

# Barbara Pym's "Finding a Voice" and Hazel Holt's Detective Novels<sup>1</sup>

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First, I want to say that Hazel Holt was one of the kindest and most loving people I have ever known—as was her husband Geoffrey. They had all the other virtues of friends too—intelligence, wit, charm, humor, energy, generosity—and were wonderfully supportive listeners and advisors always, but the more I knew them, the more I was awed by their goodness. I miss them profoundly and always will, but I feel extraordinarily lucky to have known them. I thought of them as chosen family. Nothing I say could do either of them justice, so I'll make do with a few anecdotes and some history before speaking about Hazel and Barbara Pym's finding their voices.

I met Hazel in 1984, after I'd written to her for permission to look at the Pym archives in the Bodleian later that year. She and Hilary were in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on a book tour promoting *A Very Private Eye*. It took me about eight hours to get there by public transportation—Harrisburg is out in the middle of nowhere—and I was expecting huge crowds because Pym was so popular. But there were few people, maybe twenty in all. Hazel and Hilary spoke informally, with great verve and charm as always, answered questions, then adjourned to refreshments. I'm very shy with people I'm impressed by, but because there was such a small audience I amazed myself by going up to speak to them, and they were astonishingly easy to talk to, Hazel especially. They told me that they were coming to New York the following summer, and when it appeared that they didn't like staying in hotels, I said I'd be away and (like a typical effusive American) said they'd be welcome to use my Brooklyn Heights apartment on Pineapple Street. They delighted me by sounding enthusiastic at the idea—not at all like most of the English people I knew! I described the area, we exchanged information, and I left absolutely thrilled—having told them I would be taking a bus to the bus station in the pouring rain, another bus to Philadelphia and then one to New York City to the apartment, arriving there at probably about 5 am for a conference. I learned later that when they saw me trekking off in my wool cape for the bus, they thought I was like Emily Brontë intrepidly poised to cross the sopping moors of Yorkshire. No one could be less like Emily Brontë than I am, but this false impression evidently served me well. I also learned later that Hazel luckily had a fondness for Americans, perhaps because of all the American films she watched in her youth. I exchanged letters with Hazel, arranged for my sister-in-law to show them in and take them around in 1985, had tea with Hilary in Finstock when I was at the Bodleian ... it all seemed miraculous to me.

But it was Hazel and Geoffrey whom I became close to—visiting them at Tivington Knowle usually once a year or more because I was making many research trips to England, first to do research on Jane Austen, and then on the 18<sup>th</sup>-century reading public. Hazel insisted that I see Daventry in 1985, where more than 200 years earlier the 18<sup>th</sup>-century bookseller whose archives I was studying had a bookshop. She remarked sardonically and correctly that there was probably no bookshop in Daventry any longer, and managed in the overgrown cemetery to find the grave monument of the family. Hazel had an eye: she found “informative gravestones” for Barbara when they visited Minehead together investigating Barbara and Hilary's Barnes neighbors.<sup>2</sup> I should add that my Bodleian researches on Pym yielded one essay, but Hazel very gently set me straight on my study of parallels between *A Glass of Blessings* and Jane Austen's *Emma*: I had left out “one more parallel: the ever-present consciousness of CLASS. Keith (especially) is not the same *Class* as Piers (Provincial, rather common little voice—‘the *pathos* of not knowing French’,” because, presumably he didn't go to a grammar school). Mr Bason, too, is a class below Wilmet and Rodney which is why it would be *so* unsuitable if the flowers had been sent from all 3 of them! Miss

Beamish was Upper Middle (probably *she* had to be stopped referring to “the poor” as well) but could entertain an ex-governess (as well as an ex-ambassador) because she had been a) a gentlewoman in her own right and b) with the Best Families *abroad*. There are, I am sure, many other instances in *A Glass of Blessings* and, of course, Wilmet is as big a snob as Emma....”<sup>3</sup> I realized that with my American blindness to nuances of class in Pym I’d better stick to appreciation instead of analysis.

