

Various Positions: Oliphant, Mallow, Lydgate, and Pym, On Writing

Gabriele Caras

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I want to start with a confession that may cause you some unease. I am ascending from a long and thorough depression. The past several years have been some of the worst in my life. The influence of a severe chronic depression acts, not like a prophecy in a Greek tragedy, but a curse in a fairy tale. Rather than dread my end, I spent my days trying to divine the nature of my affliction, the peculiar laws by which it operated. But my forecasts always came too late. Certain dreadful constants flourished, grew stronger, and put down roots. What first flowers as the loss of pleasure later ripens into the loss of ability. Reading and writing, the comforts on which I had depended my whole life, became suffocating punishments. Every page I met was rootlocked.

Many months of NDRI's gradually began to untangle my mind. The sensation has been that of falling asleep on a train and waking up at different stations, the change in light and landscape quiet indicators of the distance traveled. On this journey, something fortuitous and delightful happened, just as if a favorite novel had been left on the seat next to mine. In saying that, of course, I have already given it away: I reencountered the works of Barbara Pym.

Pym is a great believer in the recuperative power of reading and writing. In her world, comfort, and even cosy-ness, are not small, toneless pleasures, but spiritual balms. It is only fitting, then, that I feel I owe much of my present state of health to her. Leonard Cohen once said of his own depression, "I've taken a lot of Prozac, Paxil, Wellbutrin, Effoxor, Ritalin, Focalin. I've also studied deeply in the philosophies and religions, but cheerfulness kept breaking through."¹ Reading Barbara Pym's books has been exactly that for me. They take me inside and outside of myself and draw me into a room of friends, new and old. Best of all, they are deceptively simple—simple enough to coax even the most tired, ailing mind into producing, astonishingly, a "real round sound"—laughter.²

I hope you don't mind my borrowing a phrase from Hardy for that line; but it seems only appropriate, when writing about Barbara, to intersperse one's words with those of other writers. This brings me to another of her beliefs: in the infectious and sometimes absurd power of language, to which we may be grateful for the many moments of humor it inspired: the excerpts and hymns of varying unsuitability that spring into her characters' minds; the ambiguous relationship they have to their own word choice; their uncertain navigations of the gulf between silence and speech. Perhaps you recall this faltering sentence from the encounter between Catherine and Tom's aunt: "'Yes, we had naturally envisaged...'" Mrs. Beddoes stopped, either because she was surprised at herself for producing such a curious word or because she did not like to say just what they had envisaged." (LTA) To put it another way: Barbara recognized that language has a life—and mind—of its own.



My subject is writing. I first came to it questioning how form and audience affect what a writer produces, and what degree of choice a writer has in such matters. You see, Pym's descriptions of writing, and of writers, in *Less Than Angels* run parallel to what I have had the negligible fortune to witness in graduate school. I am sixty years and an ocean away from Pym and her characters; my study is English, not anthropology; but I've found few

other differences. Students still drag their unwritten theses and term papers around like a ball and chain. Academics of ambition and success seem somehow more miserable than the rest, as if they had made an unglamorous Faustian pact. Finally, the few who defected to make a living by writing outside the walls of our institution have been reduced to authoring listicles and reviews for websites of lukewarm popularity. Different genres, different styles; different readers, different motivations; equally unpleasant results, so far as I could tell, for composer and consumer alike.

My title seems to weigh two authors of fiction, Barbara Pym and Catherine Oliphant, against two academics, Tom Mallow and Alaric Lydgate. But as I read, not just novels, but stories, articles, and essays by and about Pym and her characters; as I sifted through their diaries, drafts, and letters, I realized that there was something wrong with the question of “choice”; “choice” cannot encompass all I wish to talk about. It omits a sense of fluidity, spontaneity, and chance; a sense of instinct. Surely in our writing, as well as in our speaking, the unconscious plays as large a part as choice does. Have we not all had our own Beddoesian moments in composition as well as in conversation?

In a talk given some months after the publication of *Less Than Angels*, Pym remarked, “Even when a novel isn’t obviously autobiographical, one can learn a good deal about a novelist from his works, for he can hardly avoid putting something of himself into his creations.”³ This is the spirit in which I have approached this talk. More important, or significant, than any “choices” she made are Pym’s own values as a writer and her beliefs about literature—for instance, the comfort that reading and writing can bring. These can be gleaned from a careful examination of writing, and reading, as they are depicted in her novels and stories, though no one character directly represents her point of view. At times, these rustle with that ever-present element of human thought: contradiction. How can one insist on producing something one believes in and at the same time lack confidence? Or advocate equally for empathy and detachment? What is the difference between writing from one’s life and ‘gathering material’?

