

'Diarrhoea,' Letty Repeated

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'Do you find the country is doing you good?' Letty asked.

'I've had diarrhoea all this week,' came the disconcerting reply.

There was a momentary – perhaps no more than a split second's – pause, but if the women had been temporarily taken aback, they were by no means at a loss.

'Diarrhoea,' Letty repeated, in a clear, thoughtful tone. She was never certain how to spell the word, but felt that such a trivial admission was lacking in proper seriousness so she said no more.

This wonderfully humorous passage from *Quartet In Autumn* (composed 1973-76) is a good example of Barbara Pym's use of adverbs, or adverbial phrases, for comic effect, or to convey the mood, or reactions, of her characters. But first of all, let us see what is an adverb. Adverbials (adverbs, adverbial phrases or adverbial sentences) are parts of speech which give us additional information about *e.g.* the time, place or manner of the action which is described in the rest of the sentence. They answer such questions as: Where? When? How? Why? How often? How long? or How much?. As we shall see from the examples, Barbara Pym's characteristic use of adverbials falls very much into the third category, '*How?*', the manner in which an action is performed. Moreover, she uses adverbials to a striking, even unusual, extent in connection with direct speech, to describe the mood, or reaction, of one of the speakers in a reported conversation. Often this is done for humorous effect. The conversation which I quoted earlier is, given the British love of lavatorial humour, already very funny. The inappropriateness of David Lydell's reply to Letty's question is at the heart of the comic effect, but the description of the *clear, thoughtful tone* in which she repeats the word 'diarrhoea' enables us to see her as she sits there, to hear her voice as she says the word slowly, to feel her embarrassment and how she tries to cover it. Try it for yourselves. First say "'Diarrhoea,' Letty repeated. She was never certain how to spell the word..." Then say "'Diarrhoea,' Letty repeated, in a clear, thoughtful tone. She was never certain how to spell the word..." Barbara shows us how to perform the conversation in our heads, or even out aloud, and makes the whole episode much more entertaining. We have all experienced this in the dramatizations performed by the Pym Players. A passage which read silently to oneself raises a delighted smile, leads to riotous laughter when performed on stage. The remainder of this passage illustrates well the way in which Barbara brings it to life with the use of adverbials. 'Strong drink would do you more good than the eternal parish cups of tea,' Marjorie suggested *boldly*. We can see her body language and we begin to understand the degree of intimacy that already exists between her and David Lydell. When Letty suggests enterovioform, David smiles *pityingly*. We can just see his scornful, self-centred manner. When he claims that his 'case is rather different' from 'all those English on package tours' the adverbial sentence '*The sentence trailed off, leaving the difference to be imagined.*' is irresistibly comical. Perhaps Barbara is as much a dramatist as a novelist. Certainly dialogue plays a strikingly large role in her novels, and she has a wonderful ear for it. Just the other day I heard a talk by a contemporary dramatist, Tom Stoppard, in which he used an example to illustrate the importance of performance as well as text. In his play *Travesties* the first act is riotous and comic. In the text the second act begins with a long lecture by Cecily on the subject of Lenin. Stoppard decided that the contrast between the first act and the beginning of the second was too great, and recommended that most of the lecture be moved to the interval. When, therefore, the play was performed in Paris he was surprised that the director insisted on including the long, boring speech in its original position at the beginning of Act Two. He was even more surprised when he heard that audiences in Paris were gripped by the speech and received it with enthusiasm.

He decided that he must attend a performance to see what the secret was. All became clear when Cecily delivered her lecture stark naked.

I don't know whether Barbara knew how effective the device of using adverbials was, or whether it just came to her naturally, but in any case she made strikingly extensive use of it. To make a comparison with another writer of the period, in *Black Mischief* (1932) Evelyn Waugh never places an adverbial after reported speech, while Barbara in *Less Than Angels* (composed 1953-54) does it thirty-seven times in the first chapter alone. Of course, she does not only use adverbials for reported speech. In that first chapter she uses them in the narrative as well. On page 9 she employs them seven times. Catherine, having watched Professor Fairfax and Dr Vere through the window of the Lyons Corner House where she is enjoying a pot of dark and stewed tea, stands up *reluctantly* to go. Meanwhile, Professor Felix Byron Mainwaring leans forward in his taxi *in pleasurable anticipation*. He tells the driver to stop before he had reached the number he *really* wanted so that he could see the house from the outside. He wonders how it would strike his colleagues, approaching *in their shabby motor-cars or on foot, laden with the paraphernalia of their academic calling...from which they seemed so unwilling to be parted even on social occasions*. Would they envy his skill in having persuaded Minnie Foresight that some...of her late husband's wealth could not be more *nobly* used than in founding a new anthropological library.... *Certainly they* could not have done as much. He remembers Mrs. Foresight...her large blue eyes *full of admiration and bewilderment* while he talked and explained and persuaded....