Hazel and I took many other trips together during my often long visits to Tivington—the most memorable being to Winchester while I was working on a biography of Austen. Hazel actually knocked on the door and talked us into the house where Austen died! She was adamant—using my biography as an excuse and wholly undeterred when the wary homeowners said that they had been approached by *many* biographers. So I have a photograph of me in the actual space upstairs where Austen’s bed had been, taken by Hazel of course. When we traveled to American Civil War sites in 1991, Hazel used our trip to Antietam in her novel *Murder on Campus*. But a word about life and literature is appropriate here. Anxiety from me about one of her characters drew this response from her, which I am sure parallels what Barbara Pym’s would have been: “What I have done is what the real writers do, i.e. I have taken incidents and real descriptions of people and places and then (perhaps unforgivably) tacked onto them some characteristic or trait that I need for the purposes of the plot, so that although some characters in my books may have something in common with people I know and indeed (as Tom will affirm, though *he* can’t talk since he’s used quite a few of my phrases in the most *unfair* contexts in *Ye Gods*) my nearest and dearest, none of the characters is actually based on anyone.”<sup>4</sup> The phrase “the real writers” is characteristically modest.

I’ll add that I have a wonderful description from Geoffrey of a “think-tank session” at Tivington between Hazel and Tom, producing ideas for one of his books:

You should have seen and heard the pair of them once the bits were between their teeth and the ideas began to flow. Imagine a pair of electrodes sparking and cracking at each other and generating shock-waves of high-voltage ideas that went ricocheting around my bemused head. Picture mother and son, falling about with laughter and excitement, eyes flaring, totally absorbed in each other. Mind you, to his credit, when Tom took to his bed he wrote a synopsis of the plot they had created and then got up and put the whole thing on an Amstrad disc before he went to sleep.<sup>5</sup>

Tom gave Hazel many plot ideas for her books as well, and she would often develop them while swimming. I’m sorry to add that various disasters at Tivington also suggested plots—their wonderful local water supply was contaminated once, so they needed the installation of an ultraviolet sterilizing shed, and they had a chimney malfunction which sent them both to the hospital with carbon monoxide poisoning. But Hazel seized on both events as possible ways to murder someone for her novels. Nothing wasted was her motto as much as (in her view) it was Pym’s.

For more than thirty years, Hazel and I exchanged letters, manuscripts, phone calls, and photographs, first by mail and then from about 2000 by daily emails. Hazel would email chapters of her novels for me to share with my closest friend Ruth Portner, whom Hazel had come to know, and we’d convey to her our invariably delighted responses. Hazel always said that we helped her to continue writing. Whether that was true or not, no writer minds praise. The daily immediacy of email was splendid but as we all know I’m sure, letters are more expressive and more permanent. If the digital revolution had occurred sooner, I would not be able to quote Hazel as I have. Hazel and I didn’t often talk about Barbara Pym—I felt from the start that I didn’t want her to think I was only interested in her as a friend of Pym—but I do have this wonderful tidbit that probably you know already: “Barbara felt about Wilmet rather as J[ane].A[usten]. felt about Emma. Surely I told you of how we used to ‘parallel’ the novels: i.e.,

*Excellent Women* with *Pride & Prejudice* (the one everyone likes), *Jane & Prudence* with *Sense & Sensibility* (same quality & tone of voice in some ways) & *Emma* with *G of B*. We didn't try it with the others—a continuing game for you to try?"<sup>6</sup>

