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GREEN LEAVES

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THE BARBARA PYM SOCIETY OF NORTH AMERICA 2001 CONFERENCE

The third annual conference of the Barbara Pym Society of North America was held, as last year, in the grand surroundings of the Austin Hall of Harvard Law School. Once again Ellen Miller had provided a splendid setting and delicious food, and her chosen speakers too regaled us with an experience both splendid and delicious.

Quartet in Autumn

The first to speak was **Anne Pilgrim,** Professor of English at York University, Canada. Her subject was 'Constructing *Quartet in Autumn*', and this proved to be a fascinating account of the growth of the novel as evidenced by the surviving manuscripts. Professor Pilgrim pointed out the relationship between the composition and the publication of the novels. As in the case of Jane Austen, they were by no means closely linked. Barbara Pym continued to write during the wilderness years.

Quartet in Autumn is a masterpiece of psychological penetration and humour. It is also a marvel in terms of its structure and details. How did Barbara Pym build this structure? The study of her MSS. in the Bodleian Library is a fascinating pursuit.

The materials that she used were a school exercise book, two W.H. Smith spiral bound notebooks, nine notebooks that would fit into her handbag, two hundred and twenty-three typescript pages, and letters. A great miscellany of materials was also used for notes and drafts. The scene in the office at the beginning of the novel, for instance, was written on a Sainsbury's bill. Barbara Pym also used discarded carbons from her job, and these of course help to provide dates of composition. Those eventful but rather bleak years are reflected in the novel. She took her notebook with her into hospital and hospice.

May 1971 saw the germ of the novel with a confessional note: 'One falls in love with one's surgeon'. This then became the basis of the fictional slightly deranged spinster. Events in Barbara Pym's life went straight into the novel: for example, life and work in London, travelling on the Underground. These were the raw materials, but Barbara Pym had to shape them, to construct a plot, to imagine the characters, the crabby people in the office. Barabara Pym talks to herself in the notebooks. She pictures the race to the grave between man and woman, developing notions for the plot, which moves to the idea of four people, of whom the two women retire, with contrasting lifestyles. Barbara Pym writes to herself about the order of events.

Anne Pilgrim

Barbara Pym listed twenty possible titles, of which six had the word solitude or solitary in them. Several contain the number four. One idea was 'Sinking fires', based on W.S. Landor's poem. Another was 'The embrace of death'. It is a pessimistic view of ageing. Ideas of elegy, winter, darkness and autumn recur, but right at the end there is optimism and empowerment. The last paragraph was written by hand on the typescript. Perhaps it was the result of Barbara Pym's happiness in retirement.

There are only twelve characters in this novel, but originally there were more, and more were given names. Barbara Pym also hesitated over the names of the quartet. In the notebooks she drew up C.V.s for Marcia and Letty, though in the novel Marcia's C.V. does not feature very much, and her life remains ambiguous. It must also be remembered that Letty's life is not an autobiography of Barbara Pym. Letty is an independent character.

Barbara Pym was constantly polishing her style, adding and deleting. 'Too many qualifying clauses', she notes, and again 'Prune, reduce, brighten'. She even notes how many times she has mentioned Marcia's milk-bottles. When Barbara Pym writes about Letty listening to the radio and dreaming that she was back in a distant hot summer, she notes 'Make the whole less factual', and 'Do we want all these tedious details?'

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It was not the *TLS* mention that gave Barbara Pym the confidence to submit the novel to Macmillan. She had already done so, but they had found the novel too short. Barbara Pym accordingly added passages like, for example, the memorial service, but these were fully integrated, and do not read like additions.

Barbara Pym originally thought of calling the novel 'Four point turn'. 'Quartet in Autumn' may have been suggested by the publisher. In any case, the novel was written over many years, with little hope of publication. She wrote it alone, without any consultation. Modern novels are the product of team-work between writer and editors. What extraordinary courage Barbara Pym must have had!

Jan Fergus, Professor of English at Lehigh University, then gave a most lively and entertaining talk, in the course of which the audience became so enthusiastic that Professor Fergus had some difficulty in keeping order! She revealed that as a kind of a lark she had decided to teach a one-credit course on Barbara Pym, a writer of whom her students had never even heard, and she chose *Quartet in Autumn*. Lehigh is a private university, so the students tended to be upper-middle class. They were drawn from many different disciplines. She had wondered how it would go with young people, but she need not have worried. Barbara Pym's humour and powers of observation carried the day.

The first paragraph of the novel is brilliant, so she had asked her class to analyse it sentence by sentence. She then asked the conference attendees to do the same. This was great fun, and there were many intelligent observations made. Professor Fergus said that she does not remember anything her students said, but that they too really enjoyed it. They realised that we move from comic to poignant as the novel develops. However narrow the choices that the characters have they are still there. One student spoke of 'A drab life vividly lived'. The students found it frustrating that people could find happiness in greyness.

Jan Fergus

What did the students remember? Marcia's cans – the students felt they knew the characters well just through the details. They got into the characters' minds. Comical and cynical at the same time, Barbara Pym had inspired them, but she had given them details, not structure.

Professor Fergus then asked the students to write a story projecting themselves into the future – into late middle age. It was surprising how much the students took from Barbara Pym in their own writing.

Gentlewomen

Frauke Lenckos then spoke on "There are Ladies present: 'Gentlewomen' in the Novels of Barbara Pym". In *Some Tame Gazelle*, when Belinda is ill in bed, she and her sister read *The Gentlewoman*, a magazine lent to them by Connie, former companion to a Lady residing in Belgrave Square. Connie is upper-middle class, and is married from her former employer's Belgravia house.

When *Some Tame Gazelle* opens, however, Connie is a decayed gentlewoman, wearing cast-off clothes, and thought a bit potty. She comes of a good family, but has fallen on hard times. Women lacked means for their mature years if they remained unmarried. Most such women are found in the novels written before the gap.

Among younger gentlewomen are Jessie Morrow in *Crampton Hodnet*. She had no privacy in her employer's house, but she has great resources of humour. She refuses to make a loveless marriage. She has the gift of finding joy in simple things. By *Jane and Prudence* times are changing. The second Jessie has stooped to conquer. She has married to avoid genteel poverty in old age.

The First World War left many spinsters because of the casualties. After the Second World War, increased taxation reduced the number of people (including gentlewomen) whom the rich could employ. Such women had to look elsewhere. The Distressed Gentlefolks Aid Association (founded in 1897) and similar bodies existed to look after them. Mildred Lathbury, indeed, works for such an organisation – she might need it one day herself. Characters in the novels send clothes to help these bodies. Private giving is found in the novels, presents from richer women. But Barbara Pym's women do not just take charity, they take jobs, or start their own tearooms or cafés. Barbara Pym's novels mirror social history accurately.

Gentlewomen also took university courses to fit themselves for work. In the first half of the 20th century, however, opportunites were limited. Excellent women are not successes in material terms, but they lead lives of service and duty. They are not bitter because they see that they are privileged. Decency is rewarded by good marriages. Generous and forbearing, they are gentlewomen in the true sense. It is a long tradition, going back to the 17th century, the art of being an English gentlewoman. The hallmarks are grace, virtue, education, pleasing behaviour, and reputation.

Barbara Pym shares the ideals of the traditional gentlewoman although middle-class herself. Her women willingly shoulder household duties, and find contentment in their domestic skills. Women can, however, be desired only for their furniture, or as an appropriate, even if not beautiful, adornment of the home. They must always look absolutely right.

Ianthe wants to cherish and care for somebody rather then remaining single. It is harder to be a spinster as the century advances. Nevertheless, the life of a spinster can be worthwhile.

In the later novels (*Quartet in Autumn* onwards) the mention of gentlewomen occurs no more. The *Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and other novels of that time had attacked the spinster-gentlewoman as dangerous. Barbara Pym rallies her splendid gentlewomen to rebut this – especially Harriet and Belinda Bede. The best gentlewomen give distinction to our world, with their good manners, education, self-reliance, and well-earned independence. The younger women, however, can not achieve a life like theirs. The time has passed.

