

Class and the Novels of Barbara Pym

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The last time that I spoke to the Society about class, I picked examples of where it was significant, or where Barbara Pym had depicted the indicators of class with telling, almost wicked, accuracy, from several of the novels. This time I thought that I would examine the role played by class in just one novel: that considered by many to be her best, *A Glass of Blessings*. At first I was worried that there might not be enough material in just one novel, but as I read through it, sticking a slip of paper in beside every page where there was a reference to class, the resulting forest of slips - very nearly one for every page - showed me that I need have had no fear. Barbara Pym's keen powers of observation and acute sensitivity to class indicators had provided me with a rich field for harvest.

None of this should be taken to mean that Barbara Pym is in any sense a snobbish writer, holding her non-Upper Class characters up to hatred, ridicule or contempt. She observes, she describes, but she does not judge by appearances alone. Father Bode (what a wonderfully downmarket monosyllable that is), of whom she wrote: (A) proves to be indeed a good man, one of the quiet heroes of the novel. Another hero is the equally common Keith, he of the small flat voice and the background in Leicester, one of the least picturesque of the English provincial cities. [Oddly enough, it is a background which he shares with the real-life playwright Joe Orton, gay also, but outrageously so. At least, as far as we know, Keith did not murder Piers, as Kenneth Halliwell did Joe Orton]. Keith it is, in his rather fussy, even prissy way, who keeps the inadequate Piers more or less on the rails.

As always, Barbara Pym is brilliant at using names and vocabulary as class indicators. Here we have Wilmet, Rodney and Sybil Forsyth, clearly not members of the working or even middle class (though Rodney is a teensy bit suspect - I should have preferred it if Sybil had chosen to call him Roderick instead). Wilmet's best friend is Rowena, and they are both tall, tweedy young Englishwomen. Rowena's husband is Harry, her children Sara, Bertram and Patience. Rowena lives in a large house built in the Elizabethan style in 1933. Harry works in Mincing Lane for a company founded by his great-grandfather. Mincing Lane was traditionally the home of merchants in tea and similar high value produce. So here we are once again in the territory with which BP is most familiar, the upper middle class. Not the upper class. Harry has plenty of money, but during the four generations since the founding of his family firm no-one has aspired to join the landed gentry by purchasing an estate.

This was not unknown among the merchant princes of the City of London. A friend of mine whose family firm, trading in dyestuffs, was founded in the 17th century told me that his family continued to live in the same large house right in the middle of the City for most of the following 350 years, very sensibly resisting the temptation to sink their money into a landed estate. Harry has a large garden, employs a full-time gardener, but the summit of his aspiration is to own a cedar tree - an aspiration he cannot fulfill owing to the slow-growing nature of the species (one must inherit a cedar tree), so that he has to substitute a monkey-puzzle, a somewhat suburban specimen. How deftly BP fills in the picture. Harry and Rowena live in Surrey, a county of contrasts, in the north sandy heathland and therefore heavily occupied by the army. [Indeed it has been said that an army officer need never leave the county in his entire life. Public School (in the British sense) at Wellington, is followed by Sandhurst Royal Military Academy, followed in turn by a posting to his regiment at Aldershot, the British Army's largest base, followed by the Staff College at Camberley, followed by a further spell at Aldershot, and culminating in all likelihood with an indefinite spell in Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum.] In the south, on the other hand, the county is very beautiful, especially round Box Hill (whither, readers of Jane Austen will remember, Emma Woodhouse and her friends made an expedition). And indeed there are still ancient aristocratic families living in Surrey. The descendant of John Evelyn, the 17th c. diarist, still lives in the house which John Evelyn owned. But Surrey

