

# Flower Books and Fruitwood Mirrors: Commodifying Nature in Barbara Pym's *The Sweet Dove Died*

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*The Sweet Dove Died* begins and ends with flowers: the Victorian flower book which brings the three main characters together, and the bunch of peonies borne by Humphrey on the closing page of the novel.<sup>1</sup> In Pym's final work, written two years after *The Sweet Dove Died*, a 'few green leaves' are active agents of transformation; in prolonging the life of the November roses in Tom Dagnall's church they are able to 'make such a difference.'<sup>2</sup> In contrast *The Sweet Dove Died* presents the natural world as commodified, with plants, landscapes, and animals, including human ones, emptied of their unruly natural qualities and subjected to the power of ownership and commerce in a world where artifice and elegance rule.<sup>3</sup> In this context, I am using the term 'commodity' to indicate a substance or object that can be traded, bought and sold and therefore owned and used.

Given the resonance of the novel's title and epigraph, it's evident that a major theme of *The Sweet Dove Died*, is going to be this confinement and commodification of natural things, and the sad consequences of the process: Keats' sweet dove dies of grieving for its lost freedom, its confinement and its transformation from a wild creature to a domestic pet.

Yet at the same time, Barbara Pym suggests that the emotional forces expended on objects can endow them with magical, talismanic properties. Emptied of one set of meanings they become powerful personal and cultural signifiers. In a key sentence Barbara Pym tells us, Leonora 'had always cared as much for inanimate objects as for people' and I'll suggest that in doing so she blurs the distinctions between the animate and the inanimate in her world. Things are given personalities while people are viewed as things.

To begin, as the novel does, with Victorian flower books. These were dictionaries of the 'language of flowers', the Victorian conceit that each flower had a specific meaning supplying lovers' messages, artistic symbols (think of the Pre Raphaelite painters' use of flowers as symbols) and added significance to domestic floral arrangements. Tennyson's poetry is full of talking flowers; it's a powerful Victorian trope. For example, Leonora's purchase has a picture of pink convolvulus signifying 'Worth sustained by tender and judicious affection'<sup>4</sup> and she turns a page each day to display another illustration, rather as books of remembrance in churches are used. She buys the 'dear little book' (making it sound like a child or a pet) for herself and it becomes something of a talisman (an 'enchanted little book'); she can't bring herself to bid for another for 'she could never hope to be as lucky as that first and only time'. The book is thus marked out as unique, endowed with a personality of its own. It is significantly linked with Leonora's first meeting with James: and when their relationship ends he looks 'hopefully' at 'the table where the little Victorian flower book used to lie, open at a different page every day, but it was not there,' a sign that things will never be the same again between them. The purchase of the flower book establishes early on, as Mason Cooley says, Leonora's 'collector's passion for the ownership of beautiful objects'<sup>5</sup> which will later include James. And in the world of the literary text, collectors of beautiful objects tend to have a bad press in terms of human relationships: for example Henry James's Gilbert Osmond in *Portrait of a Lady*, or his Mrs Gereth in *The Spoils of Poynton*. (It seems that both Leonora and Ned have read Henry James).

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Pym, *The Sweet Dove Died*, London: Moyer Bell, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Pym, *A Few Green Leaves*, London: Granada, 1981 p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> See Christina Kiaer, 'The Russian Constructivist Flapper Dress' in Bill Brown, ed. *Things*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. p.264, n27 for reference to Marx on 'fetishism.'

<sup>4</sup> Dr Kym Brindle points out that convolvulus is also known as bindweed, an invasive plant dreaded for its clinging tendrils.

<sup>5</sup> Mason Cooley 'The Sexual Politics of Narcissism' *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol.32, no 1, 1986, 40-49, p.43.