Pym's Desert Island Discs

Father **Gabriel Myers** had had the brilliant idea of digging out the recording of 'Desert Island Discs' which Barbara Pym had made on 29th July 1978, shortly after *The Sweet Dove Died* was published. Father Gabriel quoted Professor Mainwaring on

light-hearted music (Oh, oh, Antonio!), then played Barbara Pym's first choice, the invigorating and cheerful Baron Ochs Waltz from Der Rosenkavalier. Barbara Pym was then heard saying that she would sing a lot on the island, but there was no scheme to her choice. This was followed by the piano played brilliantly in Chopin's Variations on 'Give me your hand' from Mozart's Don Giovanni. Father Gabriel remarked that this brought to mind Harriet Bede, who looked splendid at the piano, but then jangled forth 'The Harmonious Blacksmith'.

Roy Plomley asked Barbara Pym 'Were you a bookish girl?' 'I suppose so', said Barbara Pym, 'I loved Edgar Wallace'. The first good writer she read was Aldous Huxley: she loved his *Chrome Yellow*. She wrote and finished a novel at sixteen. When she went to Oxford she had it in mind to be a writer, but did no writing at Oxford. On coming down, she did try to write a novel. Then came the War, and the Wrens. She went to Naples as a censor. While there she went to the San Carlo and heard Tosca, her favourite opera. Father Gabriel pointed out that Leonora was taken to Tosca by Humphrey, and then played the third record, Maria Callas singing 'Vissi d'arte' from Tosca.

Barbara Pym said that after the War she found herself in London, having been demobbed in 1946. She had a job at the International African Institute, doing editorial work. She started writing again in 1948. Her first novel had been written some time before, but was rewritten. It was accepted straight away. After that there was a novel every two years. The characters were middle-class, educated people with unexciting lives. The Church played a large part, more than in any other novelist.

Philip Larkin's poem, 'An Arundel Tomb', read by himself, followed. Father Gabriel said that Larkin wrote to her: 'You spoke sensibly and amusingly'. He was flattered that she chose his poem, but couldn't bear his tedious voice slogging on. The tomb is in Chichester Cathedral, though the joined hands are a Victorian addition. It symbolises the struggle between love and mortality.

Barbara Pym went on to say that then something came unstuck. In 1973 her publisher said he did not want her seventh novel, he thought it unsaleable. She went on writing. She didn't change her style. She adopted a man's name but still her novels did not sell. She began to feel retired. This lasted for fifteen to sixteen years. Then came the 75th anniversary of the *TLS*, when critics and writers were asked to listed underrated and overrrated writers. By luck she had a novel with a publisher. The manuscript was *Quartet in Autumn*, a novel inspired by the verge of retirement. Then followed Barbara Pym's choice number five, 'a splendid organ piece to drown out a thunderstorm', Messiaen's 'Les Enfants de Dieu, La Nativité du Seigneur'. Father Gabriel said that this work is heard at Christmas in *A Few Green Leaves*.

Barbara Pym went on to say that she was lucky – *Quartet* was listed for the Booker Prize. Her new novel was *The Sweet Dove Died*. Roy Plomley remarked that here she was in the 70s stream, more modern. It concerned an older woman and a younger man. Barbara Pym said she hadn't abandoned the novels of the neglected years. She had a novel on the stocks, but much revision was needed. She said that she was not as disciplined as she ought to be. She wrote eight-hundred words a morning. She had always kept notebooks.

Father Gabriel introduced Barbara Pym's sixth choice by saying that she had shared with Hilary a love of Greece and Greek songs. She had wanted a Greek song to remind her of her first visit, and chose 'Sto Perigiali' by Mikis Theodorakis.

Roy Plomley asked how she would survive on a desert island. Barbara Pym said that she was fond of cooking, sewing and baking. She was not a bad gardener, and expected that she'd contrive a shelter of leaves and branches. She would not try to escape, she was frighteded of the sea.

Eleonore Biber, Barbara Schmoczer and Kathy Ackley

Barbara Pym's seventh choice was Johann Strauss's 'Czardas' from 'Fledermaus'. It would remind her of Old Vienna, though she had never been there. Father Gabriel reminded the audience that Jessie Morrow hears on the wireless a sinful warmth, while Mrs Wilmot asks 'Was it very lovely in Budapest?' He went on to say of Barbara Pym's last choice, 'if she were marooned over Christmas', Christina Rossetti's 'In the Bleak Midwinter', that this reminds us of Wilmot's Christmas and a heart-shaped box. It is a children's time, but now we see the problem of grown-up Christmasses. Father Gabriel thought that a bitter-sweet strain ran through Barbara Pym's choices.

Anglo-Catholicism

The next morning **Eleonore Biber** began the session with 'A Strong Smell of Incense: Aspects of Anglo-Catholicism in Pym's Novels'. In *A Glass of Blessings* all the details of an Anglo-Catholic church are rapidly established. Wilmot approves of mysterious dimness pierced by a red light. Catherine, however, thinks such a church must be Roman. Letty asks Mrs Pope about Edwin. 'We are not high enough for him – no incense.'

The expression High Church was first used at the end of the 17th century, but it had been a tradition since Elizabethan times. High Churchmanship was transformed by the Oxford Movement, who felt that the Church should not just be a department of government. It was led by Keble, Pusey and Newman. Barbara Pym was very interested in the Oxford Movement.

Anglo-Catholicism led to church-building in Gothic style with altars, rood-screens etc. Barbara Pym refers to the Gothic revival in *Excellent Women*, where she compares the bathroom to a church with stained glass. The decline of Anglo-Catholicism in the 70s is reflected in *Quartet in Autumn*, but it still has influence.

Each of Barbara Pym's novels mentions Anglo-Catholicism. She was always accurate on the subject of High Churchmanship. It was a pervasive background in her life as in her novels.

She does not seem to have been much influenced at Oxford. It began when she was in the Wrens and found an Anglo-Catholic church less dreary than the one provided by the Royal Navy. When she moved to London she found St Gabriel's right on her doorstep.

Barbara Pym and Robert Smith used to go on church crawls. Many London churches provided the setting for events in the novels. Anglo-Catholicism provided richness to someone observant and ironic. She was an expert on the different types of incense on offer – it is a leitmotiv.

Incense is regarded by Protestants as the most aggressive evidence of Romish practices. Belinda in *Some Tame Gazelle*

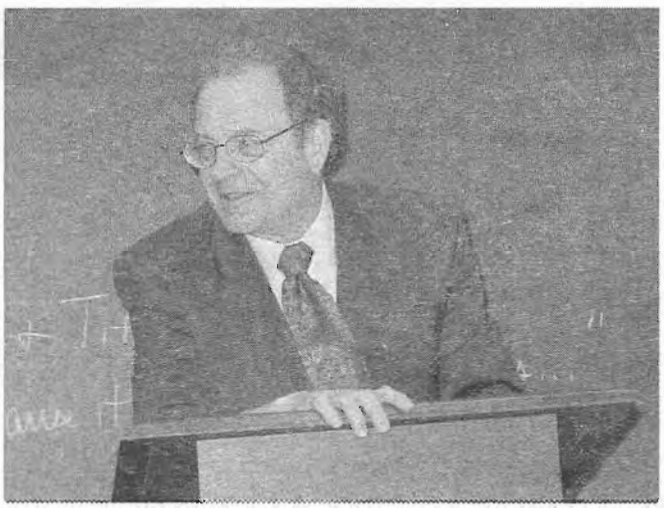
describes biretta, incense etc. with horror. Even her broadmindedness can not accept all of that. Archdeacon Hoccleve explains the dangers of Midnight Mass.

Going to Anglo-Catholic services such as Benediction is seen as very naughty for Protestants, which of course adds to the enjoyment. Confession, too, is seen as very Romish. Seeing it mentioned on the notice board can cause a shudder.

Not since Trollope had the Anglican Church been so extensively covered in literature. Barbara Pym's attitude was critical but affectionate. It was rich material for the study of human oddity. The Anglican Church and English Literature were the two most important things in Barbara Pym's life.

