



**MANSERVANT
AND
MAIDSERVANT**
IVY COMPTON-
BURNETT

INTRODUCTION BY
DIANE JOHNSON

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
CLASSICS

M A N S E R V A N T A N D
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IVY COMPTON-BURNETT (1884–1969) was the seventh child of an English homeopath, and the first of seven additional children born to his second wife. She grew up in the coastal town of Hove and read classics at London University before returning home to help her widowed mother care for her younger siblings. Her favorite brother died of pneumonia at the age of twenty, while a second brother, Noel, who may have helped with the writing of her first (later disclaimed) novel *Dolores*, was killed in the First World War. Two sisters committed suicide together in 1917, after which Compton-Burnett herself suffered a prolonged nervous collapse. The Great War, she said, left her “smashed up.” In 1925, at the age of forty-one, she published *Pastors and Masters*, the first of nineteen novels written in her mature manner; the last, *A God and His Gifts*, appeared in 1963. Both *A House and Its Head* (1935) and *Manservant and Maidservant* (1947) are available as New York Review Books.

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Ivy Compton-Burnett



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D I A N E J O H N S O N

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

THE FIRST THING that strikes the reader of Ivy Compton-Burnett's novels is that they are written almost entirely in dialogue, with the merest stage directions to place people or indicate who is speaking. This was considered their innovation, the something "modern" about them when her first books were published in England in the 1920s, to growing acclaim. It also explains their difficulty. Their difficulty may in turn account for the fact that they were fashionable, and that they are not much read today, so that a new edition of *Manservant and Maidservant* may be for many readers an introduction to the works of this fascinating novelist.

Though she had published a novel at the age of twenty-seven, Compton-Burnett's productive career did not begin until she was well into her forties; the much-praised *Manservant and Maidservant*, her eleventh novel, came out in England in 1947 when she was over sixty. It was the first of her novels to be published in America, under the title *Bullivant and the Lambs* (the publisher fearing, perhaps, that references

to maids and footmen might seem too undemocratic or too old-fashioned), and was instantly successful here as well.

To address, first, the modernity that was claimed for her novels by early critics: they were seen as "postimpressionist," and compared to the paintings of Cézanne. ("Post-Impressionism, indeed!" says E.M. Forster's Mr. Fielding, "Come along to tea. This world is getting too much for me altogether.") Today postimpressionism seems an even more ambiguous term, meaning, perhaps, no more than innovative, a reputation Compton-Burnett still maintains. But now we can see that these novels are more clearly rooted in Victorian literature, especially the late Victorian theater, than related to the modernist literary impulses of people of Compton-Burnett's age, like James Joyce or Virginia Woolf, or to younger writers like Evelyn Waugh who were publishing at the same time as she. Her stylized repartee can remind of Oscar Wilde, and is more directly the forbear of, say, Harold Pinter, than of the British novels of today. Her preoccupations too are Victorian: the destructive force of tyranny in all its forms, especially tyrannical parents; stifling family relations; shattering glimpses into the fragile accommodations of the seemingly solid nineteenth-century social structure.

The utterances in her work that were at first received as witty asperities are in fact revelations of a world of pain and cruelty that few writers have dealt with so straightforwardly, or, it must be said, obsessively. Recent biographies of Compton-Burnett suggest that her novels, seemingly so stylized, were more realistic than they seem and must have borne considerable resemblance to the facts of her life, especially its dramatic family configuration.

The dreaded Victorian burden of fertility shadows her work, with its ample casts of characters, as it did the Compton-Burnett family. Ivy was born in 1884, the seventh child of a London doctor, and the first child of her mother, Katharine, who was the second wife of this pater familias and who

would produce seven children of her own, without, reportedly, much liking children. The family lived in relative isolation in the countryside near the coastal town of Hove, which the doctor believed to be more healthful than town. Dr. Compton-Burnett would die when Ivy was sixteen. With her father's death, she was left under the yoke of her difficult, peremptory, unhappy mother, who shut the family away from the world and dressed them all in black.

Ivy was allowed to read classics at London University, unusual for a young woman at the time, but then was called home to teach the younger children, a common Victorian sacrificial custom. The older surviving five children had taken themselves off somehow, but a baroque series of tragedies awaited the rest. First, Ivy's psychological "twin," her beloved brother Guy, died unexpectedly of pneumonia. Their mother became ever more depressed and arbitrary and herself died in 1911, a decade after her husband, leaving Ivy in charge of the remaining brothers and sisters. Then her other, equally beloved, brother was killed in 1914 in the war. In 1915, the four remaining sisters rebelled against Ivy, whose insights into the tyrants she writes about may be taken in part from introspection—her sympathy for her tyrants is always surprising.

The girls escaped to London together, where the youngest two, with the touching names of Topsy and Primrose, committed suicide in their bedroom, aged eighteen and twenty-two, on Christmas Day of 1917. At this unexpected horror, Ivy had a serious breakdown from which it took several years to emerge, with the help of a friend, the writer and furniture expert Margaret Jourdain, with whom she then lived until Jourdain's death in 1951 (in a relationship the nature of which their friends were divided about).

Ivy Compton-Burnett's literary fame began with her second novel, *Pastors and Masters*, which was published to considerable praise in 1925, and she would continue producing her odd, admired works, twenty novels in all, until the end of

her long life. But Jourdain's death was another great blow to her, and she retreated further into her already eccentric persona, that of a famous, slightly inscrutable literary figure, prim, formidable, and blandly sociable, giving tea parties and writing her devastating novels. She received the CBE, was made a Dame in 1967, and died in 1969.