Let us, for the moment, lay these questions aside and turn to an extremely high value of Pym’s on which I think we can all agree: imagination. Several writers have commented—Anthony Kaufman comes to mind—on the links between subjectivity, memory, and fantasy in Pym’s work. I would like us to bear this value of imagination in mind—the exercise of the imagination as a creative and self-asserting act, a method of engaging with oneself and the world—as we go forward into the next section of this paper. Perhaps you, too, will consider your own values as writers and readers, and your own definitions of some of these terms.



Since *Less Than Angels* is Pym’s novel about anthropologists, it would only be polite to begin with them—though I’m afraid this courtesy will prove to be cold comfort. Pym’s academics have been described by Annette Weld as “[coming] in for ridicule or, at best, bemused tolerance. They are isolated from the community by their esoteric and ultimately worthless efforts.”⁴ I find that, at least in *Less Than Angels*, Pym’s attitude towards the anthropologists is a little softer, more affectionate. So too ought to be a reader’s; for one would have to be very unkind not to look a little gently on those who have been so wonderfully, if inadvertently, amusing. But Weld is right in suggesting that they are in a world apart, a world of their own, from many of the other characters they encounter. It is this gap that Pym typically exploits for humor. For instance:

[Rhoda] had imagined that the presence of what she thought of as clever people would bring about some subtle change in the usual small talk. The sentences would be like bright jugglers’ balls, spinning through the air and being deftly caught and thrown up again. But she saw now that conver-

sation could also be compared to a series of incongruous objects, scrubbing-brushes, dish-cloths, knives, being flung or hurtling rather than spinning, which were sometimes not caught at all but fell to the ground with resounding thuds.

The “clever people” in question here are Tom Mallow and Alaric Lydgate. Throughout the novel, other characters and events repeatedly try to draw them together—they have common interests and acquaintances—but Tom and Alaric are consistently at pains to distance themselves from one another. Though they have studied the same tribe for years they derive no sense of mutual pleasure or interest from it; instead, they are quick to point out that they focus on entirely different aspects of the subject. This is a familiar pattern among academics: to compete rather than collaborate, even when a partnership or mentorship would seem to be the natural course of action. Their conversation at the Swans’ dinner table is predictably terse, a display of dominance that is inconclusive and uncomfortably low on spectacle, like two men at opposite ends of a clearing, squinting at each other and trying to determine who has the bigger stick:

‘Have you published anything yet?’ Alaric asked Tom abruptly.

‘No, but I have a few articles nearly finished.’ Tom’s tone was evasive and he seemed as if he would like to change the subject.

‘I suppose you’ll be sending them somewhere soon,’ said Alaric, and then went on to name one or two journals much respected in the anthropological world.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Tom indifferently.

Less Than Angels delivers a striking impression that academic work is neither easy nor enjoyable to produce or to read. Deirdre is forever putting down one of her school books in favor of poetry or her own thoughts; the readers at Felix’s Folly are always pleased to be interrupted in their studies, whether by a sherry party or the outbursts of Ms. Lydgate and Father Gemini. Catherine, a reader of sophisticated novels, “couldn’t get through” any of Tom’s books—though this is not unusual for someone dabbling in a specialized subject on another person’s behalf. In fact, it proves to be a greater misfortune when a supremely inexpert reader, Minnie Foresight, does make it through a piece of anthropological writing: an article by Professor Fairfax leaves her scandalized. Most alarming, however, is one of Alaric’s smug assertions: “one doesn’t look for enjoyment in our field.”

What then does one look for? It is one thing to struggle to write something which will enhance the life of its author or readers, but Tom and Alaric, who labor under Damoclean piles of field notes and withering ambitions, reap no such reward. Of course, the necessity of producing an already projected or desired result can be paralyzing. The specter of an expectant audience weighs like an incubus on the writer’s desk. But there is a deeper current to Tom’s distress. He complains to Catherine,

I just wonder sometimes what’s the use of it all. Who will benefit from my work, what exactly is the point of my researches? Are my people out there going to be any happier because I happen to have found out that they have a double descent system? Who will be any better off for my having discovered new facts about the importance of the mother’s brother?

Far from assuaging Tom’s doubts and casting his lost-faith scene as a personal crisis, the other characters confirm his suspicions as the novel goes on. Catherine, admittedly a little prejudiced, explains to Deirdre, “A thesis must be long. The object, you see, is to bore and stupefy the examiners to such an extent that they will have to accept it — only if a thesis is short enough to be read all the way through word for word is there any danger of failure.” Though Deirdre regards Tom, and his thesis, with reverence, in her daydreams she still characterizes his work as “difficult and unrewarding in itself.” Tom’s young friends, Mark Penfold and Digby Fox, are skeptical of the “myth about Tom’s brilliance.” Yet even the kinder and more generous of the pair eventually suggests that,

“Certainly [Tom’s] conversation isn’t brilliant, perhaps ours is even a little better than his. . . . And I thought that paper he read in the seminar last term was — well — confused.” Faintly damning, coming from characters who often function as the text’s chorus.

