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GREEN LEAVES

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THE NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE 2005

Dale Salwak speaking on "The spell of Barbara Pym"

The Seventh North American Conference of the Barbara Pym Society, held 2-3 April, 2005, got under way on a "tempestuous morning" in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Though no monkey puzzle trees brushed against the tall windows of Harvard Law School's Austin Hall, the gloomy weather was decidedly North Oxford-like. But inside the hall the warmth of good fellowship prevailed, with more than 84 people attending the conference, including about twelve first-timers.

After Ellen Miller welcomed everyone, she spent a few minutes remembering two members of the Society who had died in the past year: Michael Egan and Frances McMeen. Ellen read tributes to them both, and all of us who knew and loved them felt their presence through the weekend.

Dale Salwak, professor of English at Citrus College, Glendora, California, started off the conference with his talk, "Under the Spell of Barbara Pym". He was one of Pym's earliest supporters, and described precisely what it means to fall under the spell of Barbara Pym. He noted that Pym lets us enter into her mind, allowing our own world to be subsumed by her created one. As a result, we are touched within "by some sort of awe or joy or light. We feel lifted. We feel more fully and pleasurably alive". How does she do this? Why did Philip Larkin say of her books, "No man can read them and be quite the same again?" In search of an answer, Salwak gave some examples of how different Pym readers had come to find her work – often through book reviews. He himself had found Pym through a friend, though he had been putting articles about her on "the back burner" for some time before reading his first Pym novel, *Excellent Women*.

Salwak went on to explain how he came to produce two books on Pym: an annotated bibliography and a collection of essays on her life and work. In putting together the latter, he learned a great deal about Pym, her readers, and himself. After working with the book's 19 contributors, he realized that his own response to Pym was not unique. "She seemed to touch, to guide, to inspire us all." In 1984, when Hilary Walton and Hazel Holt were in New York in connection with the publication of *A Very Private Eye*, Salwak met them at their hotel suite. The end of the meeting was entirely Pymish. As he was leaving, he overheard one of the ladies say, "Such a nice young man. So unlike the other American we met this morning."

In talking about the lasting nature of Pym's amazing spell, Salwak noted that both readers and critics continue to enjoy her work and find new depths "to mine". Pym is storyteller, teacher, and "above all, an enchanter". Perhaps one reason for Pym's appeal is that although not much happens in the novels, she makes us care for her characters and the minutiae of their lives. Still more important is her ability to meet us "at a point of need – not only for pleasure but for companionship, for stability, perhaps even for consolation". Her novels are not escapist literature, but they do speak to anyone willing to "slow down and listen", because she is writing of the human heart.

Eleonore Biber's talk focused on "Barbara Pym and the Oxford Novel". Biber holds a doctorate in English Language and Literature from the University of Vienna. Her areas of expertise are the modern Anglo-Catholic novel and Victorian detective fiction, and she has spent much time in Oxford doing

Contents

North American Conference 2005 report	1	An unmistakable voice	10
Philip Larkin and Barbara Pym: a meeting of Societies	3	Notice Board	12
Barbara Pym Requiem Mass	4	Elements of the maternal in three Pym novels	13
Sermon preached by Revd. Colin Oxenforth	4	www.barbara-pym.org	15
Obituaries: Michael Egan; Frances McMeen	5	Pym gleanings	16
Dust shalt thou eat: some problems with Pym heroines	6		

research. She noted that more than 500 novels have been set in Oxford, including works by Hazel Holt, Philip Larkin, and Robert Liddell. Thanks to her years at St Hilda's, Barbara Pym often focused on the city of dreaming spires in her novels (*A Few Green Leaves, Crampton Hodnet, Civil To Strangers, Jane and Prudence* and *Some Tame Gazelle*), stories, and diary entries. Of course the intrigues of the Bodleian Library —that haven for scholars with its 90 miles of shelving — offered the possibility of romance to Barbara and, in turn, to some of her characters. As early as 1933, Pym noted in her diaries that she wanted to write "the Oxford novel". Though she was clearly delighted by Oxford and made return visits to St Hilda's, her treatment of the city sometimes has a gloomy, melancholy feel. This is particularly evident in *Crampton Hodnet*, where we find Miss Doggett with her sense of righteousness.

