according to the principles of common sense" and "a supreme interest in life". And, this only man's "experience teaches him". Although Bennett seems not to have recognized, but his empirical concern with life corresponds precisely to Locke's goal of human conduct and understanding. Locke says:

For . . . any desire, before the will be determined to action, and the action (which follows that determination) done, we have opportunity to examine, view and judge of the good or evil of what we are going to do; and when, upon due examination, we have judged, we have done our duty, all that we can, or ought to do, in
pursuit of our happiness; and it is not a fault, but a perfection of our nature, to desire, will, and act according to the last result of a fair examination. . . . This is so far from being a restraint or diminution of freedom, that it is the very improvement and benefit of it . . . and the further we are removed from such a determination, the nearer we are to misery. 98

Finally, Bennett's perspective is experiential. Bennett evokes man to self-knowledge, self-action and self-help, by suggesting practical hints and exhorting "how to live on 24 hours a day", how to increase "mental efficiency", how to "make life yield maximum". Therefore, in order to look at and understand 'What Life Is', Bennett advises to cultivate "the intense consciousness of being alive. Reveal in every manifestation of your being alive. . . . This moment that you are living through now is a bit of life itself. Therefore live it thoroughly. Sad or joyous, it is really rather fine", and the real preparation for living and making best of life. This is true of Bennett's own life. He writes in his journal:

Every morning just now I say to myself: Today, not tomorrow, is the day you have to live, to be happy in. Just as complete materials for being happy today as you ever will have. Live as though this day your last of joy. 'How obvious, if thought about' — yet it is just what we forget. . . . Each day, thrice, I expect romantically interesting. 101

In a way, Bennett emphasizes practical consequences and values that resemble the theory of pragmatism. "The whole meaning of a conception expresses itself in practical consequences, consequences either in the shape of conduct to be recommended, or in that of experience to be expected"; writes William James,
the theorist of pragmatism. Bennett's pragmatic attitude is
evined by his exploration of the "ability of men to rule
themselves by reason and common sense" and be benefited by
"getting the better of their judgement." And Bennett himself
believes "that it is only a matter of tact and common sense to
interpret the unseen by the seen, the mind by the features,
characters and motives by behaviour." But in this pursuit
Bennett does not abandon his personal honesty and morality.

He is by no means unmindful of the
spiritual aspects. The love and respect for human
nature which characterized all his more serious
work meant a belief in the innate spirit that
distinguishes humanity from all other forms of
life — in human nature, that which loves, that
which has self-consciousness, self-respect, an
instinctive morality.

Summarily, the mode of realism that Bennett in effect
develops — in addition to representing reality from historical,
social, and scenic points of view — as derived from various
premises is experiential and epistemological. In all this
Bennett's central concern is man — his feelings, emotions,
desires, ambitions, pride, humility, courage and cowardice,
love and hatred, power and propensities. Precisely, he is
interested in human condition, human nature, in terms of its
distinctive traits, range of human abilities, proclivities,
in the varied phenomena of life. This state of man varies from
the "comic" and trivial at one extreme to "tragic" and
significant at the other. In between lie the general questions
about the difficulties of living like a perfect human being
which involves a series of choices, decisions, judgements,
trials, failures and frustrations. Bennett's central concern
is to make his people capable of standing independent, on their own feet. It is this that gives them understanding, maturity, knowledge and experience, and makes them real figures. Though they are provincial people, they are set on a process of learning, by asking such essential questions as 'how to live', 'how to make life better', 'why to live', and 'why not to live at all'. The following analysis of Bennett's serious novels depicts the various stages of man's evolution: man seen in the historical background of the Five Towns; man enmeshed in the prevailing environment of Victorian philistinism; man as a rebel against the constrictions; man exercising his free will, to decide his future career, his love and marital affairs; finally, man realizing and making an assessment of his position. The words 'understand', 'learn', 'experience', 'comprehend', 'decide', 'choose', 'trial', 'succeed', 'fail', 'discover', 'desire', 'aim', 'achieve', 'gain', 'frustrated', 'realize', 'feel', are employed throughout Bennett's novels to indicate the effects of experience on his individuals in the process of their maturity and understanding of life. It is this vision through which Bennett seeks to demonstrate the viable form of his epistemological realism.
Arnold Bennett, Journals, ed. Frank Swinnerton (London: Penguin, 1971), p.53. Bennett is not satisfied with the commonplace realism, defined in terms of commonplace cliches. To say that his enthusiasm for 'realism' and 'naturalism' is gone is true in one sense: what he means is that he is sick of conventionalization of life. However, Bennett is aware of the conventions of literary realism. At about the same time; reviewing George Moore, Bennett says, by the terms 'realistic novel', "I simply mean, of course, one whose aim is to be real, regardless of any conventions which would involve a divergence from life itself. And I do not forget that the realism of one age is the conventionality of the next!

Also, he says that the 'realists' and 'naturalists' have aimed at "conventionalization of life". By so doing, Bennett asserts, "It is impossible for us to see how far we still are from life. . . . The notion that 'naturalists' have at least lighted on a final formula which ensures truth to life is ridiculous. 'Naturalist' is merely an epithet expressing self-satisfaction" — The Author's Craft and Other Critical Essays (1914), Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska, 1968, pp. 144 and 23.

Bennett, The Author's Craft, pp.23, 26.

R.A. Scott-James, Fifty Years of English Literature, 1900-1950 (London: Longmans, 1951), p.35.