A good segue perhaps to the topic of "Finding a Voice." As you all know, Pym and Hazel shared more than the editorial office at the Africa Institute when they worked there together—among many things, taste in books and a profound love for English Literature, sense of humor, pleasure in creating sagas about people (and researching them), love of animals. But they also shared a deep sense of the importance to a writer of finding a voice. Pym recorded a radio broadcast on that topic in 1978, concluding that it's "the kind of immortality most authors would want—to feel that their work would be immediately recognisable as having been written by them and by nobody else. But of course, it's a lot to ask for."<sup>7</sup> Hazel signaled her sense of the importance of this talk by reprinting it in her anthology *Civil to Strangers and Other Writings*, the only non-fiction she included, and by giving her biography of Pym the title *A Lot to Ask* (1990). Although Hazel herself had written television reviews for *Stage & Television Today*, book-length publication began only with her literary executorship of Pym's works. In the ten years after Pym died in 1980, Hazel saw *A Few Green Leaves* (1980) through the press posthumously, issued the rejected novel *An Unsuitable Attachment* (1982), and then from the archives produced *Crampton Hodnet* (1985) and *An Academic Question* (1986), as well as *Civil to Strangers* (1987). She also collaborated with Hilary Walton on an edition of Pym's diaries and letters, *A Very Private Eye* (1984), brought out the biography of Pym (1990), and published in 1989 the first of her 21 cosy detective novels featuring Sheila Malory of Taviscombe, the fictional version of Minehead that she and Pym had invented for *No Fond Return of Love*. In addition, by the June of 1990, she had also drafted her second novel, *The Cruellest Month*, and by August of that year started the third, *The Shortest Journey*. And though it was to be published much later, in 1992 Hazel also began *My Dear Charlotte*, a wonderful mystery novel written in the style of Jane Austen's letters. Amazing productivity and variety!

During the ten or twelve years following Pym's death, then, Hazel developed several voices, first just in order to be Pym's literary executor. She needed an editorial voice to write the biographical pages that introduced the selections chosen for *A Very Private Eye*. So far perhaps we can say that Hazel was simply editing Pym. But it was very challenging editorial work. Whereas *Crampton Hodnet* could be published "with some very minor cuts,"<sup>8</sup> to issue *An Academic Question* Hazel had to deal with two extant versions of what Pym had called her academic novel. Hazel chose to use the first of these, completed in 1971, and the surviving manuscripts show that in order to produce a coherent story Hazel had to cut some parts and to incorporate the end of the second version. To do so required her to write some sentences in Pym's style. She told me that she had to do far more of that for *Civil to Strangers* because the manuscripts were so much less complete. After all, Hazel was working with writings dating from the 30s and the war, so she had to decide what segments might be enjoyed by Pym's large audience and then put them into publishable form, tying together parts that Pym had left undeveloped. In short, Hazel had to ventriloquize Pym's own voice.

What made it possible for Hazel to ventriloquize Pym so well? Of course sheer talent is required. Hazel's son Tom has it too, having begun his literary career by writing two novels in the style of E. F. Benson—two new Lucia books for fans! And Hazel's close friendship with Pym, their shared tastes and humor, their daily sharing of jokes at work, and Hazel's experience of reading some of the novels in manuscript during Pym's lifetime certainly helped. But I would argue that Pym's and Hazel's individual voices grew out of similar circumstances. Both began writing as teenagers, imitating the styles of admired published authors, in ways that uncannily resemble one another, though of course they had not yet met. Pym wrote *Young Men in Fancy Dress* at sixteen, imitating the manner and subject of Aldous Huxley's *Crome Yellow*, and thus as she put it, writing "about a group of 'Bohemians'—I must

put that word in quotes—who were, in my view, young men living in Chelsea, a district of which I knew nothing at that time.” In “Finding a Voice,” Pym detected nothing of her mature style there “except that the Bohemian young men aren’t taken entirely seriously, and that there’s a lot of detail—clothes, makes of car, golf, and drinks.”<sup>9</sup>

Hazel, aged fifteen at King Edward’s School in March 1944, had a parallel encounter with a distinctive voice, but not in writing. She heard the schoolboy Kenneth Tynan, sixteen years old and a future drama critic, participate in the “Annual Joint Debate with the girls’ school” in which he proposed the motion, “Happiness is the highest aim of man,” and “claimed that he reveled in the luxury of sensual pleasure and concluded that it was better to have loafed and lost than never to have loafed at all.” A male friend noted, “Tynan was at his very best today; brilliantly wrong.”<sup>10</sup> It is easy to imagine that Hazel Young and her school friend Barbara Siggs were galvanized by this astonishing performance. Certainly they began a novel based on Tynan immediately afterward, no doubt spurred on by the history mistress’s having told them that he had an “unsavoury reputation”!<sup>11</sup> They apparently collaborated sometimes in the Kardomah coffee shop in central Birmingham and met Tynan there that spring. Over a year later, in August 1945, he replied at length to a questionnaire about himself that they had sent him, which suggests that they were still at work on their novel.<sup>12</sup>