As the archivist of the Barbara Pym Society, living near Oxford, **Yvonne Cocking** could not be better qualified to speak on the topic of "Researching Pym at the Bodleian". The Pym archives there contain diaries, correspondence, drafts, and "miscellaneous" items. Cocking first viewed the collection in 2000 and subsequently was asked by the society to search the archives for unpublished material to include in *Green Leaves*. The task requires a great deal of time, as well as patience in occasionally having to decipher handwriting or faded notes. When she started her work, Cocking turned to the unpublished poems and short stories. Of the 27 short stories, only six had been published. She found that four could be used without amendments. The archives also contain letters to Pym from readers, including one who wrote, "I am so glad that you are not dead," several who spoke about the difficulty of finding the novels, and one who praised the superiority of her themes amid the rubbish that was available to readers. She found only one letter of condemnation, pointing to some church-related matter. Since Hilary Walton's death in early 2004 more material has arrived in the archives, and there is much work to be done. Scrap books containing reviews are now part of the collection, as well as more correspondence. Cocking continues to look for material that could be used in dramatized readings at conferences as well as in *Green Leaves*. She noted what a privilege it has been for her to work with Pym's papers. Clearly, the Society is very fortunate to have such a skilled and devoted archivist.

Tim Burnett gave the second part of a talk he began at the North American Conference in 2003, on "Class Differences in Barbara Pym". Burnett is a consultant to Robert Holden, Ltd., Fine Art Agents in London, prior to which he was with the Department of Manuscripts at the British Museum and British Library for more than 35 years. He concentrated on a *Glass of Blessings*, finding that Pym provided many details to reveal the social standing of various characters; in fact, this novel offers an ideal picture of the prosperous middle class. However, as always, she does not condemn any particular behaviour, choosing instead to observe and describe. Among his many points, Burnett noted that Harry Talbot wants a cedar tree for his front lawn, but settles for the very suburban monkey puzzle instead. Thus Pym places him firmly in the upper-middle class, as someone from the upper class would have inherited a cedar. Moreover, the monkey puzzle is a distinctly suburban garden feature. Surrey, where Rowena and Harry live, is too close to London to be "smart." Also, Jaguars are not quite the thing: a little too flashy. Burnett noted that Rodney Forsyth in the 1950s is probably much better off than he would be in the same position today, reminding us that servants were once quite common in England. Of course, the two clergymen at St Luke's offer a striking social contrast: mild dumpy little Father Bode, with his common voice and his probable preference for tinned salmon, versus Father Thames, with his love of beautiful objects and fine food. Burnett once again touched on the question of U (upper-class) and non-U expressions, including "pudding" versus "sweet". We were also delighted to be introduced to another Betjeman poem, "A Subaltern's Love Song".

On Sunday morning, **Barbara Dunlap**, Professor Emerita at City College of the City University of New York, who currently processes manuscript and archival collections at the Grolier Club in New York City, spoke to us on "Barbara Pym and the Sermon". She pointed out that Pym, who had a keen interest in sermons, uses them to illustrate the characters of her clergy and to imply how they may "starve or nourish" their parishioners' spiritual lives. Dunlap looked briefly at the development of the sermon in the Anglican tradition and at the popularity of Judgment Day as a topic. Not surprisingly, we learned that some of the Anglican Divines liked to show off their learning and stuff their sermons with citations. This led to a closer look at the preaching styles of Archdeacon Hoccleve and of his two rivals, Father Plowman and Mr Donne. Dunlap mentioned that in an early version of *Some Tame Gazelle*, now in the archives at the Bodleian, Pym gave more details about Father Plowman, noting his aptitude for preaching simple sermons.

Dunlap finds that Pym presents four different types of sermons in the novels: the literary, the Scriptural exegesis, the instructional homily, and the inspirational talk. Her talk moved between passages involving sermons in the novels and historical figures that may have influenced Pym as she created her scenes and characters. She mentioned the unpretentious (though formal) style that Julian Malory probably used, the rather dull instructional homilies of Father Thames, the limping platitudes that fill Father Ransome's sermons, and the forcefulness and sincerity of Mark Ainger — though he is also described as too intelligent for his congregation. In looking across the complete spectrum of the novels, Dunlap said, "We begin in *Some Tame Gazelle* with a sermon in which the egotistical Archdeacon implies that a literal physical Hell may be the destination of many of his congregants, and we end with a bland suggestion from the modest Tom Dagnall that his [congregants] consider their individual ideas of heaven".

Though the sermons in the novels may have failed to satisfy Pym, Dunlap said that John Henry Newman's preaching style tells us something about the kind of sermon that might have pleased her and her most thoughtful characters. Newman's sermons were simple, with no pomp or ritual, and were delivered in silvery tones. He managed to be both tender and stern, and he would concentrate on just one fact or quotation, unpicking its possibilities. He was concerned with what is in the heart.