Some Tame Gazelle

Professor **Anthony Kaufman** then spoke on 'Love Like Bedsocks: *Some Tame Gazelle*'. *Some Tame Gazelle* reveals what is to follow in Barbara Pym's other novels. It is funny and serious. Barbara Pym was able to transmute her feelings of rejection into an ironic and comic novel. Her diaries are a kind of novel, 'my own story'. Early joy was crushed by rejection by Lorenzo. Hope was terminated, but a new purpose began, to tell her story in her novels. This was defence and aggression at once. catharsis and revenge. The destructive impulse is changed into



brilliant novels, and the centre of them all is 'the spinster'.

Some Tame Gazelle distances the story from herself. Henry is Archdeacon Hoccleve, Belinda is Barbara Pym, but the transformation is successful, even though this is the most personal of her novels. Lorenzo was the inspiration, but memory transformed pain into amusement.

Much changed during the creation of the novel. The 1950 version is radically different from the original drafts. When she starts she projects herself and her friends into middle-age.

Belinda in her 50s feels insignificant. She dwells in memory. She is the first of the excellent women, but she has immortal longings; she needs something to love. In Barbara Pym this is unique to women. Men need to be admired, not to be loved. Men are inadequate. Belinda is aware of Hoccleve's shortcomings, but her love for him is at the centre of her life. The need to love leads to great patience and forebearance, but not to love is to be mad.

Memory is transformed by current emotional needs, which falsify recollection. Barbara Pym revenges herself on Henry by turning him into an idle, pompous, egotistical wind-bag.

Awareness of death is a central preoccupation of the novel. Age ought to end the anxieties of youth, but it doesn't. They are people at the end of youth and possibility. Literature is inadequate to express the human situation; Hoccleve's quotations are absurd, and The *Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* is not as comforting as a hot drink. Young's *Night Thoughts* are quoted twice, in the churchyard and at the wedding; on each occasion they are quite inappropriate.

The hinge of the novel's plot is the entrance of two purposeful suitors, Mole and Grote. Belinda is afraid of change. Like Dr Johnson she thinks all change is bad. As the novel ends Belinda realises that she is happier than she has been for a long while, or content at least. The departure of the suitors is a relief. Love for selfish Harriet and for Hoccleve makes Belinda content – a life of service and resignation. In her novels Barbara Pym tells and retells 'her story'.

Tim Burnett

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CALENDAR

Barbara Pym Society

Annual Meeting and Conference:

Some Tame Gazelle

1 – 2 September 2001

St Hilda's College, Oxford

An Afternoon Visit

Barbara Pym

Judith hesitated outside the window of the flower shop and looked in. Everything was obviously much too expensive here, roses a shilling each, carnations ninepence and the only flowers within her means bunches of orange marigolds which grew like weeds on the rubbish heap at home, and tightly massed forget-me-nots which seemed unsuitable for the occasion. Inside the shop a girl was wiring some yellow roses on to a wreath, while another was showing spikes of delphinium to a languid-looking young man, who rejected each one as the girl took it out of the vase.

This was, of course, a fashionable part of London, so everything would be expensive. Judith's picture of herself arriving with a sheaf of hothouse flowers wrapped in cellophane would obviously have to be modified. She hoped she would find a cheaper shop or even a barrow as she went on, but she was nearly there now and there wasn't much time.

The search for suitable flowers had occupied her for the last half hour, so that she had temporarily forgotten her own misery. To be really in love for the first time at seventeen is more often than not an experience which has some misery in it, and although the feeling of living intensely was not altogether unpleasing to her, Judith was unhappy. Now as she walked she let the feeling come down on her like a dark cloud, so that she nearly missed seeing the old woman on the corner with the little flower stall.

There seemed to be a profusion of flowers here, such as one might see in an ordinary suburban garden like their own, Judith thought, except that there had seemed to be nothing out at this moment. It ought to be possible to get a nice bunch for five shillings.

'For your room, dear?' said the old woman, as Judith went up to her. 'I can see you're fond of beautiful things, You look like an art student to me.'

Judith smiled with pleasure. She was in fact taking an ordinary secretarial course, but her auburn hair, piled up into a knot on her head, and her carefully chosen 'casual' clothes made her look unconventional.

The old woman began to take some flowers out of the jars and tins in which they stood.

'I think you'd like a mixed bunch, dear,' she said. 'I wouldn't do it for everyone. You just tell me what you fancy.'

Judith enjoyed choosing a bright assortment of carnations, pinks, larkspurs, sweet peas and love-in-a-mist. It was not until the old woman was wrapping the flowers up that she remembered that they were not for herself.

'They're not for me,' she said. 'I'm going to see somebody in a nursing home.'

'Oh, dear.' The old woman's face was worried but her eyes brightened. 'Seriously ill?'

'Well, she's just had an operation, but they say she's got over it very well.'

'You never know with operations,' said the old woman. 'Nasty things. Pity, I thought the flowers were for you. A pretty girl like you ought to have flowers given you.'

It seemed a little inartistic after this to ask how much they were.

'Three shillings to *you*, dear,' said the old woman. 'And I hope you'll find your friend better – or is it a relative, perhaps?'

'No, she's really more a friend of my mother's,' said Judith. 'She lives next door to us.'

'Well, it ought to do her good to see a pretty young face,' said the old woman. 'Bye-bye, dear!'

Judith went on down the street. The nursing home was somewhere in the square she saw opening out in front of her. She now began to feel guilty at having paid only three shillings for the flowers and to wonder if they were really suitable to take to an invalid, especially one as elegant as Mrs. Lacey. She hadn't really wanted to come and see her at all. Ill people were an embarrassment and she couldn't imagine what she would have to say to her. She couldn't really talk about anything much, certainly not about. the one thing that was on her mind. Again the cloud of misery threatened, but now she had to start looking at the numbers on the houses and then she was on the doorstep in front of a red-painted door, which seemed a strange colour for a nursing home unless, of course, it was meant to be cheerful and welcoming, but that didn't seem right either.

Judith wondered which bell to ring, but she must have chosen the right one, for after a few seconds the door was opened by a smart-looking nurse in a mauve and white striped dress and becoming white cap. Briefly Judith saw herself as a nurse and then dismissed the idea – she was much too squeamish. A group of nurses had gathered in the hall and were going down to what must be a basement dining-room for their lunch. One was talking about a film she was going to see, another was grumbling about something she had been made to do that wasn't really her job.They did not seem to be at all noble, as Judith always imagined nurses must be.

'I wanted to see Mrs. Lacey,' she said diffidently. 'I hope I haven't come at a bad time? I mean, will she be having her lunch?'

'Oh, I expect she'll be just finishing,' said the nurse cheerfully. 'Do you know her room? It's number twenty-four.'

Judith walked up a fine curving staircase, thickly carpeted in dark, but somehow rather dingy, moss green. She had never been inside a nursing home before and kept expecting to hear strange sounds or to see terrible sights. But it was all very quiet; only when she had climbed to the second floor did she hear a faint tinkling sound of music, as if somebody had the wireless on.

Number twenty-four was at the end of a corridor. Judith paused outside the door, nerving herself to meet the invalid, and then knocked. Mrs. Lacey's voice, recognisable but rather weak and silvery, called to her to come in. Judith opened the door gingerly, half concealing the buneh of flowers behind her back.

'Ah, Judith dear, how lovely to see you!'

Mrs. Lacey was sitting up in a rather high bed, supported with many pillows, some of which had embroidered organdie covers. She seemed to be 'toying' with some invalidish-looking food, something pale in a creamy sauce with a few green peas and very small new potatoes.

'I'm sorry I've come in the middle of your lunch,' Judith began, 'I didn't know . . .'

'But it's so sweet of you to come at all. Do sit down, dear. I really don't think I can eat any more of this. What else have they given me?' She peered into a little dish of fruit salad, 'Tinned. Not very imaginative really, are they?'

Judith sat on the edge of a chair near the bed, holding the flowers awkwardly. 'I brought these for you,' she said, 'but

you seem to have so many.' She glanced round the room at the vases of roses, delphiniums, sweet peas and gypsophila, carnations and stocks. There hardly seemed room for any more flowers.