Rereading Ivy Compton-Burnett's *Manservant and Maid-servant* makes one almost regret the disappearance from modern fiction of that peculiarly Victorian villain, the tyrannical father, so convincing is her rendition, so satisfying is Horace Lamb to hate. We might think of the more famous examples of Elizabeth Barrett's father, or Edmund Gosse's in *Father and Son*, but Horace is a particularly brilliant example of the type, a man domineering over and poisoning the lives of his wife, Charlotte, a large crowd of children, servants, and his dependent cousin Mortimer, one of many appearances in her work of another recurring Victorian character, the poor relation.

Horace conceals even from himself the selfish motives behind his mercenary management of Charlotte's money and his cheeseparing and cruel economies around the house. He is a bully who, while persecuting his children, wife, and cousin, believes himself a model of altruism and self-sacrifice, an especially Victorian hypocrisy Compton-Burnett specializes in deriding, and Freud was to unmask utterly.

But beside the savage story of the disappointed lives of the Lambs is the tenderer story of their footman and housemaid, young George and Miriam, with the cook Mrs. Selden, the lady Miss Buchanan, who keeps a nearby shop, and of course the masterly butler Bullivant. Few Victorian writers occupied themselves with servants and the life below-stairs in any detail (which perhaps accounts for the novelty and popularity of the television series *Upstairs*,

Downstairs when it came out in the 1970s; Compton-Burnett writes the noir version). There are vignettes in Dickens, to be sure, and an occasional cook strays into the story in Trollope, and there is George Moore's portrait of a servant girl in *Esther Waters*; but one thinks of few fully developed explorations of the sociology of an elaborate Victorian household staff. Compton-Burnett is fascinated by this milieu, with its dignity, resentments, fellow-feeling, tendency to persecute its own members, and, ultimately, its solidarity and superior survival skills.

Miss Buchanan's guilty secret, so brilliantly contrasted with the ugly open secrets of the family (miserliness, adultery, sadism, and homicidal impulses) is that she cannot read, a humiliation she has organized her life to conceal. Though Bullivant and Mrs. Selden, who have discovered her secret, torment her a little by asking her to read or to glance at a label, she falls back on responses she has perfected over a lifetime. ("From this book we will all read a passage in turn. . . . Miss Buchanan, will you select your passage and render it?" . . . "No, I do not come here to take the lead in religious observances. I am a guest, not a conductor of your household ceremonies.")

In the end, though, Bullivant and Mrs. Selden will organize the housemaid Miriam to muster one of her few marketable skills and teach Miss Buchanan. They will also spare poor George the footman the consequences of an impulsive action—they are capable of kindness and of decision, unlike the bourgeois family, which is paralyzed by economics, convention, and ineptitude. In reality, this whole pre-World War I social order had collapsed by the time Compton-Burnett came to write about it after the Second World War, but since no intimations of the future ever come into her work, in contrast to the sinister harbingers that appear in the daily life of Mrs. Dalloway, say, the novel is utterly without anachronism.

As for Compton-Burnett's "difficulty," one reason for it is the absence of figurative language, so that the effect is almost like a transcript. Where another novelist might write an entire work to show, without ever mentioning, some insidious family secret slowly poisoning its members, with Compton-Burnett all is completely explicit. It is not events but words that fascinate her. A peculiar property of mind that she allows most of her characters is extreme literalness. In order to avoid the actual significance of a statement, people are taken to mean exactly what they say. When a child complains, "The room was too cold to sit in, Father," Horace can ignore the cruelty of keeping children in freezing rooms by responding, "But why need you sit? Why did you not stand?" Or,

"Are you deaf, Sarah? Oh, you evidently are," said Horace, speaking with contempt for this infirmity. "What are you laughing at, Jasper?"

"If you call people deaf, you can't expect them to hear, and then you can't blame them for it."

Language is deployed to conceal or ignore the implications of what the characters have said.

Having thus to defend their exact meaning in conversations that are always combative, the characters must have an exact understanding of what in fact they do mean, superego, ego, and id in complete communication, self-knowledge eerily dramatized. There is no hyperbole and no understatement. Silence is the best form of defense or aggression, as when the boys "forget" to say anything about the dangerous bridge into which they ambivalently hope their monstrous father will fall, even though he has lately reformed and been treating them better.

When Horace understands that his sons may have wanted him to fall into the chasm, there follows the sort of explicit confrontation that could be written by almost no one but

Compton-Burnett. Detailing his feelings and those of his siblings, eleven-year-old Marcus says:

We are afraid of you. You know we are. . . . Your being different for a little while has not altered all that went before. Nothing can alter it. You did not let us have anything; you would not let us be ourselves. If it had not been for Mother, we would rather have been dead. It was feeling like that so often, that made us think dying an ordinary thing. We had often wished to die ourselves. . . .

When Horace exhibits no capacity to learn from these bitter reproaches, Marcus concludes: "I have often thought it might be best to die . . . and now I know it would." Neither in life nor in literature do eleven-year-olds often articulate such feelings.

And when Horace tells his family that a fatally missent letter "has broken my heart, but that is the natural result of the use of words," he is stating the exact opposite of the modern belief that in words lie therapeutic possibilities for healing and rapprochement. If we can begin to express our feelings, we are taught, we can begin to master them. Perhaps in their endless conversations, Compton-Burnett's characters are striving for a measure of healing. But for Compton-Burnett herself, who believes this attempt to be doomed, words are chief among the instruments of torture available to the civilized, and few have explored their use with such bitter candor. Though some people have found that her twenty novels are much like one another, it is clear, I think, that for her, these were attempts to understand the family experiences that had marked her own life: she was condemned to revisit these domestic scenes of the powerful tormenting the weak and to subject them, at least, to the shapely and reassuring control of artistic form.

—DIANE JOHNSON