Unfortunately, nothing of that novel survives—in which I am sure, as in Pym’s teenage effort, the “young men” were not “taken entirely seriously.” But in early 1945, when Hazel was just sixteen years old, the two school-girls had also written their first letter to a famous drama critic, James Agate, whom they clearly admired enormously. Surprisingly, they received replies from Agate—who actually printed and replied to letters from many unknowns, all of whom obviously felt authorized to write to him. Because Agate published excerpts from four of Hazel and Barbara’s letters with one of his answers in his yearly autobiography, we can actually see what Hazel’s youthful voice was like before she met Pym—and the parallels are remarkable—or remarkably fine, as a comic Pym character might say.

The important excerpt is below. Because Hazel Young and Barbara Siggs wrote jointly, it would be impossible to tease out their different voices, if they had not in this one of their letters to Agate written “descriptions of each other.” As you can see, Hazel gives herself away as sole author of Barbara’s portrait when she says “by which I do not mean skinny.” She is light and amusing—see the gloriously anticlimactic “Her mouth is normal.” She puts “commingling” in quotation marks, indicating her own self-conscious sense that she has chosen a fancy or unusual word. But most important, in seven lines she manages a quotation from Hamlet’s description of Horatio plus three allusions: to Louise de Quérouaille, one of the mistresses of Charles II, to the contemporary diarist John Evelyn who described that “baby face,”<sup>13</sup> and to the first Duchess of Marlborough. All these allusions and quotations remind us of the youthful and some aspects of the more mature Pym, in love with our greater English poets.

By the way, would you be interested in what we look like, because here are descriptions of each other. If you are not interested, skip it! BARBARA is medium height and slim, by which I do not mean skinny. She has the shape of face which Louise de Quérouaille should have had to justify the description “baby-faced.” Her eyes are large and slate-grey set under thick dark brows. Her nose is snub. Her mouth is normal. Her crowning glory, and for once the title is justified, is red—not that harsh scarlet which one sees so often nowadays but a gentle “commingling” of every red shade that ever was with a slight bias towards fair. In fact, in appearance she greatly resembles Sarah Churchill, first Duchess of Marlborough. In temperament she is very much like Horatio, and not a “pipe for fortune’s fingers.” HAZEL is medium height and build. Her face is an ordinary shape. Her eyes are hazel and fairly deep-set, and they

twinkle! Her mouth is thin-lipped and flexible. Her nose is long and straight. Her hair is light brown and curly. She is a feminine version of John Gielgud.<sup>14</sup>

The other passages that Agate quotes from the letters of Hazel Young and Barbara Siggs are full of more jokes about themselves as well as quotations and allusions that match the voice that we see in the above and may have been largely supplied by Hazel: I've added a few examples. They address themselves to Agate's intellect as well as to his sense of humor—the latter when they recommend themselves as “We're awfully good at looking happily vacant”<sup>15</sup> or when they write “Actually if we did meet any of you great people we would probably stand gaping and tongue-tied, looking like soulful plaice!”<sup>16</sup> I love the phrases “happily vacant” and “soulful plaice.” The girls work hard at imitating Agate's allusive style, so that they can appear worthy of him—and he apparently laps it up. In their first letter they introduce themselves as possible assistants but point out that they can't really type well or take shorthand—but at least they won't irritate him (they don't wear scent) and they “would endure draughts gladly” and “would be prepared to cope with allusions to almost anything from Herodotus to Popocatepetl.”<sup>17</sup> This last comment I feel utterly sure emanates from Hazel, whose voice so cheerfully throws out allusions. Agate replies thus to Hazel and Barbara's first letter:

Now one day, when he [Horace Walpole] had become an extremely old and highly curmudgeonly old gentleman, Horace met two young women called Mary and Agnes Berry, who were about the age of his great-nieces. They had come to live with their widowed father near Strawberry Hill, and presently Walpole invited them to view his private printing-press. Although he was fifty years older than they were, the two girls conceived an affection for him which lasted until his death. After which they “cherished and embellished” his memory until they died, both in 1852. But there is this difference between Walpole and me. In his will he left the young ladies £4000 apiece: I shall not be able to leave you anything. I should require more cherishing and embellishing than he did. He wanted to marry Mary Berry. I don't want to marry either of you. However I am persuaded that you are charming children...<sup>18</sup>

The girls respond:

Our usually so fluent pens are frozen by your so great kindness that we can only say, simply and very sincerely, “Thank you.”

Our reactions to your letter were varied. Barbara rushed from room to room in a state of wild excitement (comparable only to the Polovtsian Dances from Prince Igor). Hazel, who received her letter in the early morning and was thus still in bed, bounced up and down so much that she broke a spring (comparable only to Donald Wolfit in Volpone).

We are prepared to “cherish and embellish” you as and when required. Perhaps, by riveting, when we are thirty-five (“the ideal age for a woman”) we will have amassed about £4000 apiece and will be able to start a fund for “The Cherishing and Embellishing of the Works and Person of James Agate.”

We had had the temerity to think of adopting you as an honorary uncle—or great-uncle (shade of our now-even-more-beloved Horace Walpole!). May we now have that very great honour? (N.B. This should be read in a very deep voice—like the Rev. Chasuble—and if this reads like Stephen Leacock we can't help it.) We hope that you will excuse our “forwardness,” and may we as dutiful “great-nieces” inquire solicitously about your health? We have been wanting to do this before, but we did not know whether it was “quite nice.”...<sup>19</sup>

We can certainly see parallels between these schoolgirls' ability to make fun of themselves while in teenage pursuit of an admired but distant male and Barbara Pym's sense of being intoxicated by literature and by young men when she arrived at Oxford. And in the editorial offices of the Africa Institute, enjoying that wonderful daily experience of commenting and sympathizing while working together, they were twin literary souls. They also shared

pleasure in frivolity—”frivolous” was one of Hazel’s most positive adjectives—and what Pym called “small blameless pleasures,” as Hazel always quoted.<sup>20</sup> Hazel was thus the perfect choice to carry out Barbara’s wishes after her death and to make decisions about publication, able to summon and ventriloquize Pym’s voice in making the incomplete works accessible to readers. But Hazel also had to find a different voice in order to write the biography—knowledgeable, sympathetic, aware, and unobtrusive, not overemphasizing Hazel’s own close friendship with Pym, and yet offering some degree of intimacy. Hazel wrote to me in August 1988, “I did manage to get down on paper about five pages of *something* on the *Life* but I’m still groping for a *style*—when that comes it will all flow more easily, I hope.” In fact she sensibly relied a great deal on Pym’s own voice, quoting extensively from the diaries and letters.

We can all be grateful that Hazel’s work kept Pym’s name before the public for more than ten years after her death, that is, beyond the three years that Pym lived past her rediscovery. Given how quickly and easily women writers can be forgotten once they die, Hazel’s issuing of so much Pym material not only sustained Pym’s literary reputation during this time but established Pym’s stature as a novelist whose work spanned five decades, from the thirties through the seventies. The first conference on Pym took place in 1986, during the decade that Hazel was editing Pym, though the Society wasn’t founded until 1994. The academic Pym industry got off to an impressive start with at least nine full-length books between 1985 and 1989, after the appearance of *A Very Private Eye*. I am convinced that all Hazel’s work, more than enough to grant her tenure if she had by some evil chance been employed in an American university, prepared Hazel to find her own voice as a detective novelist.