It seems the only work that does come easily to Tom and Alaric is criticism—“a recognized sport.” Tom interrupts his introduction to Deirdre to “[walk] about the room, taking books out of the shelves and making derogatory comments on them.” As for Alaric, we are introduced to him through his self-criticism. Almost at once we learn that he “[regards] himself as a failure...[who] had achieved nothing in the fields of anthropology or linguistics”—a mentality under which it would be terribly difficult to synthesize eleven years of research and produce something worthy of a long silence. Alaric is, however, able to buy a little relief through writing virulent reviews. From a literary perspective, these probably have more in common with Rhoda’s letter to the Electricity Board than with any other piece of writing we see in the text. (Certainly his editor would think so.) In short, as writers, Tom and Alaric are much like the Dostoevskian graduates Pym describes toward the beginning of the novel, who have far greater success in recounting the “neuroses and psychological difficulties which prevented them from writing up their material” than in producing any kind of manuscript. Writing, as they experience it, is at once depleting and unfulfilling.



After her upsetting encounter with Fairfax’s article, Mrs. Foresight meets Professor Mainwaring for lunch and a tour of the research center. Tom Mallow happens to be one of the specimens on display. Felix smoothly reassures Minnie, “Mallow is doing valuable work which the Administration is finding most useful. When he publishes anything . . . you can be sure it will be a model of dullness, quite unreadable, I should imagine.” However sardonic his statement may be—and one can make varying arguments on that account—I would like to linger here a moment to consider the notion of “dullness.” It is, I admit, a clumsy-sounding term; but “dull” is one of Barbara’s favorite words. In fact, I think this clumsiness, or cloddishness, may have been one of the reasons for her attachment to it. It captures the sensation of a blunted spirit and evokes an atmospheric condition—like humidity.

“Dull” is not an inherently censurable quality in Pym. After all, for her heroines, the mundane is a vivid adventure. (Doesn’t “mundane” have, comparatively, rather a romantic sound to it, with the vowels ascending as they do from a low “u” to a long, breathy “a” and “e”?) People have so often said Pym’s novels are about adjusting expectations, or coming to terms with disappointment. I think it’s far closer to the truth to say that they’re about the life of the mind. Have you ever read *Murphy*? “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.”⁵ That’s a line I find tremendously funny, especially as a way to begin a novel. It goes through me in a rush of delight. But a friend I shared it with this year thought it depressing. At once I was reminded of a letter where Barbara wonders, “Why is it that men find my books so sad? Women don’t particularly” (AVPE). Of course, one need only look around this room to see things aren’t always divided that way. I’ve found, however, that the friends and relations I’ve introduced to Pym’s work tend to fall into two categories: those who love and understand her right off the bat, and those who question her novels’ significance or (worse) concern with trivialities. Those in the first group know the “nothing new” gives Pym’s heroines the opportunity to fantasize, remember, and invent; in other words, to exercise their imaginations. The discrepancy between fantasy and reality is not necessarily tragic. Beckett’s hero Murphy must go to unusual lengths to escape into the “life in his mind,” but when he does, it “[gives] him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure was not the word.”⁶ Sometimes, one’s imagination is a triumph and joy in itself.

In *Less Than Angels*, “dull” can be downright “cosy.” After seeing Tom and Deirdre in the Greek restau-

rant, Catherine longs for a “cosy woman friend,” and thinks “regretfully of all the people she had meant to keep in touch with, and rather shamefacedly of others whom she had rejected as being dull.” Mabel and Rhoda come to mind, and she does, eventually, retreat to the Swans’ house after the significantly more disturbing event of Tom’s death. The neighborhood as she sees it from the bus is full of “gardens...bare and wintry now, the little front lawns dull and rough-looking.... Inside the houses all was cosiness and security.” Dullness may be a comfort in times of great distress, but it is more often a marker of suitability—or unsuitability. Mabel Swan married a “good dull man,” and has a “good solid...dull” son, Malcolm. His friend Bernard Sprunge is “rather fond of [Deirdre] in a dull sort of way,” but she considers him “a dull old thing,” particularly after she falls in love with Tom. Here, I admit, the life of the mind abuts uncomfortably with reality: “There are few experiences more boring or painful for a woman than an evening spent in the company of one man when she is longing to be with another, and that evening Bernard’s dullness seemed to have a positive quality about it so that it was almost a physical agony.” Predictably, Mabel and Rhoda find Bernard “suitable.” Perhaps when expectations are met it is sometimes a greater disappointment than having to adjust one’s hopes. I wonder if we might consider the relationship dullness has to imagination; whether it connotes, among other things, a lack of it. If dullness and lack of imagination are responsible for unoriginality, repetitiveness, predictability, stasis, being unamusing, and a host of other sins, then perhaps certain anthropologists are more of a piece with the Swans and Springes than they, or other characters, are able to admit.