Just as the Victorian flower books imposed a human language on the blooms, the many, indeed constant, mentions of flowers throughout *The Sweet Dove Died* convey social meanings within this 'world where artifice prevails over nature.' Barbara Pym rarely shows them growing in a natural unconstrained state. Wild flowers are conspicuously absent. Instead Leonora is 'good with house plants', she does 'marvellous flower arrangements'; the tulips and irises on her patio are presumably in pots and 'lilac and laburnum' are glimpsed only 'over distant garden walls.' Leonora exerts control over the 'flowers [which] surely went on flowering later for [her] than for anyone else' and here they are specifically named as 'begonias, dahlias and a second blooming of roses': all rather highly cultivated garden flowers. Leonora even transforms a humble culinary herb into a fashionable trimming: after her visit to Vine Cottage and her meeting with Miss Culver, she leaves 'carrying her bunch of parsley with such elegance that it looked like an exotic accessory to her outfit'. Following the theft from Humphrey's shop, Leonora sends a sheaf of white roses and carnations tied with mauve ribbon, and a card whose wording suggests condolence after a death: 'With kind thoughts and deepest sympathy after your sad losses'. Leonora does not do irony; in her eyes the loss of the precious objects amounts to a bereavement, and the funereal bouquet is a suitable tribute. White flowers with a mauve ribbon convey a message, like the illustrations in the Flower Book; this use of the language of flowers also happens later in the novel where lily of the valley is given implied meanings: the fact that Leonora and Ned impose different significances on the flower highlights the culturally constructed elements of the process. For Leonora, lily of the valley is distilled into a perfume, the one she uses in summer instead of her sophisticated winter fragrance, and the change is part of her seasonal ritual along with the purchase of new clothes. Actually we know that her winter perfume *L'Heure bleue* also has a floral note, of heliotrope: and the words of its creator Jacques Guerlain are uncannily appropriate for Leonora's stage of life: "The sun has set, but night has not yet fallen. It's the suspended hour..." (*L'Heure bleue*) Meanwhile the consummate actor and poseur Ned mentally rehearses the scene of his expected triumph over Leonora. He thinks carefully about what flowers to bring, deciding on lilies of the valley as 'a simple tribute' endowed with an aura of innocence and an imagined backstory of his boyhood, 'seeing the simplicity of the flowers reflected in himself' although of course Ned is anything but simple. As the two opponents meet, we are told that for a moment their perfumes mingled, giving Ned the opportunity to describe the lilies as '*your* flowers' and continue his shy boy act with the flowers as a prop. Significantly they go into 'a Victorian glass vase painted with forget me nots' one of the many flower-patterned objects in the novel, which will be discussed later.

To move to the final page, Humphrey presents a rather endearing figure as he arrives 'encumbered by a large bunch of peonies.' 'There was something slightly ridiculous about the exuberance of the flowers' (peonies are like that!). These flowers are irrepressible and unruly, bursting out of their confines to give Humphrey a touch of human enthusiasm and warmth befitting one of the more likeable characters in the novel. But at this point the whole final paragraph is worth quoting as it brings the floral world totally back under control. Leonora remembers that Humphrey is going to take her to The Chelsea Flower Show. 'It was the kind of thing one liked to go to, and the sight of such large and faultless blooms, so exquisite in colour, so absolutely correct in all their finer points [an expression which likens them to animals at a judging show], was a comfort and satisfaction to one who loved perfection as she did. Yet, when one came to think of it, the only flowers that were really perfect were those, like the peonies that went so well with one's charming room, that possessed the added grace of having been presented to oneself.'

Clearly, then, the many plants and flowers in *The Sweet Dove Died* are contained and constrained by pots, flower beds and florists' wrappings; they are objects given meaning only by the codes of social ritual. In fact uncontrolled Nature is seen as rather threatening. James fears that too many leaves near a window may provide an illicit entryway for insects. Phoebe comments on the 'oppressive greenness and too many trees' of the countryside. Leonora prefers her local park with its planted borders of fuchsias and heliotropes. Interestingly James, although no nature lover, (he 'hates gardening') finds this park depressing 'with its formal flower beds and evil-faced little statue' and its 'dusty grass and trees' (46) perhaps because it sets Leonora off on her reminiscences of 'the famous gardens of Europe'. Virginia Water, where Leonora and Humphrey visit, is very similar to these famous gardens in being a carefully constructed landscape with imported ruins. As Leonora hints, it is like a painted scene: 'a distant glimpse of a temple—perhaps a ruined temple—among trees, over still water', she mused. 'I think