'My dear, how kind of you – mixed ones too. So much prettier and more natural-looking than the hothouse things.'

Judith glanced warily at the figure in the bed. Mrs. Lacey always made her feel big and clumsy, especially now, when she was hot and untidy after a morning at the secretarial college. The gay casual clothes seemed wrong here in contrast to Mrs. Lacey's mauve ruched chiffon bed jacket, her neat white curls and elegant little hands. Then, too, the bed was so high and the chair so low that Judith felt inferior in another way. She wondered desperately what she was going to talk about and how long she would have to stay.

'I do hope you're feeling better,' she said. 'Mother and Pamela send their love. Mother hopes to come and see you herself but she thought a lot of visitors might be tiring for you.'

'That was thoughtful of her, and of course one *doesn't* want all the nicest people to come at once, does one?'

Judith could think of no answer to make to this, but sat doggedly, glancing at the little table by the bed, interested to notice the kind of things people brought into a nursing home. It was to be expected that Mrs. Lacey would have a little cream-coloured portable wireless set, the latest novels in bright new paper jackets and the best of the women's magazines. There was also a white leaf-shaped dish of black grapes and a cut glass decanter of something that looked like sherry. Judith tried to imagine Mrs. Lacey sitting up in bed drinking sherry.

'I must have my little comforts,' Mrs. Lacey said in an amused tone, noticing the direction of Judith's glance. 'Does it seem very wicked to think of an old woman enjoying a glass of sherry in bed?'

Fortunately she did not wait for an answer but went on to ask Judith about herself, how she was liking her secretarial course, what she had been doing in her spare time, how things were in the suburb where they lived. 'The vicar has called,' she said, 'but he didn't give me quite all the gossip I wanted to hear. Tell me all about the summer sale, how it *really* went, and did Miss Holt get her way about having the teas outside in the end?'

Judith did her best and the conversation jogged on quite pleasantly. But all the time she was waiting for the question that would come eventually, as inevitably as the arrival of Mrs. Lacey's tea-tray in the well-ordered nursing home.

'And how,' Mrs. Lacey asked at last, looking down at her little pink pointed nails, 'is my grandson?'

'Oh, Nigel . . .' Judith hoped that she sounded more casual than she felt. 'I haven't really seen much of him lately,' she brought out with a rush.

'But I thought you'd have been doing so many things together – parties and picnics and sitting in coffee bars and going to the pictures and all the many things you young people seem able to do together nowadays – far more than we did, though of course we had our good times too.'

Judith turned her head away in embarrassment, thinking not of her own unhappiness but of the impossibility of imagining 'good times' with old Mr. Lacey. 'Nigel and I seem to have drifted apart,' she said, realising that her words must sound stilted, perhaps even a little comic.

'Drifted apart! Oh, dear .. .' Mrs. Lacey laughed her little silvery laugh so that, for a moment, Judith hated her. But in an instant she was serious again. 'I'm so sorry, my dear,' she said. 'But Nigel is very unsettled and so young for his age, after all, too young to know a good thing when he sees one,' she added kindly.

'I don't mind really,' Judith began, but then suddenly it came over her how much she did mind and, to her horror, she found herself telling Mrs. Lacey that she did, even going into embarrassing and shameful details, his dancing too much with somebody else at the tennis club dance, and his forgetting her birthday.

'Poor Judith, I know how it can hurt,' said Mrs. Lacey seriously. 'It's something that has to come in your life, you know, your first unhappiness in love. Perhaps nothing ever hurts quite so much as that.'

Judith mumbled something. She was dreadfully afraid that she might be going to cry.

'And in a way,' Mrs. Lacey went on, 'your telling me this seems to have brought us close together in some curious way. There's something the same about our positions – a young girl facing her first unhappy love affair and an old woman facing death.'

Judith started up in horror. Surely Mrs. Lacey didn't mean that she was going to die soon, perhaps here, in this nursing home? 'Everybody dies,' she said uncertainly.

'Yes, but we don't always know when we're going to die, do we? I think I'm rather lucky to know that, though it's a little frightening, too.' Mrs. Lacey drew the collar of her mauve chiffon bed-jacket a little closer round her neck.

'But do you mean you aren't going to get better?' Judith asked stupidly, for what else could she mean?

'No, I shan't get better. I know that now.'

'Did you. tell Nigel when he came to see you?'

'Nigel? Oh, no, he's such a child in so many things.'

'Oh, Mrs. Lacey, I don't know what to say. Perhaps you're imagining it all. Surely doctors don't tell people when they're going to die.' Judith was filled now with resentment and despair at her own inadequacy.

'Well, perhaps not in so many words, but people can use their intelligence,' Mrs. Lacey smiled.

Judith was glad that there was a tap on the door at this point. It was a nurse coming to take away Mrs. Lacey's lunch tray. 'I think we're ready for a rest now, aren't we?' she said, rearranging the patient's pillows.

'Yes, thank you, nurse. We've had a nice talk and we've got a secret between us, haven't we?' said Mrs. Lacey, looking at Judith with a little smile.

'Yes, we have. Good-bye!' Judith went out of the door and hurried down the dingy moss-carpeted stairs. There were no groans or frightening sounds coming from behind the closed doors, just people quietly facing death, she thought. Yet when she got out into the still sunny afternoon, her conversation with Mrs. Lacey seemed like a far away fantastic dream.

Judith's mother was getting tea when she walked into the kitchen.

'And how did you find Mrs. Lacey?' she asked. 'I expect she was glad to see you.'

'She seemed very well,' said Judith. 'She was sitting up in bed.' Looking at her mother, stout and cheerful, she realised that she didn't want to talk about Mrs. Lacey.

'What did you talk about?'

'Nothing much. She said ...' Judith hesitated.

'Well, what did she say.'

'That she sometimes drank sherry in bed – just imagine. It seemed so funny. Let me take the tray, it's heavy.'

'Since when am I incapable of carrying a tray,' said her mother cheerfully. 'I'm not a little fragile thing like Mrs. Lacey, you know. But take it if you like and I'll bring the other things. By the way, Nigel was here before you came in. He wanted to know whether you'd like to go out with him tonight.'

Judith went over to the window and looked out to where the golden privet hedge separated them from the next door house. A feeling of sadness came over

her. 'He's so young,' she said. 'I don't really feel I can be bothered with him any more.' And yet, she told herself, I can't grow up all of a sudden, just because I know that Mrs. Lacey isn't going to get better. She's an old woman, but I've got all my life before me.

'Perhaps I would like to go out, though,' she said. 'It's a long time since I had a gay evening. I think I'll just go across and tell him.'

Copied by permission of Hazel Holt, Barbara Pym's Literary Executor, from MS Pym 92, folios 40-50, in the Bodleian Library Pym Archive.

Outings and events

Visit to the Barbara Pym Archive

The very bad weather and the approach of Christmas meant that only five members were able to make this visit on 14th December 2000.

We met in the Delegates' Room of the Clarendon Building where Dr Judith Priestman had arranged a selection of items from the Barbara Pym archive brought from the New Bodleian Library across the road.

The first three exhibits were manuscript notes and drafts for *A Glass of Blessings* (originally entitled "The Lime Tree Bower"), *Excellent Women*, and part of *No Fond Return of Love*.

Next were three little-known and unpublished works – her children's opera, 'The Magic Diamond', composed in April 1922 when she was only nine years old, with photographs of the cast; a manuscript copy of a novel called 'Young Men in Fancy Dress' written in 1929-30; and a collection of poetry and short stories from 1930 to 1938.

Then, her undergraduate diary for 1932 ('The Saga of Gabriel Harvey'), and Henry Harvey's 1937 B.Litt.thesis, "Gerard Langbaine the Younger", which Barbara had typed.

The rest of the exhibits were letters – from 'Jock' Liddell covering more than forty years, and a wonderful collection of the correspondence between Barbara and Philip Larkin between 1961 and 1979.