It is important we recognize that, for all the little jokes about word choice and esoteric content scattered throughout *Less Than Angels*, Pym is not rejecting an entire genre or practice of writing and reading. Gertrude Lydgate and Father Gemini are figures of fun, but they show that even the most unlikely topic can be a site of excitement, passion, and intrigue. This is also true, in a way, of Ms. Clovis, for whom a stack of academic, and perhaps even outdated, articles conjures strong personal associations. I’ve often been caught at the turn of the season by a breath of air that carries the feeling of a different year. Some phrasing of atmosphere and landscape, the time of day, an anticipation of weather or another, less perceptible change, all register in the body so powerfully that I sit at the window the way a dog does: muscles tense beneath the skin, lip twitching, staring directly at something that can’t be seen. Ms. Clovis’ encounter with the yellowing pages of *Blutfreundschaft* and the “slightly disturbing” memories they “arouse” strikes me as, if anything, less obscure. The offprints may mean something quite different to readers like Pym and like ourselves, but as in Proust, any object can be a talisman of memory and fantasy. I don’t believe Pym would ever deny anyone the pleasure, intellectual or associative, that any form of reading could bring. The problem is that Tom and Alaric—who are not just two of the most central academics in *Less Than Angels*, but two of its most central writers—experience their work only as an occasion for failure and self-doubt. Tom completes his thesis, but never resolves the problem of his faith. After his death, “seven or eight large wooden chests” of field notes present themselves, kid brothers to the tin trunks in Alaric’s attic. Those closest to him do not want them, either because “we shouldn’t really know what to do with them or even understand what they are,” or because they would be a “burden.” As for Alaric, he is liberated only with the burning of his papers. The recuperative potential of reading and writing are completely absent from their lives. So too is the ability, and arguably the aim, to produce something in which the writer really believes. The unhappiness, frustration, and uncertainty these characters face suggests Pym’s belief that a writer can be neither happy nor fulfilled without overcoming, even temporarily, the loss of faith and pleasure in one’s work.



In *An Unsuitable Attachment*, Ianthe Broome makes a bolder suggestion than I have had the nerve to so far:

“Life can be interpreted in so many different ways. ... Perhaps there the novelist has the advantage [over the anthropologist] ... He can let his imagination go where it will.” The dichotomy this suggests is appealing: fiction writing is to imagination what anthropology is to the lack of it. Certainly, there are aspects of *Less Than Angels* that encourage this perspective. The novel is structured around Tom and Catherine, a representative from each camp, and around the trajectory of their relationship. But to see Tom and Catherine as oppositional forces is too simplistic; it ignores the subtler aspects of their juxtaposition. Though they work in different genres, both seem to write primarily for professional reasons; and if you disagree with me on the basis of Catherine’s romantic fiction, then at least grant me her beauty columns and budget cocktail party ideas. It’s true that Catherine is rather flip about the plodding nature of academic writing. I assume her professional need to generate a variety of new, salable material on a regular basis contributes to her limited respect for, and even frustration with, the anthropologist’s process. When we see her at her typewriter, she is usually, actually writing, whereas Tom “[sits] at the desk, brooding over his typewriter, as if by looking at it long enough he could make it write words that would turn themselves into a thesis.” When Deirdre asks wonderingly how Tom was able to write such a thing, however, Catherine says, “Well...writers of fiction would tell you that one just goes on and on until one reaches page four hundred and ninety seven.” (I trust I am not the only one who finds this description alarming—and I hope I don’t sound like I’ve employed this method myself!) Catherine and Tom may not understand each other’s subjects, admire each other’s use of language, or have a single reader in common. And anthropologists may be dull—yes, there—I said it. But novelists can be every bit as unimaginative, aloof, out of touch, and, frankly, boring as even the worst academic—as a different Catherine can tell you.

Barbara Pym wrote “The Pilgrimage” in 1951. It is the story of a meeting between a devoted reader, Catherine Tillet, and a greatly admired contemporary novelist, Gabriel Langbaine. Langbaine’s novels are marked by their psychological depth: “His characters were memorable for their wonderful conversations and thoughts and for the intensity of their relationships with each other; he wrote about women’s feelings so subtly, it was almost uncanny that a man could have such perception, Catherine thought.”⁷ This sentence fills me with foreboding. I suspect anyone else here who moonlights as a Samuel Richardson scholar will feel the same. In any event, after an exchange of letters, Langbaine invites Catherine into the country for tea.