Hazel followed up her announcement of having produced five pages toward the biography and wishing for a “*style*” with a sentence that suggests how much easier it was to write the detective novels, where she was not groping for a voice: “And then, again, I long to get on with my new detective novel (I’ve just had the proof of the first one).” That first novel, *Gone Away*, was published about six months later in early 1989, but the second, *The Cruellest Month*, did not come out until 1991, after the biography, though she finished the manuscript before June 1990, and by August 1992 had started her third, *The Shortest Journey*. What Hazel was writing was the so-called “cosy” mystery, set in a small middle-class community which is restored to normalcy at the end when the criminal is discovered. In cosies, an amateur detective works alongside or even independent of the police, and violence and sexuality, though present, are not emphasized. Agatha Christie’s Miss Marple novels are the most familiar exemplars of the genre. Right away it’s possible to see that Hazel’s earlier work on imitating Barbara Pym’s voice might be useful in creating a voice of her own for the cosies. Clearly, a Barbara Pym novel and a cosy share some qualities—a comic focus on and intense curiosity about the lives of people who live in small communities, who know one another with varying degrees of intimacy and domesticity, and who share communal concerns, from church in a Pym novel to women’s volunteering in Hazel’s *Taviscombe*, where Sheila lives, is (as mentioned) the town in which Dulcie and Viola pursue their Forbes research in *No Fond Return of Love*. Some of Hazel’s characters, like Pym’s, draw on figures of English literature—we have Sheila **Malory**, after all, as well as perhaps Charles **Richardson** and Lee **Montgomery** just in her first novel, and more later. But though I grant these parallels, and comparable irony and amusement, I think that in writing her first novels Hazel consciously rebelled against some aspects of the Pym voice, in order to develop her own—and in order to work out her relation to a very different genre than the version of domestic comedy that Pym chose. A murder, after all, would not fit into a Pym novel at all.

In *Gone Away*, Hazel’s first novel, her first-person narrator Sheila Malory is far less tentative than Pym’s most well-known first-person narrators Mildred Lathbury and Wilmet Forsyth, who tend to turn on themselves

when critical of others. The tone of this novel is sharper, harder than we usually find in Pym. Sheila is often annoyed by others, even if she swallows her irritation and resentment.<sup>21</sup> She immediately takes a satisfied dislike to Lee Montgomery, who disappears at the end of the first chapter and is found a victim by Chapter Four, so I've offered only a mild spoiler here. Sheila gets involved in the mystery because Charles asks her to find Lee when she disappears. Victims in cosies are often unlikeable, so that readers can rejoice when they are found dead, but Sheila also rises to loathing twice, once of housework ("I loathe housework and am delighted to find any excuse to turn my back on it" [160]), and more seriously toward Mrs. Dudley, her friend Rosemary's mother: "Mrs Dudley was the sort of elderly woman I absolutely loathe. She had been extremely good-looking in her youth, and in old age still seemed to care only for her appearance. She was self-centred, snobbish and difficult and made poor Rosemary's life pretty hellish at times" (35). But despite such unpleasant females, women in this novel are generally friendly and mutually supportive, if only because they are engaged in good works together—and even though they may dragoon one another into taking on more responsibility.

I don't mean to imply complete absence of echoes of Pym. That would be impossible, given the kind of community Hazel has chosen to describe in *Gone Away* and given how much Sheila's intense curiosity about and humor and observation of others resemble that of many Pym characters. Just in the first chapter we hear Sheila noting that Charles kept her "up to date with all his girl-friends"—why? "Since I had been his first love in those far-off school days, I might be supposed to lend a sympathetic ear to his romantic entanglements" (6). Those who suppose so are men, of course, who take women's concern for granted and their due in many Pym novels. Similarly, having described all her committees and jumble sales and coffee mornings, and her cooking and cleaning for her son when home from university, Sheila (and behind her, Hazel) nods to Pym with this wry line, "It will be seen, then, that I lead what might be called a full life" (10).