that's really one of my favourite sights.' Nature here is very much adapted to culture; the area is an eighteenth century 'picturesque' creation, and that is what attracts Leonora. Interestingly the other visitors interpret it differently, with Humphrey recalling his late wife in her ATS uniform while a cheerful family group, the women in bright floral prints, enjoys visiting the totem pole; again an imported and rather incongruous element, given to the Queen by the people of Canada in 1958 and said to be cursed. Made from a 600 year old redwood tree, it is yet another example of commodified nature, this time with a great deal of mystic significance.

Leonora is not alone in avoiding too much unadulterated nature. The buds of Vine Cottage are at a double remove from both Phoebe and James: she does not know how they should look, and he knows only through a literary quotation which he in turn, has received only at second hand. Referring to 'The vine which sprawled over the back of the cottage', (notice that this vine sprawls uncontrolled) Phoebe asks, 'is it all right, do you think, with those woolly grey buds?' James replies, 'of course, don't you know the poem about the red turning grey?' Suddenly he recalls that it is 'one of Leonora's favourite poems-that was how he had come to know it.' The reference is to Browning's *The Lost Mistress*;

And the leaf-buds on the vine are woolly,  
I noticed that, today;  
One day more bursts them open fully  
– You know the red turns grey.

Much later as Leonora, deeply saddened by the transfer of James's affection to Ned gazes into the conservatory at Keats's House ('some late flowers, begonias and perlargoniums, were still in flower') the sight of grapes on a vine reminds her of Phoebe's cottage and 'how simple that had been compared with this!' So what we have is quite a complex layering of natural objects (the vines), poetry (Browning, Keats) and memory (James of Leonora, Leonora of past experiences).

The *mise en abyme* of Phoebe, James and the vine buds is carried further by the various inanimate objects which bear representations of botanic elements such as trees or flowers, or are made from natural materials such as fruitwood. Firstly, nature is often seen in flat representations or patterning: for instance on wallpaper (wisteria, at Vine Cottage; green leaves, in Ned's rented flat, again a cultural double take as it is 'almost a Morris paper') or fabric (Colin's 'pink, flowered shirt'). It is also seen on three dimensional artefacts. Humphrey gives Leonora a plate, bearing 'a Victorian scene of ladies under a tree; a cedar tree they decided'. Highly significant in defining Leonora's relationship with objects (and, as I'm arguing, with animate beings too) is the interaction with the miniature jug decorated with flowers: 'a petal from one of the forget me nots was chipped off. How had she not seen this before? She could not bear to have anything not quite perfect in the room'. On the very next page Meg advises: 'you mustn't expect things to be perfect, Leonora; they never are'. She means Things in general, beyond the 'things' which Leonora collects, but the textual juxtaposition equates the two categories, highlighting Leonora's need for stasis and control.

The novel also describes some less refined objects, which appear at the house sale attended by James, Phoebe and the Murrays, dealers in Victoriana.<sup>6</sup> The Murrays are interested in a bedroom set 'a ewer, basin and chamber pot patterned with purple irises' and at another sale they purchase 'the most marvellous old flowered *loo*...we're going to put it in the [shop] window and fill it with bulrushes and pampas grass'.