Catherine works in an office, lives in a bed-sitter, and sees a young cricket enthusiast named Geoffrey on weekends. She is also a classically imaginative Pym heroine. Though she’s acutely “conscious of the dullness of her life compared to [Langbaine’s],” it is a life infused with thoughts, dreams, and—today—pleasurable anticipation. Once off the train, Catherine “[walks] slowly...[wanting] to take in the atmosphere of the place where Gabriel Langbaine lived.” When at last she reaches Mulberry Cottage,

She saw, as if in a picture, Gabriel Langbaine sitting on the lawn with a small table covered with papers at his side and an herbaceous border, gay with dahlias and michaelmas daisies, at his back. ...She stood there for a moment, just gazing. Then, as suddenly as the picture had come before her eyes, it broke up.

Unluckily for Catherine, this last line turns out to be a synecdoche for the whole story. She tells him, “You are just as I imagined you would be,” and he, in turn, smiles “a rather sad, what some novelists might call a ‘wry,’ smile.” Over the course of their meeting, the world Langbaine’s novels and letters had encouraged Catherine to see is interrupted, progressively more rudely, by a different set of facts. Disappointment comes on gradually. His eyes are hazel rather than blue, as Catherine had always imagined them, but he looks “only a very little older than the latest” of his photographs. Catherine compliments one of his titles—a quotation from Keats’ “Ode to a Night-

ingale”—and he responds, “Yes, people like that kind of title, I find.” Langbaine then dominates the conversation. He speaks to Catherine, not of creative agonies and revelations, or even the content of his novels, as she had expected, but of

...the iniquities of British and American publishers, the scandalous behavior of certain literary agents, the unreasonable whims of reviewers. ...after a while Catherine found that she had lost the thread of what he was saying. It almost seemed as if he were talking about income tax, but this seemed so unlikely that she could only think that she must have misunderstood him.

She hasn't.

Langbaine continues on such dreary topics and at such length that he nearly puts to sleep a woman who came completely prepared to adore and hang off of his every word. Mrs. Langbaine suggests they “leave Gabriel to his income tax papers” and invites Catherine in to see her husband's study, and to dispel a few more illusions. Gabriel writes until lunchtime every day, not late into the night—he would fall asleep if he did. Oh, certainly, she may see one of Gabriel's manuscripts—but they are all typed, not handwritten. The final revelation of the afternoon comes from the Langbaines' neighbors. It turns out that Catherine is only one in a extremely long line of young women admirers who are invited to visit Mulberry Cottage; so many, in fact, that, “I often say to my friend they ought to ask them in twos or threes instead of always by themselves — it would be company for the journey.”

Catherine has indulged in the possibility of a more romantic, unusual, and intellectually sophisticated life—and lover—if only for an afternoon. Pym does not paint her as a woman led astray by an overactive imagination and unrealistic expectations, only to return to and endure gloomy quotidian. Catherine recovers quickly. At dinner with Geoffrey, she looks back on her memories of the visit, this time with laughter. She doesn't spare Langbaine any criticism: “He was so carefully arranged under the tree... why was his conversation so boring? ...almost as if he was doing it on purpose.” The one mystery that remains is how Langbaine could possibly have been the author of—to borrow a Richardsonian term—such penetrating novels. Certainly, he didn't appear particularly perceptive about any woman's feelings that afternoon, much less uncannily so. “His wife might help him,” Geoffrey suggests, “One never knows.” Tom Mallow is dubious about the relevance and value of his work. Alaric Lydgate's arrogance is complicated by his fear of failure. Pym may not condone her anthropologists' priorities and proclivities, yet neither is she wholly unsympathetic towards them. But Gabriel Langbaine is a different story. He has an oversaturated confidence in novels he may not have written, and an obsession with sales and profits. In Pym, it may be the greater flaw to be undeservedly full of oneself than to forfeit personal fulfillment.