While we pored over these treasures, Dr Priestman regaled us with amusing anecdotes and reminiscences of these and other characters of her acquaintance, and answered many of our questions. Our warmest thanks are due to her for her kindness in letting us see these pieces, and providing such interesting commentary on them.

We all thought how good it would be if some of these items, the poems and short stories for example, could be made available to a wider audience, and I said that I would ask the Committee if the possibility of publication could be investigated. The Committee agreed, so, with further advice and encouragement from Dr Priestman, I have spent the last few months examining much of the unpublished material in the archive.

Hazel Holt, Barbara Pym's Literary Executor, has kindly given permission for some of the material to be copied and printed in *Green Leaves*. We hope that our readers will be as pleased as is the Committee that one of Barbara's short stories appears in this issue, above, and that others may appear in subsequent issues.

I am very grateful to Dr Judith Priestman, Hazel Holt, and Colin Harris and his staff in the Modern Manuscripts Department of the Bodleain Library, for the opportunity of revealing some of Barbara's previously unknown work to the members of her Society.

Yvonne Cocking

Pym seminar in Chicago

Last November's *Green Leaves* reported that Dr Frauke Lenckos was to teach a seminar entitled '"The Passionate Language of Geography": Women's Novels, Women's Journeys' (the subject of her paper in the May 2000 *Green Leaves*), 'grouping Barbara Pym with other great novel writers'.

In October last year, two US Pym Society members eagerly made the 160-mile round trip from their home town to Chicago to attend the Barbara Pym segment of the series.

A Few Green Leaves had been the assignment for the group, which represented a wide range of ages and interests, all obviously appreciative of literary topics. Since some class members had not previously been familiar with Pym's work, biographical details were provided, along with brief descriptions of some of her other novels. The stimulating discussion for the evening was prompted by Dr Lenckos' suggestion that there are parallels and contrasts between Pym's Emma Howick and Jane Austen's Emma Woodhouse, which include depictions of the personal journeys undertaken by both. Pym's Emma partially fulfills her personal odyssey by remaining in the same location in the village at the end of the novel, but with a cottage of her own in which to write, echoing Virginia Woolf's familiar thesis found in her *A Room of One's Own*.

It was instructive to participate in a discussion that placed Pym with other prominent women authors, and gratifying to witness the appreciation of the class members new to Pym, and their vowing to read more.

Norma Munson

Alliance of Literary Societies

Forthcoming events organized by member societies include guided tours of George Eliot Country around Nuneaton and Bedworth, on 27 June, 8 August and 9 September. Tickets £10; contact Tourism Officer, 024 7637 6490.

Literary website

The West Midlands Creative Literature Collection, housed in Shrewsbury Library, is a diverse reference collection of materials by authors native to, or substantially influenced by, the West Midlands region, covering the historic counties of Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire. Barbara Pym is one of the featured authors, in the Shropshire section (together with Mary Cholmondeley, Wilfred Owen, Edith Pargeter, Malcolm Saville, Mary Webb and Stanley Weyman).

A website has been created and can be found, at the following location:
http://home.freeuk.net/castlegates/creative.htm

This gives background information about people and places as well as the opportunity to sample the literature itself.

Coming home

James Runcie

I begin, daringly, with an insult.

Some years ago, I was reading *Utopia and Other Places* by Richard Eyre. The book began well, securing my trust with its comfortable authority and strange *faux* honesty until, suddenly, I could read no further.

For Richard, now Sir Richard, Eyre had committed an absolutely unpardonable offence. he wrote:

> "There are moments in your life when you confront the limits of your capabilities: you will never play the saxophone, become a polyglot, or ride in the Grand National. There are other things you admit to never having the will to do; walking the Pennine Way, giving up alcohol for life, seeing the entire Ring Cycle, or reading the novels of Barbara Pym."

Well!

I took this as nothing less than a personal attack. This is a world that I, and all of you, know something about. For me, it is the world of my childhood and much of my life. I was brought up in the village of Cuddesdon in the Oxfordshire countryside, the son of a vicar who always managed to find a decent curate and who never underestimated the importance of the flower rota. In many ways, it was a typical English country parish, the rhythms of the Christian church in harmony with the seasons of the agricultural community, our lives framed by Advent, Epiphany and Easter – as well as the less familiar but resonant festivals of quinquagessima, candlemass, and lammastide. This was a place of village fetes, home baking, broken engagements and hidden passions – of quiet rituals, light Sunday suppers, and heartless betrayals.

It was a strange, contained, yet peculiarly diverse world, always prepared for the eruption of the unexpected, and yet taking everything in its stride because the continuity of village life always seemed more important than the individuality of its inhabitants.

It was a mixture of the timeless and the bizarre. I remember the optician making a pass at my mother, thinking me too young to understand, and I remember the loneliness of my father's secretary, Mrs Maguire thwarted in love.

After her husband had left her, his mistress came to collect a few things.

"What does he like for his tea?" she had asked in triumph.

Mrs Maguire was incensed.

As she retold the story to my father, she confessed that she had, at first, been stumped for a reply.

"And then I thought of the rudest word I could. HARPIC – I said."

She is "one for the collection" and I can well imagine her as a villager in *Some Tame Gazelle*. I can imagine my father, when young, as a Barbara Pym character, together with most of the villagers of my childhood; the eager curate, the over zealous schoolmistress, the gloomy publican, and the dodgy scout-master.

Yet despite such familiarity Barbara Pym has what she always strived for, and which so few writers have – a unique and distinctive tone of voice. Having just published my own first novel (*The Discovery of Chocolate*, Harper Collins, £12.99 – please do buy it!) I thought that it would be interesting to consider how she achieved this, by looking at her first and her last novel.

I think it's a salutary lesson to look at how writers start and where they finish, comparing the early and the late work, whether it be Jane Austen moving from *Sense and Sensibility* to *Persuasion* (I discount *Sanditon*), Henry James moving from *Roderick Hudson* to *The Golden Bowl*, or Virginia Woolf's development from *The Voyage Out* to *Between the Acts*.

But in the world of Pym this does not so easily apply. Her first novel, evolved over a period of fifteen years, during which she worked on six other ideas (just as Jane Austen re-worked 'Elinor and Marianne' over fourteen years from 1795 until it was published as *Sense and Sensibility* in 1809).

Furthermore, *Some Tame Gazelle* is extraordinarily accomplished, as fine as anything she ever wrote, so that, in Philip Larkin's words, "there is no development in the work of Barbara Pym".

So perhaps the whole premise of my talk is fallacious. But one has to start somewhere, and I would like to start with *Some Tame Gazelle*.

People always look for autobiographical elements in first novels, as if writers haven't yet fully engaged their imaginations, and as if this is something of a fault. And certainly, the idea of two sisters living together, Harriet and Belinda, mirroring the sisters of Hilary and Barbara, one of whom harbours an unrequited love for a man called Henry, does tend to make the knowing reader somewhat suspicious.

But this, for me, gives the book depth and pathos, as Belinda's heart, broken at twenty-five, and mending over the years, gives the novel much of its soul. There is extraordinary poignancy in the writing.

> Henry had once said he liked her in pale colours, and although that had been over thirty years ago it was possible that he still might.
>
> It had started to rain outside, and the soft patter of the rain in the leaves, combined with the rapidly falling darkness, made her feel pleasantly melancholy. She wondered if Henry were looking at the twilight, missing Agatha, she thought dutifully, or even regretting that she had not stayed to tea...
>
> Staring at the Archdeacon's back, she reflected that he was still very handsome. Perhaps he would read aloud to them when he came to supper tonight, though, as she would be the only person who wanted to listen, it might be rather difficult to arrange...

Yet, despite the pain of unrequited love, this is not a novel that ever feels sorry for itself. There are unexpected moments of happiness, minor triumphs and quiet joys, that Barbara Pym visits on her characters simply because she loves them: it is not a coldly detached eye, but a loving eye. The reader feels that she knows these people, warts and all.

Here begins her brisk enjoyment of the onamatopoeic quality of names – Everard Bone, Edith Liversidge, Nathaniel Mold, Theodore Grote, Joan Grudge and that triumphant pair, Miss Beard and Miss Smiley.