In closing, Dunlap noted that during Lent in 1843, Newman fasted severely but was pleased to find there was no restriction on tea at any hour, early or late. Thus he drank very freely of it, with sugar. With this very Pymian sentiment in mind, Dunlap ended her talk and invited us to go and enjoy our tea – with or without sugar.

Following our last break for tea and refreshments, the conference ended with a dramatized reading of *Crampton Hodnet*. On Saturday, Anthony Kaufman, Professor Emeritus of English, University of Illinois, had led a discussion on why we think this novel works or doesn't work. Many in the audience disagreed with his view that it is not funny. If the exuberant humour and the farcical side of *Crampton Hodnet* were hidden from readers, they came out clearly in the dramatization adapted by Carol Bennett. Two of the cast members had suitable props: Eleonore

Biber, the quintessential Miss Doggett, didn't wear a skunk cape, but the fur piece (a small fox) complete with tail and head that encircled her neckline was most effective. Ellen Miller, as the clergyman's wife, was shod for gardening and peered from beneath a wide-brimmed straw hat bedecked with cherries. As Susan Bramson notes in her lively posting on the Pym email discussion list, "Tom Sopko was Mr Latimer to a 'T' — clueless, uncomfortable (tugging at his clerical collar), and giddy (at the end, after he has met Pamela). Meanwhile, Tony Kaufman was suitably downtrodden as the hard-done-by Francis."

The meeting came to a close much too soon for all of us, and we thanked Ellen Miller and her staff for putting together another wonderful conference.

Conference Report by Beverly Bell

Photograph by Sherrie Saint John

Philip Larkin and Barbara Pym: a meeting of Societies

A joint meeting of the Barbara Pym and Philip Larkin Societies was held in Oxford, at St Hilda's College, on Saturday 9 April, 2005. Thirty-one members of the BPS attended (including 98-year-old Muriel Maby, Pym's close friend in the Censorship at Bristol in the early 1940s), and 18 of the PLS.

Professor **Anthony Thwaite**, Larkin's literary executor and President of the PLS, and his wife, Dr **Ann Thwaite**, read the selection from the letters exchanged between Pym and Larkin from 1961 until Pym's death in 1980 that Anthony Thwaite had edited for a radio broadcast in 1989. Our Chairman, Deirdre Bryan-Brown, commented that she had never heard the letters read better.

In the discussion that followed, Professor Thwaite called the relationship of the two writers 'essentially an epistolary' one.

Triona Adams, herself a graduate from St Hilda's, spoke of 'Pym and Larkin's Oxford', describing the city at the different times at which the two writers had been undergraduates there. She recalled that when she first came up, in 1933, she was warned against 'the Oxford experience', the frivolous side as portrayed by John Betjeman and in Dorothy Sayers' *Gaudy Night*. She found that the Oxford experience proved to be highly subjective: what one made of it oneself.

When Pym came up to St Hilda's to read English in 1931, Oxford was a prosperous city. Her diary entries record those college days, concerned mostly with beauty treatments and men; little about college life, university politics, or women; as Adams put it, 'sherry and suspenders escapades', showing a heady independence.

Larkin, by contrast, at Oxford – St John's College, also reading English – during the lean war years of 1940-43, experienced dull meals, queues, shortages and utility goods, described by himself in the introduction to his novel, *Jill* – no arcane luxurious Oxford traditions such as balls; none of the glamour and excess portrayed in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited.* Like Pym, Larkin did little academic work, perhaps because effort expended on postwar prospects, the grey future, seemed a waste of time. Also like Pym, he gained his greatest pleasure at Oxford from relationships, enjoying close friendships with Kingsley Amis and Bruce Montgomery.

Adams thought that, for both writers, sharing a realization of the everyday tragi-comedy, their Oxford experience was a springboard to creativity. She quoted Pym's final verdict in her diary:

> I am reading *Gaudy Night* by D. L. Sayers and enjoying it very much. Pleasure and pain in an agreeable mixture. That's what I feel when I think of Oxford and of my days at St. Hilda's.

— and observed, 'Not a bad description of the work of Mr Larkin and Miss Pym.'

Barbara Everett spoke of 'The context for Larkin and Pym'. She saw their relationship as a sometimes strained literary friendship, the affinity of two writers who did not know each other very well. Larkin felt some reservations about Pym's novels, being most at home with the serious; but while working as a miniaturist in an unpretentious medium, she 'turned the romantic novel into ironic poetry'.

Both writers experienced difficulty in getting published, and ripened under failure, sharpening their comedy and writing about failure. Both concentrated on the poetry of everyday life, 'the epiphany of the commonplace'.