Catherine is reluctant to go because, as we have already been told, 'She felt no guilt, sitting *idly* at her table in the window' (another adverbial phrase, incidentally) 'for she earned her living writing stories and articles'. We can see her movement as she stands up reluctantly. She has nothing in particular to do. As for Professor Mainwaring, the adverbials point up his self-satisfaction, his scorn for his colleagues whom he feels are in a lower class both socially and economically than he is, and are incapable of appreciating, or even recognising, Georgian architecture, let alone his amazing skill at fund-raising. The use of the adverb 'nobly' is not only comic, but also conveys something of the smooth-talking flattery that Mainwaring has deployed to win over the innocent, and perhaps none too bright, Minnie Foresight with 'her large blue eyes full of admiration and bewilderment.'

Barbara's use of this stylistic feature started early. Here is a passage from the first chapter of *Crampton Hodnet*, written in 1940:

The bell rang. There was a pause, then the sound of the front door opening and a scuffling in the hall.

Florence announced Mr Cherry and Mr Bompas.

Mr Cherry came, or rather stumbled, into the room. Mr Bompas, with a whispered 'You go first', had pushed him too hard.

'Ah, the first arrivals,' said Miss Doggett, making them feel that they had come too early. 'Your aunt is a very great friend of mine she added, turning to Mr Bompas.

'Oh, yes?' said Mr Bompas vaguely. He had a great many aunts and was trying to think which one could have been responsible for this invitation. He was short and thick-set, with fair, bristly hair. He was expected to get his Blue for football. Mr Cherry was thin and mousy with spectacles. He was a thoughtful young man, quite intelligent, but very shy.

Miss Doggett now turned to him. 'Canon Oke wrote to me about you,' she said ominously.

'Canon Oke?' Mr Cherry waited uncertainly. What was the vicar of his home parish likely to write about him? he wondered. He believed that it could hardly be anything to his discredit.

Miss Doggett paused and said in an impressive tone, 'He told me you were a Bolshevik.'

Mr Cherry was as startled as the others at hearing this violent word, and he was as conscious of its incongruity as applied to himself as he imagined they were. 'I'm a Socialist,' he said shyly. I suppose he meant that.'

‘What, you a Socialist?’ said Mr Bompas. ‘Surely you don’t go to the Labour Club?’

Mr Cherry, feeling all eyes on him, sat twisting his hands confusedly.

‘I think it’s so nice to have all these clubs,’ said Miss Morrow pleasantly. ‘You must find them a great comfort.’

‘Comfort?’ said Miss Doggett. ‘Whatever should young men of nineteen and twenty be wanting with comfort?’

‘Well, of course they don’t need it in the same way that we do, but surely there is no person alive who doesn’t need it in some way,’ said Miss Morrow, hurrying over the words as if they might give offence.

‘You certainly don’t need it when you’re dead,’ said Mr Bompas cheerfully.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ said Miss Morrow in a dreamy tone. ‘I think I should certainly need no comfort if I could know that I should be at rest in my marble vault.’

I think it is extremely unlikely that you will be buried in a marble vault, Miss Morrow,’ observed Miss Doggett in a dry tone.

In this passage Barbara has employed adverbials thirteen times, almost exclusively for comic effect. The overbearing character of Miss Doggett, the subordinate position of Miss Morrow, the confident manner of Mr Bompas and the diffidence of Mr Cherry are underlined by such adverbials as ‘making them feel that they had come too early’, ‘ominously’ and ‘in an impressive tone’ in the case of Miss Doggett, ‘hurrying over the words as if they might give offence’ in the case of Miss Morrow, ‘vaguely’ and ‘cheerfully’ in the case of Mr Bompas, and ‘uncertainly’, ‘shyly’, and ‘confusedly’ in the case of Mr Cherry. Of course, the passage would still be very funny without the adverbials, but with them we are in the room, seeing and hearing the characters.