Another, earlier unpublished work contains a portrait of a novelist which falls right in line with Weld's idea of ridicule or tolerance. *Civil to Strangers* was written in 1936, and is all in all funnier, less realistic, and less grim than “The Pilgrimage.” Adam Marsh-Gibbon is described as “a gentleman of means, who wrote a little poetry and a few obscure novels.” We learn as much about Adam's hobbies as his work, which is fitting for a writer with so many distractions. Chief among these is Adam himself: his appetite, his hypochondria; and when he finds he cannot concentrate at the Bodleian, he looks up his own works in the catalogue. Adam is married to the beautiful, patient, and bemused Cassandra, and has brought her to live with him in the small town of Up Callow. He insists on naming their conventional and perfectly sunny home ‘The Grotto.’ Adam has his rooms done in black and grey, and crimson velvet, and hangs a large reproduction of Böcklin's “The Island of the Dead” over his bed: “It was the first thing that caught his eye when he awoke in the morning, so that even if he had intended to begin the

day cheerfully by leaping out of bed at eight o'clock, he was nearly always plunged into gloom again at the sight of it and would sit brooding in bed until lunch-time." He is the kind of writer who knows it is important to spend as much—if not more—time appearing to write as actually doing it:

Adam always pretended that he was so engrossed in his art that he did not have time to think of ...which chair he should sit [in].... On this evening...he was sitting at a table, deeply engrossed in *The Times* crossword puzzle. ...His new novel was not going very well. Hitherto he had been able to say very much the same things in all of them, with a few variations and slightly different characters. He was...a "philosophical" novelist, but his philosophy, such as it was, was beginning to wear a little thin, and he did not know where to find another. It was over a year since the publication of his last novel, *Things For Ever Speaking*, and already his public was beginning to get impatient, he thought. He was a vain man, and valued especially his reputation in Up Callow, because it was really the only reputation he had. He enjoyed autographing his novels and poems and was always delighted to give a lecture to the Literary Society on *The Craft of the Novelist*.

Adam is amusing and essentially harmless; more so than Tom, I think. These comic descriptions do not show him to be unimaginative, but there are other things at play which put us in mind of Mallow, Lydgate, and Langbaine: "brooding" rather than writing; a concern with audience and reputation; a proclivity for pretension and artifice. Like Langbaine, Adam knows how to look the part: "His elegant clothes were always very much admired, although nobody in Up Callow would have dared to copy his velvet coat and suède shoes. These were the trappings of genius...". Lastly, Adam justifies the point Ianthe Broome had tried to counter: that "novelists [are] just as bad [as anthropologists], writing the same book over and over again" (UA). But this is not entirely for lack of trying:

"Now, do tell us what your new novel is about," said Miss Gay. "Or is that one of the questions one just shouldn't ask?"

Adam smiled condescendingly. "Well, I think I can tell you that it is about a gardener," he said.

There was a short silence. ...Adam, who was really more interested in the refreshments, [said,] "It's rather difficult to explain. ...I'm endeavoring to show this gardener is affected by what Wordsworth calls 'the beautiful and permanent forms of Nature'" ...

Everyone beamed appreciatively, though not necessarily comprehendingly. This was obviously quite a different thing from mere gardening.

"How will you show this effect?" asked Mr Paladin eagerly. ...

"What about the language?" [the rector] asked hurriedly. "Is your novel to be in dialect?" ...

Adam looked at him scornfully. "It is to be a contemplative novel," he said impressively.

"But what about the other characters, won't they speak at all?" asked Mr Paladin.

"There is only one character," said Adam, "the gardener."

There was a gloomy silence after this pronouncement, as everyone thought it sounded a dreary novel. Yet in some way they all felt that the presence of an author in their midst, even the author of unreadable novels, gave a certain cachet to Up Callow.

Pym is clearly just as delighted to make fun of over-serious artists as she is over-serious academics. Novelists and writers of fiction do not pursue an inherently nobler path than the anthropologists who regard subjectivity as a superfluity. Nor are readers, and would-be-readers, let off the hook: they are every bit as pretentious as those they (affect to) admire.

As amusing as Adam and Gabriel are, Pym often indicates more serious opinions through her humor. The single character in Adam's novel is a flat, confusing excuse for Wordsworthian discourse; Gabriel's books capture the spectrum of human emotion, but in life, he is self-absorbed and distant. At their worst, these authors are unable or unwilling to embody Forster's precept: "Only connect! ... Only connect the prose and the passion, and

both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its highest.”⁸ I do not know whether Pym admired Forster, but she strikes me as being deeply in sympathy with this principle. Perhaps it is part of why, later in life, she was so hurt to be declared out of touch with the times: she was always deeply in touch with her own human spirit.



The character of Catherine Oliphant is interpreted by some critics as a literal manifestation of Pym’s understanding of herself. Anne Wyatt-Brown writes, “Catherine represents Pym’s view of the world. She shares her author’s imagination, her amused reaction to anthropologists, and her detachment.”⁹ A fictional character making her living as a writer at the same time and in the same place as the woman who invented her is certainly an intriguing figure. *Less Than Angels* allows us to observe Catherine’s practice in great detail. We are there when she writes and when she composes her thoughts; when she reads, and when she talks about literature; and we finish the novel having a sense of what a ‘typically Catherine’ phrase sounds like. Nevertheless, I remain unconvinced by these theories. I think, rather, it is by virtue of such close similarities that we are able to remark important differences and variations, to tease out some of Pym’s more closely held beliefs about writing and the tendencies she surrendered herself to.