Barbara Pym knows the hopes they carry, the clothes they wear and the food they eat.

It is a setting where clothing defines much of the way in which characters present themselves – this is a world of perliknit and hand-knit pullovers, coral pink jumpers, elastic roll-on corsets, wine crêpe de Chine dresses and clerical grey socks. In fact literary critics might describe the sock as the defining trope of the novel. From the very beginning, Agatha Hoccleve's inability to darn is set against Olivia Berridge's demented knitting – even if the toes are not well grafted. It is a token of intimacy that Harriet immediately recognises as a threat to her relationship with the new curate:

This Olivia Berridge knitting socks for him, that was the trouble.

By page 77, Belinda too has realised the importance of socks and mends the Archdeacon's, who, after a moment of irritation, makes Belinda's day by declaring:

"My dear Belinda you have done it exquisitely. I must take care to be passing your house every time I have a hole in my sock."

This unfortunately sets back the risotto, and Belinda worries what Henry's wife might think:

'Never interefere between husband and wife,' as Belinda remembered her mother telling her, and one could not be too careful, even about an apparently trivial thing like a sock.

But then, when Belinda sees Agatha rolling up her husband's socks in a quiet and domesticated way, she almost feels sorry for her, and wishes that she could at least be friends with the wife of the man she loves.

It is almost as if the characters are revealed and defined simply by their attitude to socks.

Even the Bishop gets in on the act, declaring:

"Ah, the socks I had knitted for me when I was a curate!

"I know", agreed Father Plowman, "some small, some large, some short, some long, but all acceptable because of the goodwill that inspired the knitters".

By page 226 Agatha Hoccleve is knitting socks for the Bishop, who confesses to Belinda that they are not quite long enough in the foot.

This sign of Agatha's weakness again comforts Belinda:

She felt that she could almost love Agatha as a sister now. The pullover that she might have made for the Archdeacon would surely have been wrong somewhere, but as it had never been started, it lacked the pathos of the socks not quite long enough in the foot. To think of Agatha as pathetic was something so new that Belinda had to sit down on a chair in the hall, quite overcome by the sensation. She began to find ways of making things better and more bearable.

This use of the sock as both love token and social indicator now applies to Belinda, and it is here that we get the pay-off as she quietly realises that "her love for Henry "was like a warm comfortable garment, bedsocks perhaps...something without glamour or romance".

Socks act as both symbols and love-tokens, and are the principal device, and the principle joke, through which character is revealed. One can imagine the Phd thesis now – " Sock as trope in the novels of Barbara Pym".

This use of domestic detail to reveal character also applies to Pym's use of food – from Agatha Hoccleve's rissoles, to discussions about mutton and redcurrant, damson flan, sardine eggs, or the positively Cranfordian use of meringues for tea. Unexpected guests might be given a tin of tongue, while boiled chicken and cream sauce seems strictly reserved for curates.

Like socks, food roots the novel in its own world, and acts as an indicator of something more profound, giving the novel its zany and eccentric comedy, the highpoints surely being the caterpillar Miss Prior discovers in her cauliflower cheese, and the cigarette ash in the baked beans spooned out by Miss Liversidge.

'Hand me that ash tray, will you?' said Edith, but not before Belinda had seen a grey wedge of ash drop into the beans.' Drat it,' she said. 'Too late. Hope you don't mind?'

'Of course not,' said Belinda nobly, remembering Miss Prior and the caterpillar. Perhaps there was something after all in being a gentlewoman.

People often describe the work of Barbara Pym, a world where there is "something frightening yet comforting about the sameness of it all", in relation to past writers – Elizabeth Gaskell and Jane Austen, being the two favourites - but she also strikes me as amazingly contemporary. Giving Miss Prior *The Church Times* as lavatory paper and a caterpillar in her cauliflower cheese strikes me not only as pure Pym, but also as pure Alan Bennett.

Bennett uses a cream cracker under the settee, or a chip in the sugar in exactly the same way, but takes the imagery further, and perhaps more crassly- the chip in the sugar being a symbol of Graham's mental illness, the cracker reminding Doris of her lost child. But here is Muriel in *Soldiering On*, a widow bankrupted by her son:

"It's a funny time, three o'clock, too late for lunch, but a bit early for tea. ... however, Mabel warmed up the proceedings with one of her famous soups, conjured up out of thin air, so we lived to fight another day. Nobody could quite put their finger on the flavour, so I was able to go round saying, "Have you guessed the soup yet?" and that broke the ice a bit. I don't know what had got into Mabel but she'd gone mad and added curry and that foxed most people. It was cauliflower actually."

The passage seems so much part of the Pym tradition, and both Pym and Bennet understand that apparent dullness of ordinary lives can contain not only the quiet desperation of which Thoreau spoke, but also surreal and unexpected comedy. How else to explain Edith Liversidge suddenly performing a Balkan folk dance after tea, or Bishop Theodore Grote performing on the Hmwoq?

Like a jazz musician, Barbara Pym's work can take unexpected improvisatory turns – at one moment a character might be discussing the history of the word "dingle", public conveniences in the Balkans, whether there are any red headed men in Naples, or if it is possible for Bishop Grote to look *both* like a fish and a sheep.

It is a world where details matter, and their significance is not immediately realised. Characters become confused by what has happened; one of the truest moments in the novel for me is when Harriet can't believe that Mr.Mold can possibly have loved her from the moment he first saw her because "She had been wearing that awful tweed coat".

These moments of detail and unexpected revelation, of bizarre comedy and intimate pathos also remind me of Virginia Woolf – whether it be Belinda planting tulips in her galoshes or Miss Prior observing that "the smell of chrysanthemums always upsets me".

Virginia Woolf's last novel, *Between the Acts*, is full of Pym-like characters with Pym-like names – William Dodge, Millie Loader, Mrs Otter, Mrs Swithin, Miss la Trobe .

She too uses domestic details and the daily round in order to provide unexpected moments of revelation:

Mrs Giles Oliver ... stood in front of the three-fold mirror, so that she could see three separate versions of her rather heavy, yet handsome, face; and also, outside the glass, a slip of terrace, lawn and tree tops.

Inside the glass, in her eyes, she saw what she had felt overnight in the ravaged, the silent, the romantic gentleman farmer. 'In love' was in her eyes. But outside, on the washstand, on the dressing table, among the silver boxes and tooth-brushes, was the other love; love for her husband the stockbroker – 'The father of my children,' she added, slipping into the cliche conveniently provided by fiction. Inner love was in the eyes; outer love on the dressing-table.

Barbara Pym's last novel, *A Few Green Leaves*, like Virginia Woolf's last novel *Between the Acts*, mixes the idea of social and historic continuity – putting on a pageant, looking for the Deserted Medieval Village – with the search for personal meaning amongst its characters.

As Daphne observes: "I'm fifty-six next birthday' What to do? Go to Greece, get a dog, what does life consist of?"

Her brother Tom attempting to be the Kilvert of his generation , cannot understand how trifles may well be the sum of life;

> "What was he to write about the events of this morning? 'My sister Daphne made a gooseberry tart and told me that she was going to live on the outskirts of Birmingham?' Could that possibly be of interest to readers of the next century?"

Barbara Pym's characters puzzle how the minutiae of life can be accumulated, as if a sufficient number might form a pattern or lead to a revelation which would make it worthwhile.

Yet, of course, they worry that all these small things will never be enough to provide consolation or engender meaning. The pain Miss Vereker feels in her side will not go away, Graham will never love Emma, Daphne will perhaps always be afflicted with depression, and Miss Lickerish, as we all, must die. Given these circumstances, can life really be improved simply by the acquisition of a new hat, as Dr Gellibrand suggests?

Well, sometimes it can, I think Barbara Pym is saying. It doesn't always take much to make us happy; an act of kindness, a moment of confidence, good food, a bargain at the jumble, or even a few green leaves.

Most of us are not Shakespearean characters or tragic heroes, but live in the smaller, more intimate everyday world where people live, cop, cook, laugh, pray, suffer, and die. The environment may appear limited but the range of human emotion is not.