Everett outlined the development and effect of modernism, equating Larkin as a poet with Auden, Eliot, Yeats and Thomas Hardy. She saw him as particularly influenced by Hardy (whom Larkin thought the greatest poet of the twentieth century), sharing his extreme concern for language, horizontality of vision of the humble and the unimportant, and conviction of the 'authority of sadness'. For the work of both poets she preferred to the term 'philistinism', 'doomster writing' (that term taken from Hardy's *The Dynasts*), implying a rethinking of authority'.

Hardy was also a favourite of Pym's, and Everett thought the fortitude of Pym's last three novels – *The Sweet Dove Died, Quartet in Autumn* and *A Few Green Leaves* (which she wrote without expectation that they would be published) similar to Hardy's view of the world, showing ordinary people facing and mastering darkness. She found Pym formidable, though not showing it.

Everett's paper is to appear in full in the *Times Literary Supplement.*

Finally we enjoyed watching the video of Barbara Pym with Lord David Cecil, 'Tea with Miss Pym'.

We felt that this, our first-ever joint meeting of the two Societies, had been a success, with distinguished speakers who had widened the horizons of members of both Societies. Larkin members said they had been impressed by the lovely surroundings of St Hilda's College, and several commented on the lunch; salmon and strawberries had been a nice surprise for those who had travelled a long way rather expecting sandwiches. Best of all had been the opportunities to meet fellow enthusiasts.

Information about joining both Societies was exchanged, and we hope to welcome members of the Philip Larkin Society to the Barbara Pym Society meetings in London on 5 June, and at St Hilda's on the first weekend of September.

Hazel K. Bell

Barbara Pym Requiem Mass

On 15 January, 2005 a Solemn Requiem and Thanksgiving Mass was held to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Barbara Pym on 11 January, 1980. This was held in the parish church of St Alban the Martyr, Holborn, an impressively large building, typical of the Anglo-Catholic churches that Barbara loved. It features in *Less Than Angels* when Catherine lights a candle "round the back of a Holborn church ... V. strong smell of incense — candles 3d. each", as noted in *A Very Private Eye*. St Alban's is of course just off High Holborn, the last address of the International African Institute, where Barbara worked until the late nineteen-seventies.

The service was conducted by the Vicar, the Venerable Howard Levett, with a thoughtful and witty sermon by Canon Colin Oxenforth, who kindly agreed to its appearing in *Green Leaves* (below). A keen reader of Pym and enthusiastic member of the Society, the Canon reflected on how Barbara's spirit lives on in her work and its observations of ordinary people. He also mentioned his own links with Barbara Pym, meeting some of her contemporaries from Huyton College in later years as his own parishioners and presenting the novels to a religious foundation in Israel as an aid to understanding the Church of England and the English.

The choir of St Paul's Church, Bedford, directed by Jonathan Jones, together with organist Ashley Marshfield, sang the music of Fauré's Requiem Mass. It was a highly polished and moving performance. There were also five carefully chosen hymns in the traditional Victorian style much enjoyed by Barbara and her sister Hilary: "Give Me the Wings of Faith", "Jerusalem the Golden", "Sweet Sacrament Divine", "Jesu, Son of Mary", and "Lead Kindly Light". The beautiful singing was much discussed later by the congregation, which was made up of regular parishioners, members of the Barbara Pym Society, several friends of Hilary Walton, and also members of the public who had seen the event advertised in *Church Times*.

After the service, which was organized by Kate Charles, everyone was invited for refreshments in the adjoining St Alban's Centre, a place familiar to the members of the Society who attend our annual Spring Meeting there.

Subsequently Glyn Paflin wrote an amusing appreciation of the occasion in the *Church Times*, mentioning that Barbara would have liked the incense, the candles and "the undulating Fauré".

Deirdre Bryan-Brown

Sermon preached by Revd. Colin Oxenforth

What am I doing here in front of all these people? How has this come about? I am not an academic, even though I have read all the Pym novels many times, and many of the books about her life and works. How did this all start?

It was when I was a parish priest at St Margaret's, Princes Road, Toxteth, Liverpool. As a present, someone gave me *Excellent Women* and *A Glass of Blessings*. I enjoyed them enormously, and soon others in the congregation began to read them also as the word spread. People began to ask, "Can I borrow another Pym please?" Many quotes started to litter conversation after mass when we had coffee or went to the local pub. One young man said that he liked reading a new Pym as you already knew most of the characters, since they already worshipped at St Margaret's. He kept reminding me that the correct response to some questions was "Rather!"