Of course the fruitwood mirror is a much more rarefied artefact, and one of immense significance in *The Sweet Dove Died*. Indeed so much significance is invested in it that it becomes a magic mirror. Leonora and James share the erotic experience of reading Sotheby's sale cata-

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<sup>6</sup> When the novel was first published, 'Victoriana' was just becoming modish/fashionable.

logues with 'seductive descriptions' of 'beautiful pieces'.. 'narrow cross--bandings of tulip-wood, palm tree motifs and eagles cresting' and the first fruitwood mirror partakes of this emotional charge. I say 'the first' because there are actually two fruitwood mirrors in Leonora's life. The original one is first mentioned by James as 'a mirror with cupids, fruitwood, that's rather pretty', and while offering to lend it to Phoebe he recalls Leonora's excessive admiration for the piece. The mirror comes to symbolise the struggle between Phoebe and Leonora, as the older woman 'rescues' it from the furniture depository and keeps it on her own wall even after she furnishes the upstairs flat for James. Magically 'the glass had some slight flaw in it, and if she placed it in a certain light she saw looking back at her the face of a woman from another century, fascinating and ageless'. This quality of timeless beauty suggests an unchanging antique portrait rather than a mirror's fleeting images, and is in tune with Leonora's love of the controlled, perfect object.<sup>7</sup> We are told that she speaks to the mirror; not just to her reflection, and what she sees there reassures her. Just as her admiration of the mirror had been excessive, she is 'quite disproportionately upset' when James takes it back. It is unique, and Humphrey's substitute will not do. 'When she looked into it the reflection it gave back was different from James's mirror in which she had appeared ageless and fascinating. Now her reflection displeased her, for her face seemed shrunken and almost old. Or was she really beginning to look like that?' At the end of the novel, the mirror is no longer in her hall, so that the departing Ned is 'denied the pleasure of seeing himself.' Cooley and other critics have noted the theme of narcissism in Pym's novel; Ned's wish chimes with the self-obsession of the handsome youth Narcissus in the myth which gave the flower its name... while the literary significance of mirrors includes the tales of Snow White and The Lady of Shalott. It is likely too that Barbara Pym knew Thomas Hardy's "I Look into My Glass" written by the ageing poet: "I look into my glass, / And view my wasting skin, / And say, 'Would God it came to pass / My heart had shrunk as thin!", perhaps Leonora's 'shrunken' face is an echo of Hardy. Mirrors are uncanny objects, perhaps even more so than talking flowers...

If growing things like flowers and fruitwood are transformed into decorations and artefacts in the novel, living animal beings are similarly fetishised and seen as commodities, if sometimes rare and valuable ones. Like flowers and plants, animals are represented on or as decorative items, with the dentist's collection of netsuke, Humphrey's stolen Chinese quails, Ned's mention of the leather hippo and the cat salt and pepper set which James sees at the jumble sale, 'with the appropriate holes in their heads', the point being that the holes are appropriate to the salt and pepper rather than to cats. Humphrey's quails have something in common with the salt and pepper cats, in that they are models of living creatures made into useful domestic items: the quails are incense burners and although much more upmarket objects than the cat set, their application is equally random and inappropriate.

Unsurprisingly Leonora is 'one who prefers to admire animals from a distance.' But she 'like[s] the feeling of fur next to my face' and this is actually the only physically sensual experience she seems to enjoy in the course of the novel, apart perhaps from the wearing of perfume. During much of the twentieth century it was extremely fashionable to wear fur, comfortably distanced from its origins and seen as a luxurious, feminine, sensuous substance, with genuine fur denoting value and expense. It's interesting that the false and shallow Ned is associated with faux fur, fake fur rugs and cushions, although his rented flat does also have a sofa made of leather, next to fur the ultimate animal product. The animal commodification theme continues as Meg's battered sheepskin jacket is likened to a pelt, and Leonora's raincoat to 'the iridescent wing of some beautiful beetle.'

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Dr. Clemence Schultze for this insight.