It surprises me when people, particularly publishers, fail to realise this; but Barbara Pym's quiet determination also heartens me. Here she is, talking about her later work:

> Perhaps in retirement, and even in the year after, a quieter, narrower kind of life can be worked out and adopted. Bounded by English literature and the Anglican church and small pleasures like sewing and choosing dress material for this uncertain summer.

In her last novel, times have certainly changed. The Bishop of Mbawa's slide lecture has been replaced by an anthropological debate on television. Women have contraceptive problems, consider lesbianism, and eat ready meals such as savoury rice you just boil up, and miniature steak and kidney pie.

Yet there is considerable continuity from the early work. There is still, for example, the delight in names with which Pym's writing life began; Avice Shrubsole, Flavia Grundy, Terry Skate, Christabel Gellibrand, Miss Lickerish, Mrs Bland. Clothing too, continues to make its mark, whether it be the Vicar's obsession with people being buried in wool in the seventeenth century, or Miss Lickerish's "knitted cap and ancient smelly tweed coat."

The delight in bizarre information continues too; as the characters wonder how to keep a dog in Birmingham, if fox dung is grey at both ends, or why the stone at the Manor bears the shape of the female pudenda.

Moments of pathos are sprinkled through the novel, which is, I think several shades darker than her first book, but this unerring balance between bizarre observation, surreal moments and quiet reflection, is I think the key to Barbara Pym's uniqueness; having worked within the details, she establishes what might be called a "double tone" in which the comedy is underpinned with sadness, and despair is underwritten with hope.

I don't find *A Few Green Leaves* quite as perfectly formed as *Some Tame Gazelle*, but I find it profoundly moving that her last novel ends on a note of optimism and that "a love affair need not necessarily be an unhappy one."

Hope is I think fundamental to her Christian view of life. She knows that at its heart, the Bible is a divine comedy, working through the tragedy of the Cross to a final revelation which is the fulfillment of everything that has gone before, and meaning, true meaning, is finally made manifest . This is what makes her an optimistic writer, for she believes, I think, that no character or situation is so awful that it cannot be redeemed. There is always hope.

When I had finished re-reading *A Few Green Leaves* I began to think of Barbara Pym's legacy.

I hope that two modern examples will suffice to show that, far from being outdated as those short-sighted publishers in the 1960's and 1970's believed, her writing lives on, both through her own writing and through its influence on others:

In Anne Tyler's *Ladder of Years,* Cordelia Grinstead suddenly leaves her family and establishes a new solitary life in which she re-assesses her marriage and her life.

Reading it for the first time, I was struck by the Pym-like world this novel inhabits. Cordelia Grinstead :

> looked toward the dress she 'd snatched up- a gray knit of some sort. Way too long, she could tell at a glance, but still she slipped it off its hanger and drew it over her head. The acrid smell of new fabric engulfed her. She smoothed down the skirt, zipped the side zipper, and turned to confront her reflection.
>
> She might be a librarian or a secretary, one of those managerial executive secretaries who actually run the whole office from behind the scenes...She noticed she walked differently now, not with her usual bouncy gait but more levelly, because of her slim skirt. Here is the secretary Miss X, speeding back to her office after lunch. Preparing to type up her notes for the board of directors."

We can find the same Pym-like awareness of character (and also the way in which characters view themselves and how they might appear) in Salley Vickers's novel - *Miss Garnett's Angel.*

Here Julia Garnet leaves her London flat after the loss of her companion, Harriet, and spends a year in Venice, perhaps trying to come to terms with who she is and what her life has meant.

Any moments of loneliness or solitude are underpinned with bizarrely Pym-like trains of thought.

Consider her reaction to her friend Vera's news:

> 'Peggy is lying down. She gets tired since Bob died.' Vera, Julia couldn't help noticing had a knack of making concern sound like disapproval.
>
> 'Has he been dead long?' Despite her resolutions to try to make the best of the visit, Julia was feeling desperate. Conversation was flagging already and Vera had only been in the apartment ten minutes.
>
> 'Last June. I told you in my letter.' Vera's disapproval became visible. 'It was very sudden. A stroke.' She had a frown which Julia had not remembered.
>
> 'Oh yes,' said Julia meekly. She had met Peggy and wondered if maybe her husband had died to escape his wife's constant talking.'

You and I know where this has come from.

Here is that true Pym-like ability to hold a conversation while thinking about something else, however trivial, knowing that life is lived in the details and that trifles are the sum of life.

We all do it, and yet so few can characterise it in fiction.

When I read such novels (and *Miss Garnett's Angel* is currently top of the paperback bestseller lists) I can't help but think of Barbara Pym. Her work is now such an integral part of the life and literature of the nation. She did find the unique and distinctive voice that once seemed such a lot to ask for, setting out themes that others now play variations upon.

As I finished writing this talk, sitting in a small terraced garden on a Sunday afternoon, to the sound of children playing, surrendered wives cooking, and men with beards getting in touch with their masculine side in garden sheds, I tried to think of the right word to describe what I feel about Barbara Pym's novel – and the

phrase that came to me was simply that I felt that her work was a blessing.

I feel blessed by it, and enriched by it, and I know in my heart that anyone who knows anything of England, its literature and its faith, cannot help but have their life enhanced by someone who has contributed so much to both.

Reading Barbara Pym is like coming home.

Talk given to the Barbara Pym Society, London, Sunday 13 May 2001

Pym gleanings

We have found many references to Barbara Pym in the national press as well as in a range of books and other media. They suggest an interesting group of novelists with whom Pym is to be compared.

In the press

On 11 November 2000, in the *Daily Telegraph* Arts & Books section, John Bayley gleefully referred to Macmillan's forthcoming reprint of 'Barbara Pym's novels, which unforgivably had been allowed to go out of print in this country' as 'the best news this year', and found *A Few Green Leaves* 'strangely like the other novel I have most enjoyed this year, Julian Barnes's *Love, etc.*'

Book reviewers are making much reference to Pym. Kate Fullbrook, reviewing Clare Hanson's *Hysterical fictions: the 'woman's novel' in the 20th century* (Macmillan, 2000) in the *TLS*, 8 December 2000, observed, 'she starts in the 1920s with the work of Rosamond Lehmann, moves through ... to the present, including the fiction of Elizabeth Taylor, Margaret Drabble, A. S. Byatt and Anita Brookner (the only obvious missing figure is Barbara Pym).' Pym is referred to, though, in the introduction to the book:

> Olga Kenyon, in her 1988 study *Women novelists today*, traces the line of development of the woman's novel... singling out Jean Rhys, Rosamond Lehmann, Elizabeth Bowen, Barbara Pym and Elizabeth Taylor as key figures. Kenyon argues that these writers display 'what might be termed a "feminine sensibility in the subtle descriptions of appearance, textures, social nuances", and also that they have the ability 'to represent the social frustrations and intimate thought-processes of gifted, undervalued women'.

In *The Times* Saturday magazine, 'Play' on 16 December 2000, Christina Konig briefly reviewed the latest edition of the *Oxford companion to English literature*, complaining: 'there are some anomalies. Ben Elton rates a longer entry than Barbara Pym'.

Jessica Mann reviewed Salley Vickers' first novel, *Miss Garnet's Angel*, in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 9 April 2000, concluding, 'Her story is written with charm and subtlety. If you like Penelope Fitzgerald, Sylvia Townsend Warner or Barbara Pym, try Salley Vickers'.

Another review – by Angela Huth, of Anita Brookner's *The Bay of Angels*, in *The Spectator* of 20 January 2001. She writes that the book's heroine and her mother 'seem content with their low-key lives, rather in the manner of Barbara Pym's quiet and uncomplaining women'.

Hannah Betts ended a review of the television version of Nancy Mitford's novels, in *The Times*, 3 February 2001,

> Mitford should be read every few months as comfort food in the way that it is nourishing to reread *I Capture the Castle*[Dodie Smith], *Gaudy Night* [Dorothy Sayers], Woodhouse and Pym.