In *Jane and Prudence* (composed in 1950-52) Barbara is still using adverbials to good effect in order to enhance her reported speech. An example is the passage where Jane and Prudence are doing the washing-up after a dinner party:

Prudence laughed and then looked a little apprehensively at Jane, who was swishing the wine-glasses about in an inch or two of brownish water at the bottom of the bowl. ‘You really need clean water for the glasses,’ she pointed out.

‘And they should have been done first,’ said Jane rather sadly. ‘Look, the twilight is coming; we’d better have the light on.’

‘The light over the sink was a dim but unshaded bulb and added a kind of desolation to the whole scene, with its chicken bones and scattered crockery. Jane went on washing in an absent minded way, looking out over the sink to the laurels outside.

‘We have laurels outside Nicholas’s study window and here.’ she said thoughtfully. ‘No doubt Nicholas and Mrs. Glaze deserve laurels, a whole wreath of them, but I don’t. Oh, Prudence,’ she said, turning to her friend with a little dripping mop in her hand, ‘you and Fabian must make a fine thing of your married life, and I know you will. You’ll be a splendid hostess and such a help to him in everything.’

‘He hasn’t asked me to marry him yet,’ said Prudence.

‘Why don’t you ask him?’ said Jane recklessly. ‘Women are not in the same position as they were in Victorian times. They can do nearly everything that men can do now. And they are getting so much bigger and taller and men are getting smaller, haven’t you noticed?’

‘Fabian is tall,’ said Prudence rather complacently. ‘I must say I like a man to be tall.’

‘Ah, you like a rough tweed shoulder to cry on,’ said Jane scornfully.

The contrast between the two friends is so well pointed up in this touching scene. The confident and competent Prudence looks ‘apprehensively’ at Jane’s feeble, even unhygienic efforts at washing up. Jane, who is only too aware that she is not the perfect vicar’s wife, looks at the glasses ‘rather sadly’ but continues washing up ‘in an absent

mindful way' and 'thoughtfully' observes that while Nicholas and Mrs Glaze deserve laurels, she herself does not. When she assures Prudence that she will make a splendid wife it is with 'a little dripping mop in her hand'. It is hard not to feel a tear at this point. But Jane still has the spirit of rebellion in her. 'Why don't *you* ask *him*?' she says recklessly, an unexpected use of that adverb. And when Prudence 'rather complacently' remarks that she likes a man to be tall Jane replies 'scornfully' 'Ah, you like a rough tweed shoulder to cry on.'

The fact that Jane is ill at ease on first meeting her new cook, Mrs Glaze, is emphasised by the use of adverbials in the wonderful conversation that ensues:

'Good evening, Mrs. Glaze. How kind of you to come to us on our first evening here!' Jane cried out.

'Well, madam, it was arranged, Mrs. Pritchard said you would want me to.'

'Ah, yes; she and Mr. Pritchard were so kind. ...'

'Canon Pritchard,' Mrs. Glaze corrected her gently, entering the house.

'Yes, of course; he is that now. Canon Pritchard, called to a higher sphere.' Jane stood uncertainly in the hall, wondering if perhaps such words were found only on tombstones or in parish magazine obituary notices, and were hardly suitable to be used about their predecessor, who was very much alive.

'Well, if you will excuse me, madam—' Mrs. Glaze made as if to pass.

'Oh, certainly!' Jane stood aside, for she had hardly yet grasped where the kitchen was and in any case it was a part of the house in which she took little interest. 'I don't know what we are going to have for supper.'

'Don't you worry about that,' said Mrs. Glaze, raising her bloodstained bundle and thrusting it towards Jane. 'I've got some liver for you.'

'How wonderful! How did you manage that?'

'Well, madam, my nephew happens to be a butcher ... Of course, he can't take the same pride in it that he used to, not every day, that is ... what with everything having to go through the Government; it's no wonder the butchers can't go on grinding out the ration, is it madam?'