Irving Kreutz takes up the whole case between Bennett and Mrs. Woolf in his essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Woolf" and concludes that Mrs. Woolf has misread Bennett's novels for her own purposes — Modern Fiction Studies, 8, No.1 (1962), 115. Mr. Kreutz's main argument is that what Mrs. Woolf has said so bluntly about Bennett and his novels is improper. He analyses Mrs. Dalloway in comparison with Hilda Lessways and concludes that it "must be judged at the end of the book as one who has fled from life, who has put the disruptive influences of her early life from... and she draws away from these she loves. For her part, Hilda Lessways... has capacity to feel intensely... In fact she subjects herself to life" (p.114). Mrs. Woolf seems ridiculous when she says life "escapes" in Bennett. Another defender of Bennett, Philip Rahv, writes an essay called "Mrs. Woolf and Mrs. Brown" and concludes that Bennett's Mrs. Brown is more substantial. Further, as Hepburn tells us, Rahv points out that "Mrs. Woolf spends some time looking for Mrs. Brown."
To her preoccupation one may ascribe her failure to look at Mr. Bennett" — See James G. Hepburn, *Art of Arnold Bennett*, p. 32.


See J. Issacs, *The Assessment of Contemporary Literature* (London: Secker, 1951), p. 25. Frank Swinnerton points out that James "failed to appreciate" Bennett's work (especially *Clayhanger*) in which he wants to write a "history" to show the "environment" with which he is familiar. "Therefore", concludes Swinnerton, "to me, James's criticism loses validity. Having failed to appreciate a large design, executed or to be executed, with some copiousness, he mistook the nature of the work" — The Georgian Literary Scene (London: J. M. Dent, 1951), p. 144.

It is significant to point out that Bennett is criticized mainly for his commercial writings and his 'pot-boilers', of which James himself is not free. Henry Smith has confirmed recently that "there is no doubt that James often felt hard-pressed financially, and he did a prodigious amount of occasional writing for magazines for the sake of income it brought him" — See *Democracy and the Novel* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), p. 143. I confirm David Lodge's point Nash tells us that James told Edmund Gosse, in 1915, that the sale of his books was virtually at a standstill (p. 144). On the other hand, Bennett knew "what the public wants" and how to keep his "pot-boiling" without losing, at the same time, touch with seriousness of life.


18 It is the title of Bennett's fourth book of The Old Wives' Tale.


20 Pound, pp. 50, 59.

21 Ibid., p.72


23 Cited George Lafourcade, Arnold Bennett, p. 27.
24  Pound, p.67
25  See Lafourcade, p.25.
26  Ibid., p.25.
28  Ibid., p.5.
29  Cited Pound, p.113.
32  Pound, pp.6, 15
34  "Letters from Bennett to Wells, 10 Oct. 1897"—See Pound, p.106.
35  Pound, p.95.
36  Journals, ed. Swinnerton, pp. 24, 28, 36 and 45.
37  Journals, pp. 53-54
38  See Pound, p.121.
39  See Lafourcade, pp. 38, 62.
Such an aesthetic creed is a slow process; Bennett writes that in 1891 when he moved to his friend’s house in Chelsea, he found himself in a different situation: “I was compelled to set to work on the reconstruction of nearly all my ideals. I had lived in a world where beauty was not mentioned, seldom thought of. I believe I had scarcely heard the adjective ‘beautiful’ applied to anything whatever, save... ‘there is a green hill far away’. Modern oak sideboards were called handsome, and Christmas cards were called pretty; and that was above all. But now I found myself among souls that talked of beauty openly and unashamed” — See John Lucas, Arnold Bennett, p.17.


Arnold Bennett, p.176.


Books and Persons, p.69


Books and Persons, pp. 237, 338. Some supreme instances of such an achievement are Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead*, "where the horrors of prison life, while realistically rendered, are turned into beauty"; the second example that Bennett cites of "the closing chapters of Stendhal's *Red and Black.*"

Books and Persons, pp. 20 and 285. It is interesting to note that Bennett wants that before becoming an artist, one must be a human being. He points out that Henry James "never married. He never... had a love-affair. He never went into a public house and had a pint of beer... He was naive, innocent and ignorant of fundamental things to the last" (p.20).

The Gates of Horn, p. 66.


Lafourcade, *Arnold Bennett*, p.28. It is unfortunate for Bennett that his critics saw in him only a regionalist, not a metropolitan or cosmopolitan, that he desired to become.


Ibid., pp.201-02. Ioan Williams's is a full length study in the development of realism in English novel, but he makes only a mention of Bennett's name in the context of 'literary experiment' and naturalistic reproduction of experience. This is an advantage: this offers a hint to the need for the critical exploration and elucidation of Bennett's novels on a realistic basis and place of Bennett's realism in this context.


"Arnold Bennett", p. 288. We shall deal with this aspect in Chapters 4 and 5.


Ibid., pp. 13,17.
73


79 Letters, Vol. III, p.188


82 Ibid., p.215.


87 Cited by Pound, p. 94.

88 Pound, pp. 100-01.


Cited by Pound, p. 58.

Ibid., p. 187.


Ibid., pp. 83, 88.

Ibid., p. 90.


All these are the titles of Bennett's pocket-philosophies.


Journals, ed. Swinnerton, p. 240. It is interesting to recollect what Brautigam says: realism should be validated by author's experience. In Bennett, we have, as here, several authentications from his life experience.


Ibid., p. 316.