Despite momentary resemblances, however, Sheila is a detective in a cosy mystery novel, not a Pym character. She has to suspect even her friends of terrible crimes. She must be curious and speculative about everyone as well as relentless in her pursuit of truth once she learns of a suspicious death, yet compassionate toward those whose suffering she uncovers—including that of the perpetrator. Accordingly Hazel spends a good deal of time in this first novel very properly satisfying the conventions of the detective novel. There is more narrative than she will later include and less dialogue: Hazel found writing dialogue easy and tended to call it filler or even cheating, but those I know who love her novels like the chat best of all. She wholly mastered the art of allowing characters to reveal themselves in their talk, and the conversations are usually wonderfully comic, balancing Sheila's intense curiosity against, for instance, Mrs. Dudley's snobbery and self-importance. As seldom happens later, Sheila actually discusses possible motives and means with Roger Eliot, a police inspector—whose literary last name we don't learn until the fourth novel: another sign of a close-knit community. Yet Roger, though a policeman, is also linked to Sheila as the partner of Rosemary's daughter—everyone knows everyone else. Evidence is sought: when Sheila does visit a rental property, hoping to confirm a relationship between the corrupt councilor who owns it and the victim, her own lipstick rolls off the table and out of sight on the uneven floor, so that when seeking it Sheila also finds Lee's navy Elizabeth Arden eye-liner. (Hazel told me that she was especially proud of this moment.) Such domestic touches are typical of cosies, though managed particularly well. But Hazel also takes advantage of the older tradition of detective fiction, in which the setting—the urban jungle of Los Angeles or Paris, the corruption and decay of Venice—echoes crimes. In *Gone Away*, before the discovery of the body, Sheila has a powerful childhood memory of being by herself on a secluded beach and finding a wild goat's dead body: "In the one look that I had taken before I turned, shuddering, away, I had seen that its creamy fawn coat was matted with blood and that the scavenging birds had already begun their work" (48-9). Hazel is really good at strong, evocative description,

especially of incursions like these of the natural world, sometimes beautiful and restorative, and sometimes fierce and frightening.

Despite a police presence, too, the novel seems as though it will end in the best tradition of the lone detective, who reaches the answer without police help. At the end, having reached her conclusion, Sheila goes alone to someone whom she thinks is a witness to demand confirmation of Sheila's deductions. But not in that tradition, Sheila finds practically in the last pages that she is confronting the actual murderer, who confesses and will make everything easy by committing suicide—and in a remarkably cosy moment, confides the care of a pet dog to Sheila. The last words of the novel find Sheila comforting the dog in her car with the phrase “everything will be all right.” She probably had that line in mind early on—generally, Hazel had the last line of her novels in her head before she started writing, though she always claimed that she never knew what would come between the start and the end. For instance, while working on *Uncertain Death*, she “just got Sheila in a coach on a Garden Club outing to Lambourne Manor with her friend Rosemary and I don't quite know why she's there or what she'll find out on the way. So I'll take a little time out to enjoy myself by writing to you.”<sup>22</sup> But once she finished her first novel, she had a response that every author dreams of. Having taken *Gone Away* to Macmillan on a Tuesday,

The following SUNDAY I had a telephone call from Hilary Hale (the wife of my James Hale [Hazel's agent] & the head of their vast and prestigious detective fiction department) at home! She said she loved it & wanted to publish it (contract in the post) & would I do a sequel, with the same heroine, set in Oxford (the 1<sup>st</sup> one was set in Minehead & Exmoor). In fact, she wants a whole Series! So *aren't* I lucky. Also, she seems to think it will be published in the U.S.<sup>23</sup>

An unfortunate parallel between Pym and Hazel was that after she had published thirteen crime novels with Macmillan, they dropped her (as they did other mid-list writers)—but very soon Allison and Busby were very glad to take her on and were much more helpful and appreciative. Similarly, when she could not get *My Dear Charlotte* accepted in the UK, it was welcomed by Coffeetown Press in Seattle, Washington, managed by a fellow cat lover who became a valued friend; Coffeetown has republished a number of Hazel's novels.