As for real live animals, Liz's cats, with their jewelled eyes, together with the other catshow felines, are objects to be evaluated by the judges' gaze; and these are not neighbourhood moggies but expensive and highly bred commodities. John Halperin has noted that their reactions to captivity highlight James's feelings of imprisonment.<sup>8</sup> At the show James identifies with the captive cats, wishing he could be like those who are stolidly indifferent while he feels that 'like some of the more exotic breeds, one prowled uneasily round ones cage uttering loud plaintive cries.' Like the cats and Keats' dove, James is characterised as a pet or a possession, just one among a range of other desirable objects who partake of Leonora's love. James is consistently associated with images of passivity and entrapment, for example at the party where he meets Phoebe, 'they were trapped in a corner and he couldn't escape even if he wanted to'. He notices that the windows of his flat in Leonora's house are barred; and later, animal-like, 'he had a sudden impulse to bury himself in the fallen sycamore leaves' in her garden, realising however that 'there was no escape from anything, ever.' 'There was no escape, she would arrange or adapt him to her satisfaction.' And the captive animal theme is continued right to the end of the novel when Leonora rejects Meg's method of attracting Colin by pandering to his taste in wine: 'there was something humiliating in wooing James in this way, like an animal being enticed back into its cage.'

So James is seen as a captive, if petted and valued, animal. How far is he the 'sweet dove' of the title? Or does the sweet dove refer to the love Leonora feels for James; or to the relationship between them? At all events, the doomed element is pictured in natural terms and metaphors:

I had a dove, and the sweet dove died  
 And I have thought it died of grieving;  
 O what could it grieve for? Its feet were tied  
 With a silken thread of my own hand's weaving:  
 Sweet little red feet! why would you die?  
 Why would you leave me, sweet bird, why?  
 You liv'd alone on the forest tree,  
 Why, pretty thing, could you not live with me?  
 I kiss'd you oft, and gave you white pease;  
 Why not live sweetly as in the green trees?

Notice a couple of cross references from poem to novel: James has apparently, lovely feet, if not little red ones, (Phoebe also appears with bare feet) and the lone female visitor to Keats House has a packaged dinner including green peas, resonating with white pease/green trees... Ned quotes part of this poem to Leonora, as he holds an alabaster dove given to her by James, yet another example of nature represented in art. Leonora dismisses the hint that the poem has 'some obscure and unpleasant meaning', as fanciful and ridiculous, although later she refers to 'those horrible lines about the dove.' Paradoxically it is the fickle, shallow and spiteful Ned who has discerned the darker side of Leonora's feeling for James (Humphrey has earlier called it an unnatural relationship, although Meg takes a more sympathetic view). And it's Ned who later shockingly compares Leonora to a wounded animal crawling away to die, an image which sparks the single example of visceral physical suffering in the novel, James's childhood memory of the beloved cat injured in a road accident and later found in the woods 'with dried blood on her mouth, her beautiful fur all dull.' And yet even this violent animal image is distanced; it is in James's memory, outside the quotidian events of the novel.

So if we include details like Leonora's vision of Colin's boyfriend Harold euthanizing pets at the veterinary practice, all the animals in the novel are unhappy, captive or dead: in the case of Keats' dove, all three. There is, perhaps, one exception: the village cat who makes itself comfortable in Phoebe's cottage and inspires her poem. Differing from Liz's penned and confined Siamese, this roving cat is a

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<sup>8</sup> John Halperin, 'Barbara Pym and the War of the Sexes', in Dale Salwak, ed. *The Life and Work of Barbara Pym*, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1987, p 98.

part of the telling contrast between the overgrown garden and untidy interior of Vine Cottage, and the perfection of Leonora's surroundings.

Moving on: while Pym's novel invites us to consider the networks of power connecting people, animals and things, also it blurs the boundaries between them. The things gain a life of their own<sup>9</sup> (the magic mirror, the talismanic flower book, the deceased/stolen quails) while people become identified with and seen as objects. As Hal Foster has suggested, 'the commodity becomes our uncanny double, evermore vital as we are evermore inert.'<sup>10</sup>

James thinks that 'it would be an amusing game to liken one's friends and acquaintances to antiques '(47) starting with Phoebe and Leonora, the two women in his life. Phoebe is a cracked little china castle while Leonora is characterised as a flawless piece of Meissen. At other moments she is seen less flatteringly as a fossil (cold and unfeeling); as 'some old fragile object that needed careful handling' with hair made of 'some brittle unreal substance', while Phoebe thinks that she has a 'marble cheek.' And as for James, 'sometimes it seemed almost as if she [Leonora] had created him herself—the beautiful young man with whom people were always falling in love and who yet remained inexplicably and deeply devoted to her, a woman so much older than himself.' He has become *something* constructed by her imagination, designed to render her unchanging love and homage: there are resonances with the Pygmalion myth here.<sup>11</sup>