We were a very mixed congregation in a once famous Anglo-Catholic shrine, with commuting Anglo-Catholic ladies, students and lecturers, West Indians and West Africans, mixed socially and sexually, with many types of spirituality and piety. One woman, now a sister in a religious community, kept remarking at various parish situations, "VERY Barbara Pym!" A research chemist was full of quotations, and even wore a false skunk cape once whilst playing bridge. I thought Barbara would have loved it, especially as she had a link with Liverpool from her days at Huyton.

Her connections with the city were shown strongly one day when Michael Wadsworth, the diocesan Lay Training Advisor, gave one of the Lenten talks at Liverpool Parish Church in a series called "The Great and Good". On being asked to give a talk he said that if he did anything at all it would be about Barbara Pym, not expecting to hear any more. When the programme of sermons was produced, there it was! At the event, two rows in front of me were about half a dozen elderly ladies who turned out to have been chums at Huyton College with Barbara. The row in front was even more fascinating. Two librarians sat down, one with a string bag containing some wet cod-fish and a packet of frozen peas. On hearing my amusement she turned round and said, "Well, you have to make a gesture!"

It was my lot to continue to meet fans. In the autumn of 1986 I was given the opportunity to have a sabbatical of two months in the Holy Land, just north of Bethlehem, to study "Christian Faith and Culture". It was at Tantur – an Ecumenical Institute, run by the Roman Catholic Church through the Notre Dame University in the States. A British contingent of three arrived at about the same time – a retired headmistress from Oxford, a Church of Scotland minister from Edinburgh, and myself. We were all Pym fans, and had brought novels with us to read, or re-read!

Again there were situations of laughter, remembrance, and of course examples of behaviour that might have come straight from one of the novels. We were picnicking on the wall of the Old City on one of many visits to Jerusalem. It was all very English, with packed food, napkins of sorts, and when a fruit knife was produced, we all had the same thought – yet again Barbara seemed to be with us. Later, at a fancy-dress evening, our retired head appeared in her usual attire with a badge bearing the inscription "B.P.". We all knew what she meant!

When it was time to leave Tantur we decided to give a collection of the Pym novels to the library, on the grounds that anyone from another culture wanting to understand the Church of England and the English would do well to read them.

I have reflected on how this all came about. I think the celebration of the ordinary, Barbara's humour, acceptance, love of the kalendar, exploration of vulnerability, faithfulness and doubt are aspects of ourselves to which we can relate. She herself was steadfast, and this characteristic is seen in many of her characters. They are like a repertory company, with a star in one novel having a walk-on part in another. Her faith underpins her writing, and redemption is a real theme, even if some of the characters have only one redeeming feature.

We are gathered in remembrance, thanksgiving and prayer that her soul may rest in peace. Often at funerals I suggest we imagine what sort of room the departed would be in. I disrespectfully imagine Barbara in a room with a comfy chair and a good G and T. We meet to commit Barbara to God with thanksgiving, but her spirit lives on as

her writing continues to provoke us, amuse, underpinned with a deep sense of culture and custom; church (going and being), with varieties of being English with all that provocative new life from Commonwealth immigration.

This has made me, and I suspect all of us, laugh as a mirror is held up to life, and our idiosyncrasies are reflected back to us, especially if we happen to be clergy. As I have aged, I ask myself "Am I getting Pymish, or even more Pymish?" Does the reading of her novels release us all with their gentle mockery and strength? I think so.

She lived so faithfully with sorrow, pain and joy. Thanks be to God for Barbara Pym.

May she rest in peace.

Amen

Obituaries

Michael Egan

1941-2004

Michael Egan, who died at age 63 on 12 June, 2004, was a warm and friendly man whose love of books and dynamic personality made him a delightful and enthusiastic conversationalist. A native New Yorker who served in the U.S. Navy for four years, Mike earned a degree in finance from Fordham University and eventually became controller of a law firm. His gift for working well with people won him respect and admiration from his co-workers. Mike was also a voracious reader whose wide-ranging interests included all aspects of World War II, spy novels, British mysteries, psychology, spiritualism, and Barbara Pym.

His wife Elena describes him as "a mixture of New York tough guy . . . and a lover and seeker of spiritual truths and beauty." It was her fondness for Barbara Pym's novels that led him to read and embrace them as well. This mutual interest took them year after year to North American meetings of the Barbara Pym Society. Mike always looked forward to those gatherings because he enjoyed connecting with people who were eager to discuss the larger ideas about life that Pym treats so well in her novels. All who knew him will miss this strong, vital, caring man.

Kathy Ackley

Frances Elisabeth McMeen

1943-2005

Frances Elisabeth McMeen of New York City died on 3 February, 2005. She had metastatic bone cancer.