Hazel's next two novels were more unconventional as cosies than *Gone Away*: *The Cruellest Month* is a psychological study of the victim as well as of Sheila, and *The Shortest Journey* was so unconventional that her American publisher delayed publication, wishing to establish first a more predictable track record. Hazel would go on to write eighteen more mystery novels after these first three, having found a voice distinct from Pym's though sharing her comic vision and love of domestic detail. Not every sentence from Hazel's novels would pass Pym's test and be immediately recognizable as hers, though some would. Any sentence about being foolish about animals or perhaps even those about being deeply consoled by them, any sentence praising ironing (Hazel herself actually liked to iron), would be hard to assign to anyone else. But I am prepared to say that certainly every chapter as well as most paragraphs contain clear evidence of Hazel's distinct voice as Sheila Malory, observant with an eye for detail, domestic, intensely curious, kind, compassionate, highly aware of people's foibles and her own, sympathetic, ironic, cheerful and ordinarily lighthearted, but disguising irritation under politeness, with a wonderful ear for dialogue and for the ways people reveal themselves through it, amused, amusing—all working, I feel, toward the deepest possible appreciation and enjoyment of the everyday. I opened *The Cruellest Month* at random to test this observation and found this very typical, impeccably Hazel paragraph:

Betty and I shared a passion for old British films of the forties and fifties and as we sat watching the black and white images of half-forgotten actors on the screen I suddenly felt a great wave of affection for her. In spite of all her new and (to me) alien interests, she was still one of my oldest and dearest



friends, someone I was comfortable with, who would pick up my allusions and references, and with whom I shared so many memories” (49).

Affection, allusions, references, memories, and “small blameless pleasures.” Those who know Hazel will recognize her in this passage too—for though she always said Sheila was nicer, in fact Hazel shared the best qualities of Sheila and much more.

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<sup>2</sup> Hazel Holt, *A Lot to Ask* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 179.

<sup>3</sup> Letter of 1 January 1987.

<sup>4</sup> Letter of 4 July 1992.

<sup>5</sup> Letter of 29 September 1992.

<sup>6</sup> Letter of 1 January 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Pym, “Finding a Voice” (1978), rpt. *Civil to Strangers and Other Writings*, ed. Hazel Holt (New York: Dutton, 1987), p. 388.

<sup>8</sup> Letter of 8 August 1984.

<sup>9</sup> *Civil to Strangers*, 382.

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth Tynan, *Letters*, ed. Kathleen Tynan, pref. Leon Wieseltier (New York: Random House, 1994), p. 43 and n.

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Tynan, *The Life of Kenneth Tynan* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1987), pp. 68, 67.

<sup>12</sup> See Tynan, *Letters*, pp. 85-7.

<sup>13</sup> See entry for 4 Nov. 1670: “I now also saw that famous beauty, but in my opinion of a childish, simple, and baby face, Mademoiselle Querouaille, lately Maid of Honor to Madame, and now to be so to the Queen.” From Project Gutenberg, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, ed. William Bray, vol. 2.

<sup>14</sup> From the third letter printed, pp. 72-3, dated 5 April 1946 in error for 1945.

<sup>15</sup> Ego 8, p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Ego 8, p.51.

<sup>17</sup> Ego 8, p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> Excerpt from Agate’s undated reply to Hazel Young’s and Barbara Siggs’ first letter, pp. 42-3.

<sup>19</sup> From the second printed letter of Barbara Siggs and Hazel Young responding to Agate, 1 March 1945, pp. 50-51.

<sup>20</sup> Hazel used this phrase often, evoking it as a mantra almost. It is to be found at the end of her introduction to the 2011 paperback edition of *Civil to Strangers* (Virago), p. xii: “It would seem that we are still glad to turn to the author who advocated small, blameless pleasures, to provide us with good books for a bad day.”

<sup>21</sup> Hazel Holt, *Gone Away* (London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 63, 112. All subsequent citations are made in parenthesis to this edition.

<sup>22</sup> Letter of 13 October 1991.

<sup>23</sup> Letter of 24 March 1988.