“Choice” actually does come into play when comparing Catherine to her creator. Catherine earns her living writing for women’s magazines; she seems to write regular features for some, and sell individual stories to others. The fiction women’s magazines published at this time was almost exclusively short, sometimes serialized, romances, described by Pym as “the Boy meets Girl kind of thing which I am not at all good at.”¹⁰ The stories were generously illustrated on the first page and continued at the back of the magazine. Catherine imagines her story, “The Rose Garden,” accompanied by a “drawing of a girl standing with a rose in her hand and a man, handsomer than any real man could possibly be, standing behind her with an anguished expression on his face.” A particularly dramatic or titillating phrase from the story, superimposed somewhere on the artwork, would also have been typical.

Catherine is perfectly at ease writing these pieces. “She...was often inspired with ideas for romantic fiction when shaking the mop out of the window or polishing a table,” probably the same activities her readers are taking a break from when they flip to one of her stories. The excerpt we see of “The Rose Garden” is not particularly appealing—“‘Oh, my darling love,’ she sighed, laying her head on his shoulder, ‘it’s been so long.’ ‘I know – dear as remembered kisses after death,’ he said gently”—though Digby’s response to it is:

‘Did people *really* say things like that to each other?’ Digby wondered. His life did not seem to have allowed much time so far for what he called an ‘amorous dalliance’. Either they said nothing, ‘submitted to his embraces’ he supposed Catherine might write, or pushed him away indignantly.

Catherine ran into the room and snatched the sheet out of the typewriter. ‘You mustn’t look,’ she cried. ‘It’s not your kind of story.’

No, it probably isn’t Digby’s kind of story, but he knows the dialect: another lovely instance of the infectious power of language. It strikes me, though, that Pym has slipped a sheet into Catherine’s typewriter that would be unlikely to appeal to Pym’s own readers. The Tennyson quote, like the title Langbaine lifts from “Ode to a Nightingale,” is a red herring, a little joke Pym makes at her own expense—and I suppose ours as well, since we are so fond of her work. But is her larger critique of Catherine, for having written it, or of Catherine’s intended audience?

Pym never set out to live purely by her writing, but publishing magazine stories was a practical way for an emerging writer to gain some traction. Unfortunately, the form and formula of women’s magazine fiction was a

doubly uncomfortable fit; in fact, “The Pilgrimage” was one of many failed submissions. Pym’s novels are characterized by their slow, subtle build. Her jokes and details pay off in the hazy everyday way, which is just what her readers relish—and what the shorter form doesn’t support. One of the rejection letters Pym received read, “We like your writing very much and you handle situations most delicately, but...they are only ‘situations’ – not plots.”¹¹ Pym’s reply was, in her understated way, unapologetic: “I am afraid that all my stories tend to be of the “situation” rather than the “movement and action” type – it is just the way one sees things which is very difficult, probably impossible, to alter very much.”¹² It is natural for a writer to experiment; indeed, it is necessary. Sometimes the writer does this on behalf of other people or considerations, and sometimes just out of personal curiosity, a sense of play. Not every experiment will be a success, but one of the results they will yield, collectively, is that the writer begins to find her voice. Possibly, Pym could have learned to write these kinds of stories, but she had no interest in them. It is not that she considered novels a higher form on the whole; simply that she did not see the point in writing if she were not writing exactly as she wanted to—which, ultimately, is what she chose to devote herself to instead.

Catherine’s position towards her own work is not immediately made clear. She strongly identifies as a writer, but when Rhoda asks her, “So you write?” she replies, “Yes, trite little stories for women, generally with happy endings,” and “[adopts] the rather derogatory tone behind which writers sometimes hide from the scorn and mockery of the world.” The narrator understands, but does not condone, Catherine’s behavior. Again, we have come up against the importance of writing something in which you really believe. The other stories that we glimpse are, like “The Rose Garden,” “trite”—familiar, but for the wrong reasons. One paints the beginning of a romance in France: “two strangers, soon to become hero and heroine, found themselves with three hours to wait between trains in the middle of a hot afternoon.” In the other, a big game hunter sits in a hotel and mulls over African scenes: “rain splashing down among the mangroves, or the laughing faces of the women as they brought in the yams. ... But would the rain splash down among the *mangroves*, and would the *women* bring in the yams?” What makes these stories so un-Pymian is that none of them seem to have been much inspired by Catherine’s life. She purrs that Alaric “has the most wonderful material” to draw on for a novel, but seems reluctant to write from her own life, from the heart: “Writing is such a comfort, isn’t it, that’s what people always say – it really does take you out of yourself. I sometimes feel it lets you more into yourself, though, and really the very worst part.” She’s not exactly wrong; but that’s an aspect of a writer’s practice she can’t—and shouldn’t—avoid forever.