Frances was a person of diverse careers, talents and interests: an employment counselor, librarian for major libraries and corporations, editor for information services, writer and public speaker; and organized and compiled data for a Wall Street investment banking firm. She was an avid reader and lover of books, with the reputation of being a "book detective", having a rare ability doggedly to pursue and obtain information about beloved books — and frequently the books themselves in hidden and sometimes musty places.

She was an active member of the Barbara Pym Society, attending gatherings in the US.

Many North American members of the BPS attended a memorial service for Frances in Manhattan and contributed to a book of tributes to her, with such comments as (from Yolanthe Smit, The Hague):

> Frances was the quintessential Pym woman; an excellent woman, solitary yet sociable, quietly living and working in the Big Apple, savouring her modest pleasures, her reading, her outings, and her participation in the world of Barbara Pym.

Beverly Bell

The Barbara Pym Society 2004-5

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Pym **website address** www.barbara-pym.org

Dust shalt thou eat: some problems with Pym heroines

Hilary Spurling

I propose to consider the Pym heroine – who she is, where she came from, what happened to her and why – for I think we may say that Pym heroines possess a recognisable, collective identity in much the same way as, for instance, the Jean Rhys woman or the Rosamund Lehmann lady. Commentators and critics have not found it easy to draw a firm line between art and life in either of these cases. Like Rhys and Lehmann, Barbara Pym was her own subject, as she readily conceded when she dedicated her private diaries to the gentle readers of the Bodleian.

My text comes from the book of Genesis, part of the string of curses laid by the Lord on the serpent after Adam and Eve had tasted the fruit of the tree of knowledge: 'Upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life'. This was the title Pym herself chose for the autobiography she never got round to writing. The original text was to have been split into two titles, one of which – *On Thy Belly* — she proposed to her friend Philip Larkin for his own memoirs. It was a popular passage. Anthony Powell had already picked a title (as surely Pym knew) from a little further on in the same chapter of curses. The one she kept for herself— *Dust Shalt Thou Eat* — would, as she said, have done just as well for 'a guide to restaurants in the luncheon voucher belt of EC4' in the city of London, the native habitat of office workers, one of the great heartlands of Pym territory: a book she might have enjoyed, or at any rate been in a position to appraise pretty thoroughly, for there have been few novelists more knowledgeable than Barbara Pym about diet, or more skilled in use of culinary metaphor.

Metaphorically speaking, her title sums up a central theme in all her novels: rejection, with its attendant disappointment and humiliations, to be avoided by the more percipient heroines only by taking pre-emptive action in the form of renunciation. This is the reason given by Mildred Lathbury, the heroine of *Excellent Women,* for turning down a proposal from a perfectly presentable clergyman — fortyish, unmarried, not bad looking, nice-natured, even quite moderately keen on her:

> Was I then to marry Julian?... Would he propose to me ... and should we make a match of it and delight the parish? It sounded ideal, but somehow morning had not brought any more enthusiasm than the night before. I still thought of myself as one of the rejected ones ...

These punitive themes – of women rejected, spurned and oppressed at the hands of men – have become exceedingly familiar in the feminist view of literature, and indeed of life. Not that Barbara Pym was a feminist: rather the contrary, if anything. She said, when asked by an interviewer why she took such a dim view of the male characters in her books: 'Oh but I *love* men'. But there was very little she did not know about eating dust in this context. Practically all her heroines do it, more or less willingly, including the engaging and optimistic heroine of *Some Tame Gazelle,* Pym's first book, begun when she was still at Oxford. Belinda Bede is a portrait of the author thirty years on, and eating dust is her speciality. She does it so cheerfully, and with such excellent appetite, that the reader can't help sharing her view that there is after all nothing much wrong with the diet. Barbara Pym said the same long afterwards in a letter to Philip Larkin:

> Why is it that men find my books so sad? Women don't particularly. Perhaps they (men) have a slight guilt feeling that this is what they do to us.

This seems to have been as close as Barbara Pym ever came to orthodox feminism, and sterner sisters would have been dismayed by her thoroughly unorthodox conclusion:

> and yet really it isn't as bad as all that.

A long line of Pym heroines eat dust and quite like it. Mildred, in *Excellent Women,* follows Belinda Bede and so, in their different ways, do both the heroines of *Jane and Prudence.* That book begins with the pair of them paying a return visit to their old Oxford college for a reunion with a collection of suitably dusty contemporaries, all of them potential Pym heroines:

> One could hardly blame people for classing all university women as frumps, thought Prudence, looking down the table at the odd garments and odder wearers of them, the eager, unpainted faces, the wispy hair, the dowdy clothes ...