Joanna Trollope, interviewed in *The Guardian*, 17 February 2001, seems to overvalue her own works:

> She claims to be part of the minor canon, certainly. 'I think I'm in a body of traditional novelists where the narrative is of enormous consequence, where characterisation is immediately recognizable to readers of any age and to posterity.' ... She cites Barbara Pym, Iris Murdoch, Vikram Seth, and Maeve Binchy as practtioners she is happy to be bracketed with.
>
> – Well she might be!

In journals

The Journal of the T. E. Lawrence Society for Spring 1997 includes a report of a talk on the Lawrence family's life in Oxford given at the TEL Society's symposium the previous year – held indeed at St Hilda's College. The speaker described North Oxford, 'at that time a relatively new suburb', with quotations from John Betjeman, Christopher Hobhouse, and Barbara Pym's *Crampton Hodnet* – the opening paragraph about Miss Doggett's house.

Learned Publishing, the journal of the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers, included in its April 2001 edition an article by Hazel Bell, 'From herbals to Hotbot: the development of journal indexing', which included Hazel Holt's splendid description of Barbara Pym at her work as indexer.

In books

Susan Chitty writes in her biography of her mother, Antonia White, *Now to my Mother* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1985):

> Antonia now became a novel reviewer herself, for the *New Statesman*. ... She was fortunate to discover such a remarkable trio of women first novelists as Doris Lessing, Barbara Pym and Elizabeth Jane Howard.

John Bayley introduced the 1987 Virago edition of E. H. Young's *William* (originally published 1925), writing:

> E. H. Young shares with Barbara Pym in our time an unmistakable but at the same time identifiable literary personality. Both women as novelists have a mixture of openness and reserve, a quiet sense of fantasy, and a sense of humour which is no part of their professional equipment ... but which can emerge in spontaneous and sometimes disconcerting ways. They are, as it were, secretly amused by their own sense of things, and readers can share this or not as they like.

He compares passages of dialogue in *Excellent Women* and E. H. Young's *Miss Mole*, 'similar in tone and topic'. 'Both Hannah Mole and Barbara Pym's Mildred Lathbury are "excellent women"; and both writers have a gently sardonic and not at all sentimental view of what that role entails. Both reveal that the "excellence" of women is a far more complex and more humorous affair than might be supposed.'

Deirdre Beddoe, in her chapter on 'Leisure' in *Back to Home and Duty: Women between the Wars* (Pandora Press, 1989), cites as evidence that 'In the course of the 1930s cinema-going became far more respectable as it was no longer viewed simply as trash for the masses', 'Writers such as Vera Brittain, Barbara Pym and Elizabeth Bowen were frequent cinema-goers'.

In *Dear Dodie: the life of Dodie Smith* (Chatto & Windus, 1996) Valerie Grove records the author's choice of reading in the early 1980s (chapter 18): 'Barbara Pym's *Crampton Hodnet*; Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*; *Adrian Mole; The Private Eye Story*; Iris Murdoch [but she pronounced her 'deadly'!]; Kingsley Amis ... among thrillers she thought only P. D. James worth hearing about.'

A. N. Wilson, in an essay, 'Christianity and Modernity' (published in *Ink and Spirit: Literature and Spirituality,* The Canterbury Press, 2000, writes of change in the Church of England. He refers to 'the large number of poets and novelists who explored the faith and its implications in their writings' in the middle of the 20th century, citing Dorothy L. Sayers, Charles Williams, C. S. Lewis and Barbara Pym, 'all in their different ways exploring church or religious life on an imaginative scale which would have surprised their parents' agnostic generation'. Later he laments, 'Many of us, who used to love the church, and who still love the old buildings and their ancient music, find that our affection for the institutional church has all but evaporated. I am talking about that Barbara Pym-ish love of all things churchy – it is hard to imagine many imaginative people sustaining it in the future. Her own diaries reflect the distress and disappointment felt by a pious woman in central London in search of unwrecked liturgy in her lunch hour.'

On the platform

Helen Clare Taylor, addressing the Angela Thirkell Society Conference in Boston, 1999, on 'Angela Thirkell's women at war', said, 'We do not usually think of Angela Thirkell, Barbara Pym or E. M. Delafield as war novelists, although their work describes what was actually going on in Britain far more accurately than many of the films made with government assistance which purport to document real life..... Angela Thirkell's fiction, like Barbara Pym's unpublished wartime novels and E. M. Delafield's *Provincial Lady*, documents the complete chaos in England caused by the government's policy on evacuees.'

And on the web

The website of the WOOBEE KNITSHOP in Laramie, Wyoming, as updated 10/09/00, offered in its Shopping Cart Ordering service as its Pattern of the Month, to be knitted in Cotton Fleece, a garment it designated *Barbara Pym's Vest*. The illustration showed a smart young woman wearing a polo-necked jumper (as we English would call it) under what we, in Pym's own country, would term a pullover: knitted, short, sleeveless, V-necked.

What a curious title for the Wyoming shop to give this garment. Vests in the UK are inelegant items of underwear. Pym makes several references to them, as follows.

Harriet Bede horrifies her sister by appearing in the front room, the curtains yet undrawn, 'wearing only a celanese vest and knickers', and later is with difficulty restrained 'from casting off her woollen vest' prematurely, in February. Miss Morrow is disgraced in Miss Doggett's eyes by the discovery of her cotton vest among the laundry, but mends her ways; early in *Crampton Hodnet* she 'felt the reassuring tickle of her woollen underwear'. Beatrice in *Home Front Novel*

> took up a vest of flowered artificial silk and tried the iron tentatively on the lower edge. Immediately the stuff frizzled up and stuck to the iron in a brown stocky mass. The room was filled with the smell of treacle toffee.

What transatlantic misunderstanding to take the title *Barbara Pym's vest* to suggest smart outer-wear!

Book on Pym – progress

Frauke Lenckos and Ellen Miller are pleased to report that the book they have co-edited, *Reading Barbara Pym,* has been accepted for publication by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press in Madison, New Jersey. The anticipated publication date will be in 2002.

The collection of original essays marks the growing recognition that Barbara Pym has taken her place as a significant literary figure of the 20th century, and examines the unique relationship between the author and her readers. Moreover, because most of her protagonists are avid students of literature, some essays probe the role of Barbara Pym's excellent women as readers, attempting to make sense of a world in which they largely serve as observers.

The co-editors originally conceived the book as one designed for both the scholarly and general reader, since both audiences comprise the Pym readership. However, since Fairleigh Dickinson University Press focuses only on libraries, colleges and universities, they requested that the less scholarly contributions be deleted—to which Frauke and Ellen agreed.

Reading Barbara Pym includes a foreword by Hilary Walton, a reminiscence by Hazel Holt, and contributions by Katherine Ackley, Orphia Jane Allen, John Bayley, Hazel Bell, Paul DeAngelis, Barbara Dunlap, Barbara Everett, Jan Fergus, Anthony Kaufman, Frauke Lenckos, Jane Nardin, Anne Pilgrim, Janice Rossen, Dale Salwak, Helen Clare Taylor, and Eleanor Wymard. In addition, Ronald Blythe has written a preface to Barbara Pym's own essay, *A Year in West Oxfordshire*, which was no longer in print.

Ordering information will become available as the book nears publication.

Stories by Pym Society member

Pediatrician, mother, novelist and Pym Society member Perri Klass has published a collection of short stories, *Love and Modern Medicine* (Mariner/Houghton Mifflin, 240 pp., $13 paperback). It has been described as "warm-hearted, level-headed stories about what one character refers to as 'all the women's magazine problems—her job, his job, the kids ...'"

Perri, a resident of Cambridge, Mass. and a long-time Pym admirer, has attended all three Pym Conferences at Harvard. The book may be ordered at www.amazon.com.

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The North American Barbara Pym Society Web site, www.barbara-pym.org, has been updated to include, among other items, a report of the 2001 Pym Conference, with photos.

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Pym Society member David Parker died in August 2000. He left £1000 to St Hilda's College, because he was a supporter of women's education and single-sex status.

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There are still five left-handed, dark green Pym Society mugs available: £6.00 each from Eileen Roberts.