There is a fourth story of Catherine’s I would like to discuss, but it is not found in the pages of *Less Than Angels*.

“...*Sunday Evening*, by Catherine Oliphant,” Rowena read out. “It begins rather well with a young man and girl holding hands in a Greek restaurant, watched by the man’s former mistress – unknown to them, of course.”

“But what a far-fetched situation,” I protested. “As if it would happen like that! Still, it must be dreadful to have to write fiction. Do you suppose Catherine Oliphant drew it from her own experience of life?”

Rowena laughed. “I should hardly think so! She’s probably an elderly spinster living in a boarding-house in Eastbourne – or she may even be a man.” (AGOB)

Like Catherine, Barbara sometimes wrote to distract herself from a particularly painful recent event, or to sustain her spirits and sense of self during a difficult period in her life; but these were also the very experiences that made their way into her future work. Her narrators are usually mature, canny—detached. The “technique of writing something painful out of her system” is rightfully a trope in literature on Pym, but I always feel this to be

candlelight rather than firelight, illuminating only part of all we might see (ALTA). “I have done so little writing this year,” Barbara wrote in April 1940, “Perhaps I need some shattering experience to awaken and inspire me, or at least give me some emotion to recollect in tranquility. But how to get it? Sit here and wait for it or go seek it out?” (AVPE). In an effort to capture the breadth of her life as a writer, I would like, once more, to twine her spirit with Forster’s, who writes:

...there seems something else in life besides time, something which may conveniently be called ‘value,’ something which is measured not by minutes or hours but by intensity, so that when we look at our past it does not stretch back evenly but piles up into a few notable pinnacles, and when we look at the future it seems sometimes a wall, sometimes a cloud, sometimes a sun, but never a chronological chart. Neither memory nor anticipation is much interested in Father Time, and all dreamers, artists and lovers are partially delivered from his tyranny; he can kill them, but he cannot secure their attention...¹³

There is something about the intensity of these periods, whether they are marked by pain or pleasure, which gives the impression, “this is how to be alive,” or, “now I am alive.” At the same time, during the most ‘valuable’ episodes, one so often feels like an actor in one’s own life, or a sleepwalker. It is only later, by writing, that one begins to understand them: to relive and reread them, explain what they were and are, discover new meanings: a further sifting or panning for values after the unconscious refinements of memory. An author once received a letter from someone he had written about. It read, “How wonderful to have that time saved and immortalized.” It does not matter whether the story was comic or tragic, what role the character had; simply that it was based on life, which the writer preserves some fragments of by looking on them with tenderness. These creative acts are imaginative acts, and these imaginative acts are acts of empathy. Perhaps this is something none of the writers in *Less Than Angels*, *Civil to Strangers*, and “The Pilgrimage” are quite capable of understanding; but it is the very secret that the Catherine Oliphant of *A Glass of Blessings* and Barbara Pym share.

Gabriele Caras is a graduate student in English at McGill University in Montréal, where her current research focuses on theorizing nature through the fiction of Thomas Hardy. Her work has a strong interdisciplinary approach and often incorporates film, visual art, and political ecology. When not reading Pym she spends her time with the novels of Elizabeth Bowen and Shirley Hazzard, and with her feline companion, whose richly embroidered life may rival even that of Tom Boilkin.

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¹ Leonard Cohen, *Live in London*, Columbia, 2008.

² Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, Ed. Juliet Grindle, Simon Gatrell, and Penny Boumelha. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 68.

³ Barbara Pym, "The Novelist's Use of Everyday Life," *Green Leaves* 12, no. 2 (2006): 13.

⁴ Annette Weld, *Barbara Pym and the Novel of Manners* (London: MacMillan, 1992), 21.

⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (New York: Grove, 2001), 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁷ Barbara Pym, "The Pilgrimage," *Green Leaves* 8, no. 2 (2002): 5-7.

⁸ E.M. Forster, *Howard's End* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 188.

⁹ Anne Wyatt-Brown, *Barbara Pym: A Critical Biography* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 89.

¹⁰ Quoted in Weld, *Barbara Pym and the Novel of Manners*, 37.

¹¹ David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain, 1945-5* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 523.

¹² Weld, *Barbara Pym and the Novel of Manners*, 24-5.

¹³ E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 1955), 28-9.