is too close to London to be smart. Wilmet gets to her friend by Green Line bus (a bus line which ran and still runs through the centre of London, through the suburbs and out into the home counties. The home counties are those counties which are contiguous to London. This makes them less smart than those counties which are not. People are at great pains to point out that they live in Bedfordshire, the least picturesque of all the counties, rather than in Buckinghamshire, a particularly pretty county, but one which is served not only by the Green Line but, oh horrors, by the Metropolitan subway line). It would have been both practical and inexpensive for the parents of boys at Eton to come down on a visit by Green Line bus, but in the '50s, oh, the mortification of having one's parents choose such a plebeian mode of transport. There is indeed a cartoon by H.M. Bateman, an artist who specialised in moments of extreme mortification (the Guardsman who dropped it, for instance), set in the 30's and depicting an Etonian's parents, top-hatted and smartly dressed, waving gaily to him from within a char-a-banc crammed with the most egregious if amiable vulgarians. The boy is vibrating with shock and embarrassment while the rest of the school looks down its nose at him and his. While Rowena is shopping in the local town (where would that have been? - Woking?, Dorking?, Leatherhead?, Reigate?, Guildford?) Harry drinks in a pub with his chums, whom Wilmet finds to be "some rather unattractive-looking men and one or two women". It's a perfect picture of the prosperous middle-class. But BP goes on applying the colour. When Piers arrives at Harry and Rowena's cocktail party (drinks party would have been a more acceptable expression) he is appalled to find that the drive (not driveway in British English) is full of Jaguars, the car, not the animal. Here again BP does not miss a trick. In the 1950's Jaguar motor cars, while no doubt expensive, were not quite the thing - not a Bentley, not a Rolls-Royce, just a little flashy, just a little suspect. BP uses cars as class indicators very skillfully.

To digress for a moment, Mr Coleman, the Master of Ceremonies at St Luke's, has a Husky, a Hillman Husky. Now a Hillman was an aspirational car - smarter than an Austin or a Morris, smarter than a Humber, less frequently seen than any of them, not as smart as an Alvis or a Lagonda or even a Lanchester, about the same as a Riley though perhaps not quite so dashing. BP threads her way faultlessly through the minute gradations of acceptability of British motor cars - and there were so many of them in the '50s. Reading the chapter which describes Wilmet's weekend in Surrey with Harry and Rowena reminded me of the poem "A Subaltern's Love Song", also set in Surrey, by that other acute observer of the social scene, John Betjeman. What I had forgotten, however, was that the Hillman motor car appears there too. [I hope you all have copies of the poem, but I will, if I may, read it out to you: B]

Wilmet and Rodney, on the other hand, together with his mother Sybil, live in London. BP gradually feeds us more and more information about the house and its location, and thereby about the occupants. Without ever being told where the house is we piece by piece infer that it must be in Bayswater since one can get to it on the Circle line from Pimlico. It overlooks a square plentifully supplied with trees, a fact which greatly impresses Keith. There are further references to a large department store which must be Whiteleys, and to a park which must be Hyde Park or Kensington Gardens. You can quite easily get there by bus from Shepherd's Bush, the insalubrious neighbourhood where Piers and Keith have their flat. This all sounds very grand but BP is once again gently putting her characters in their place, both literally and socially. Bayswater was traditionally "the wrong side of the Park". There are fine big houses in that part of London, but it is the area where Muriel Spark placed the hostel for *Girls of Slender Means*, which gave its title to the novel. Like Rowena and Harry, Wilmet and Rodney are upper middle class. There is no mention of a place in the country or of landed relations. In the 50's, of course, Rodney is many times better off than a civil servant of his grade would be nowadays. Once again we see an example of the great decrease in the spending power of the middle classes between the fifties and the eighties, let alone today. I know from my own experience that by the eighties the pay of a civil servant had fallen behind that of the world outside by 25 per cent. But back in the fifties there was no need for Wilmet to ever shop for food or household necessities, to cook or to do any housework. There were plenty of servants to do that. Admittedly, Wilmet and Rodney's life style seems to have been to some extent subsidised by Sybil. When she marries Professor Root and kicks them out of the house they have to move - as far as Wilmet is concerned to a flat in the same area. This causes Rodney some anguish. "Later that evening, when we were alone, Rodney began to talk in a rather gloomy way about Wembley, Ealing, Walton-on-Thames, Beckenham and other outlying parts of

London. He dwelt in turn upon the horrors of the Central Line, the impossibility of getting to Waterloo or Charing Cross in the rush hour, the inaccessibility of London Bridge or Cannon Street from the Ministry.” This reflects the attitude in the ‘50s of the more fortunate to London social geography. With the passing of the years upper middle and even upper class people are prepared to live almost anywhere in London if they can find a large house or if possible a Georgian house. Back then matters were much more constrained. Mayfair and Belgravia were of course all right, as were most of South Kensington and the adjacent parts of Chelsea. But when my parents acquired a dear little house in Ovington Street, a street almost behind Harrods, their friends commiserated with them at having to move to the slums of Chelsea. Today I know of at least one Duke that lives in the same street. The attitude to more outlying parts was unforgiving. “One thinks, Putney, ugh” exclaimed a woman I knew back in the fifties.