'No, indeed, one does wonder how they grind it out,' said Jane fervently. 'My husband is so fond of liver. But what about vegetables?'

'Why, in the garden, madam,' said Mrs. Glaze in a surprised tone.

Of course - "well-stocked garden". We didn't have much of a garden in London,' said Jane apologetically.

Mrs Glazes's feeling at home in the Vicarage is revealed by her correcting Jane 'gently', by her making 'as if to pass' Jane who is hovering in her way, by her 'raising her bloodstained bundle and thrusting it towards Jane', and by her 'surprised tone' when Jane appears not to know that vegetables grow in the garden. Jane, on the other hand, is nervous. She stands 'uncertainly in the hall, wondering if [the words "called to a higher sphere"] were found only on tombstones ... and were hardly suitable to be used about their predecessor ...' We are told that 'Jane stood aside [for Mrs Glaze], for she had hardly yet grasped where the kitchen was ...' Her agreement with Mrs Glaze's assertion that 'it's no wonder the butchers can't go on grinding out the ration ...' is made 'fervently,' not perhaps a normal reaction, and she confesses that she and Nicholas 'didn't have much of a garden in London' 'apologetically.'

Jane and Prudence and *A Glass of Blessings* bracket *Less than Angels* chronologically, the latter being composed in 1955-56. I thought it would be interesting to look at *Glass of Blessings*, it being, unusually for Barbara, narrated in the first person. Would this influence her use of adverbs - would there, indeed, be many instances of dialogue? As it turns out, there is a quite surprising quantity of dialogue, but very much less use of adverbials. When Wilmet and Piers go for a walk along the Thames, Wilmet spots the Harrods Furniture Depository:

‘What is it?’ I asked in wonder. ‘I never expected to see such a building here.’

‘It’s a furniture depository,’ said Piers.

‘But those minarets and Grinling Gibbons decorations -- it’s all too noble to be just that!’

‘The birds have not respected it,’ said Piers, and I saw then that the rosy facade was white with their droppings.

‘I wonder what it’s like inside,’ I said. ‘Vast high-ceilinged rooms filled with huge shrouded bulky objects -- great trunks of clothes, surely rather musty now, and books too.’

‘Or a kind of sprawling decay -- the furniture rotting and riddled with woodworm, legs of tables breaking off in your hand, chair backs collapsing at a touch...’

I’m sure that couldn’t be so when it belongs to such a very reputable firm,’ I protested. ‘And I suppose things couldn’t be left there indefinitely.’

‘You would have to pay, of course,’ said Piers. ‘It would be like keeping an aged relative in an institution.’

The passage goes on for another three and a half pages, but in the whole thing (and it began a page and a half before the lines quoted above) there are only ten adverbials.

When we come to one of the later novels, *The Sweet Dove Died* (composed in 1963-69), although Barbara does still make use of adverbials, it is to a much lesser extent than earlier. There are just as many conversations in the text, but she seems to feel less need to guide the reader’s understanding of the characters’ mood than she did before. In Chapter VII, for instance, three and a half pages out of five and a half are devoted to a conversation between Leonora and Meg, but Barbara uses adverbials only five times. She leaves the reader to infer the manner in which the speakers deliver their remarks, and the thoughts which they keep concealed.

Of course, using adverbials to enhance reported speech depends upon there being reported speech to enhance, and this feature varies from novel to novel. In the first chapter of *Quartet In Autumn* there are not many conversations and even then Barbara only uses adverbials ten times. When she does, however, it is to good effect. In the conversation about hypothermia we can perfectly picture the scene, as if it were being played upon the stage:

...as [Norman] turned the pages of his newspaper.

‘Hypothermia,’ he read the word slowly. ‘Another old person found dead. We want to be careful we don’t get hypothermia.’

‘It isn’t a thing you get,’ said Marcia bossily. ‘Not like catching an infectious disease.’

‘Well, if you were found dead of it, like this old woman here, you could say you’d got it, couldn’t you?’ said Norman, defending his usage.

Letty’s hand moved over to the radiator and lingered there. ‘It’s a state or condition, isn’t it,’ she said, ‘when the body gets cold, loses heat or something like that.’

‘That’s one thing we’ve got in common then,’ said Norman, his snappy little voice matching his small spare body. ‘The chance of being found dead of hypothermia.’