Those are the first three novels. Catherine Oliphant, the heroine of the fourth – *Less Than Angels,* published in 1953 – is pricklier, less meek, not quite so easily put upon as her predecessors. Catherine, incidentally, is not a bad cook, although she makes her risotto, as English people did in those pre-Elizabeth David days, from leftover cold meat. Just as pet owners are said to grow to resemble their pets, so Catherine takes on in the course of the novel some of the characteristics of her favourite kitchen gadget:

> She was mincing some cold meat in her mincing machine, which was called 'Beatrice', a strangely gentle and gracious name for the fierce little iron contraption whose strong teeth so ruthlessly pounded up meat and gristle. It always reminded Catherine of an African god with its square head and little short arms, and it was not at all unlike some of the crudely carved images with evil expressions and aggressively pointed breasts which Tom had brought back from Africa.

When her love affair with an anthropologist peters out, Catherine does not take her dismissal lying down. In the book's final chapter, she seems to have taken over another anthropologist, Alaric Lydgate, a senior, crankier and altogether more formidable proposition than his predecessor. She moves into his house, builds a bonfire in his garden, and is last seen by the next-door neighbours feeding the fire not only with Mr Lydgate's papers but with his lifetime's collection of masks, spears, shields and feather head dresses. By the very last page, she has stopped burning his things and started *picking his rhubarb*, a characteristically Pym touch in which the alert neighbours manage to find equally characteristic significance:

> 'We could have given her some rhubarb,' said Mabel mildly. 'We have plenty. She needn't have troubled Mr Lydgate.'
>
> 'Oh, I don't suppose he would regard it as a trouble,' said Rhoda. 'Besides, it might not be quite the same thing, having it from our garden.'
>
> This last point, she felt with some complacency, was of a subtlety that perhaps only an unmarried woman could fully appreciate. But oh dear, she thought, if ever Catherine and Alaric should marry, what a difficult and perculiar pair they would make!

Pym novels all end on something very like this note of mildly equivocal uplift. Marriage, though greatly desired by Pym heroines, seldom if ever turns out to be a desirable state. At best it is relatively tamer: think of the happily married clergy wives – Jane of *Jane and Prudence,* Sophia in *An Unsuitable Attachment* – who pay no more attention to their husbands than they would to an old dog or cat they had got used to seeing around the place. Sophia, who is still young and pretty, treats her actual cat with such passionate, demonstrative fondness that even her husband notices the contrast (I say 'even' because faithful married men are distinguished as a rule, in Pym novels, by dimness and stolidity: Sophia's husband is one of the few capable of being roused to jealousy — perhaps the only example in literature, outside pantomime, of a co-respondent cat).

Marriage in Pym's novels can be decidedly worrying, a union not simply of habitual, dulled affection, but cruelly empty of feeling. Perhaps the clearest example is an unmarried woman, the independent and comparatively liberated Emma Howick of *A Few Green Leaves,* the last novel Pym wrote (though it was not the last to be published). Emma has a more than usually desultory affair with a married man who does not pretend he is using her as anything but a convenient temporary wife-substitute. 'Graham and Emma', wrote their creator in the notebook she kept at the time: 'He just wanted someone to bully and criticise when they were together'. The most striking thing about their affair is Emma's passivity. She eats dust, so far as Graham is concerned, from start to finish, submits to his attentions, provides him with free lodging, cooks his food and carries it to him, puts up with his casual coupling ("This is rather pleasant, isn't it?" he said. "I feel I deserve a break from my work," he added, as if being with her could be no more than that'). She puts up — only slightly less coolly — with other people's patronising pity when he finally slopes off home, leaving Emma to face the doctor's wife, sent round by her husband to ask tactless questions:

> "Perhaps you expected too much," she ventured. "Oh, I didn't *expect* anything – what right had I to expect anything?" said Emma fiercely.

One of the first things to be said about Pym heroines is that as a class they have no great expectations. Emma in the last of the novels was echoing almost exactly a phrase used by Mildred Lathbury in the second, *Excellent Women,* written more than a quarter of a century earlier. Mildred, whose task in life is to smooth other people's paths – especially men's – and plump their cushions, has offered to attend a lecture given by an anthropologist she scarcely knows and doesn't like on a subject about which she is both ignorant and indifferent.

> "Oh, you will find it decidedly dull," she said. "You mustn't expect too much."
>
> I forbore to remark that women like me really expected very little — nothing almost.