In cultural studies, recent years have seen the formulation of Thing Theory, which examines the relationships between people and things, arguing that 'commodities have the role of active agents of social relations.' Thing Theory involves a range of scholarly disciplines including anthropology: which of course brings us close to Barbara Pym and her work at the International African Institute between 1946 and 1974. Muriel Schulz and Clare Hanson have both reminded us of the novelist's links with anthropologists in the 1960s and 70s: the heyday of pioneer structuralist anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss and others, who had much to say about the roles and relationships between nature and culture, people and things, in the societies they studied. Schulz notes the rich assortment of anthropologists in the novels, and the phrase she quotes from *Less than Angels* sounds like a neat parody of (if not a direct quote from) Levi-Strauss's exhaustive study of South American myth: 'The hyenas have stolen the beer-strainers of the bad sons of the good women'.<sup>12</sup> In *No Fond Return of Love*, Dulcie Mainwaring argues that 'everyday objects and customs are [as] worthy of study' as exotic beer-strainers<sup>13</sup> and things, both domestic and esoteric objects, are significant in all Pym's novels: especially *The Sweet Dove Died*. For besides sophisticated fruitwood mirrors and the Chinese quails, humbler objects like vulgarly chunky teacups and the 'touching relics' of John Keats also function in the novel.

It is Clare Hanson who makes a direct link between Barbara Pym and Levi-Strauss.<sup>14</sup> She writes of 'the tension which structures all Pym's work, between a socio-scientific view of man, and liberal-humanist or religious perspectives' and how this tension was addressed in Levi-Strauss's later work with which Barbara Pym would have been familiar.<sup>15</sup> In *The Raw and the Cooked*, a title whose culinary emphasis might well have appealed to the novelist, Levi-Strauss discusses the important social role of apparently insignificant objects in 'mediating complex relationships between the world, life and man'.<sup>16</sup> In addition, I think it is highly significant that Levi-Strauss suggests that the myths he analyses explain mankind's loss of immortality as directly linked to the acquisition of material culture and the practices

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<sup>9</sup> Henry James's Mrs Gereth "There isn't one of them I don't know and love—yes, as one remembers and cherishes the happiest moments of one's life. Blindfold, in the dark, with the brush of a finger, I could tell one from another. They're living things to me; they know me, they return the touch of my hand." Henry James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, 1897 p32.

<sup>10</sup> Hal Foster quoted in Kiaer, p.264 n29 .

<sup>11</sup> Another insight from Dr Clemence Schultze, to whom thanks for much help and support.

<sup>12</sup> Muriel Schulz, 'The Novelist as Anthropologist', in Salwak, p101.

<sup>13</sup> Schulz, p.107.

<sup>14</sup> Clare Hanson, 'The Raw and the Cooked', Barbara Pym and Claude Levi-Strauss, in Jane Dowson, ed, *Women's Writing 1945-1960, After the Deluge*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 205-216.

<sup>15</sup> Hanson, 213.

<sup>16</sup> Hanson, 214.

of civilisation.<sup>17</sup> It has often been remarked that *The Sweet Dove Died* is the Pym novel with the least religious content. Leonora is not a churchgoer let alone a believer; Miss Foxe (whose name continues the animal theme, as does Mr Lambe the dentist) and perhaps Miss Caton, are apparently the only religious adherents in the novel. Leonora then has lost immortality: she hopes only for an elegant death. (18). And I would argue that this spiritual dearth is linked to the tension between nature and culture which Levi- Strauss discerned and which Barbara Pym conveys so tellingly through the commodification of nature in *The Sweet Dove Died*.

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<sup>17</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans J and D Weightman, London: Penguin, 1992, pp149/153.