BP does not only gently but very firmly place people in society by their postal address. She is also wonderfully attuned to vocabulary as a class indicator. Two years before the publication of *A Glass of Blessings* in 1958 another immortal work was published, *Noblesse Oblige*, edited by Nancy Mitford, with contributions by Alan Ross, Nancy Mitford, Evelyn Waugh, ‘Strix’ (Peter Fleming), Christopher Sykes, and John Betjeman. The volume was illustrated by Osbert Lancaster. Alan Ross’ chapter is entitled “U and Non-U An Essay in Sociological Linguistics”, and in it he contends that in 1956 the upper class is demarcated from the middle class, with the exception of minor differences such as the games of real tennis and piquet, an aversion to high tea, having one’s cards engraved rather than printed, and not playing tennis in braces (suspenders in American English), solely by their vocabulary. To distinguish upper class usage from that of other classes he coined the terms ‘U’ and ‘Non-U’. Although Ross’s article was perfectly serious, while Nancy Mitford regarded the volume as a joke, the book was a run-away success and the newspapers together with a large section of the population became fascinated by U and Non-U. In the longer run, out of all the articles in the book, it is only U and Non-U and John Betjeman’s poem “How to get on in Society” (first line “Phone for the fish-knives, Norman”) that have really survived. [I have distributed the text of Betjeman’s poem since the last time I spoke to the Society it aroused much interest] Interestingly enough, Betjeman wrote his poem some six years before Professor Ross wrote his paper. People had of course always been aware of vocabulary as a class indicator, but it was *Noblesse Oblige* that brought it before a wider public and that provided the useful short-hand terms. Ironically enough, since all abbreviations are vulgar, the article stands condemned by its own title.

It is intriguing to speculate what effect *Noblesse Oblige* may have had on BP. She, and some of her characters, are certainly very aware of U and Non-U terms. Piers says to Wilmet after she has met his partner for the first time: “Well, now you and Keith have met I’m sure you’ll like each other. You really will have to ask him to tea, you know. He’s dying to see your home, as he calls it”. Such examples could be multiplied many times. At the same time, Homer nods, and BP herself is not without blame in the eyes of a stern critic. I have detected her in three slips: town for London, sweet for pudding, and relative for relation. Her use of the term “Gentlewoman” is more odd than Non-U. I have never heard a gentlewoman use the word of herself or anyone else. “Lady” as opposed to “Woman” would be the normal term. I have heard women of the upper class, covering their embarrassment at appearing snobbish, ask a friend about a woman unknown to them: “Is she a Lidy”, putting on a Cockney accent.

BP is, very sensibly, careful not to stray too far out of the upper middle class with whom she felt at home. Even Mary Beamish, although she is saintly where Wilmet is selfish, comes from a rich family financially based on the City of London, and is left a considerable sum of money by her dreadful old mother - a sum of money that seems likely to be spent on eliminating dry rot in Father Ransome’s new church. Father Thames, too, he of the many luncheon invitations and of the Faberge egg, is clearly blessed with this world’s goods and retires to a villa in Italy. He is a type of clergyman not uncommon in the fifties but now all but extinct, thanks to the pooling of ecclesiastical revenues, the incompetence of the Church Commissioners who managed to lose the greater part of the Church’s endowment through reckless speculation in property, and the loss of social status of the clergy, all matters that I touched on in my last talk to you. In *GOB*, as opposed to some of the other novels, *Excellent Women* for instance, the working

class are almost absent. There are none of the robust “obligers” found elsewhere. Father Thames’s housekeeper, who is replaced by the egregious Mr Bason, is never really allowed to say much. When BP treats of the Upper class I feel that she falls into caricature. Lady Nollard is a Lady Bracknell figure, and indeed BP admits as much when she writes: “And not to wait for your cup of tea either, said Lady Nollard in her fruity tones which always made me think of some great actress playing an Oscar Wilde dowager. That was very naughty, you know.” A few lines on BP even mimics the famous question: “In a handbag?” when she has Lady Nollard exclaim “Ah, the trolley bus!”

I hope that I have been able to draw your attention to BP’s wonderful ear for speech, to her acute observation of patterns of behaviour, in the context of social class, an element in her novels which she introduces so subtly and so gently that we are almost unaware of it, but which occurs on almost every page, and which makes us feel we know the characters together with all their prejudices, attitudes and aspirations.