Heroines like Mildred and Emma have long since learnt to lower their sights virtually to the ground. Others — Prudence in the novel of that name, Wilmet in *A Glass Of Blessings,* Penelope in *An Unsuitable Attachment* — have more trouble. Of all the heroines, only one has great expectations, and her story ends with a correspondingly harsh fall. This is Leonora Eyre in *The Sweet Dove Died,* the last novel published in Pym's lifetime and the one in which, according to her close friend Robert Liddell, 'the author has put more of herself than in anything since her first books'. Like Belinda Bede in *Some Tame Gazelle,* Leonora is in some sense a self-portrait. Each draws heavily on her creator's own recent experience. Both belong to the same age group, and their central experience – of rejecting and being rejected — is roughly similar. Both are observant, efficient, unsentimental women, who bear their troubles with stoical courage, emerging from them on the same characteristic note of subdued anticipation. But that is as far as the resemblance goes for they stand at opposite ends of the Pym spectrum. Belinda is on the whole placid, undemanding, curious about and appreciative of other people, modest about herself and naturally self-effacing. Leonora is restless, exacting, self-absorbed and – to start with at any rate – wholly self-admiring. Between them they provide a useful measure of how far their creator travelled as a novelist after an exuberant start towards the rather more complicated and riskier writing she negotiated in the final phase of her career.

Belinda Bede is a spinster and church worker in her fifties, comfortably off and living with her far more elegant and attractive younger sister, Harriet, also unmarried but attended by a string of suitors from whom she receives (and rejects) regular proposals. Belinda herself, when unexpectedly obliged to turn down a passing Bishop, does it so apologetically that he responds in his turn by consoling her:

> "Do not give it another thought. Miss Bede," he said briskly, "I assure you that I shall not. After all, we must remember that *God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform.*"
>
> "Yes, certainly," said Belinda, feeling a little annoyed that he should quote her favourite hymn ... She did not quite see how the lines applied here, no doubt he had something else in mind. Perhaps he would come another day and ask Harriet? At all events he was not going to give her refusal another thought, so he could not care very much. It was not very flattering to her, though she supposed that as she was not fair to outward view she could hardly expect anything else.

Expectations apart, Belinda prefers to make do with the leftover remains of her former passion for Archdeacon Hocleve, who had jilted her thirty years before to marry a rival with whom he has now settled up the road at the vicarage. Nearly all the characters in this novel were drawn directly from the author's time at Oxford, when she was herself in love with the Archdeacon's original, a fellow undergraduate called Henry Harvey. *Some Tame Gazelle* began as serial letters written to Harvey and his friend Robert Liddell, who was working at the time in a junior capacity at the Bodleian Library and who turns up in the novel as Dr Nicholas Parnell, now promoted to Bodley's librarian:

> How nice it would be to see dear Nicholas again, thought Belinda, eating her scrambled egg and feeling happy and proud that she, a middle-aged country spinster, should number famous librarians among her friends. At least, the library was famous, she emended. Dear Nicholas had rather sunk into obscurity since his scholarly publications of twenty years ago.

Liddell in fact abandoned academe to become initially a rather more successful novelist than Miss Pym. His *alter ego,* Parnell, set more store by creature comforts than intellectual effort, the sole publication of his prime being a pamphlet, prettily bound with a well-chosen Greek epithet, on central heating in libraries. Henry Harvey got a more prolonged and effective fictional come-uppance as the elderly Archdeacon, a sort of clerical Pooh Bear, bright-eyed and bumbling, with Pooh's touching vanity and infectious love of literature, kept firmly in order by a bossy Christopher Robin of a wife. Belinda's feelings for him have mellowed into proprietary fondness: he serves her as a rewarding hobby, something to fill her spare time, like stamp collection or croquet.

Liddell said that, if Pym had had an entry in *Who's Who,* she would have listed 'unrequited love' as her recreation. Her letters and diaries show how much time and energy it absorbed. Like Prudence (one of her own two favourite heroines), 'she had got into the way of preferring unsatisfactory love affairs to any others, so that it was almost becoming a bad habit'. But if Pym in her letters casts herself as a dust-eater – one of Mildred Lathbury's army of 'rejected ones' – it was because the part offered opportunities she could no more resist than her heroines. When it came to the point, Belinda and Mildred have no hesitation whatsoever in giving the brush-off to eligible suitors. Even the dimmest of Pym's spinsters has her freebooting, freelance side, or as Liddell put it in an unpublished book, "A Mind At Ease":

> It is rare that Pym women are the objects of pursuit, nearly every one of them is a huntress — but one feels they hunt for sport, so to speak, not for food. They are all eager emotionally for love but on the whole they seem not to like the idea of sex ...

Pym's Oxford diaries show her very clearly in the role of huntress: stalking her quarry from the moment she first set eyes on him in the Bodleian, studying his habits, his clothes, his complexion, tracking him to his lair, even enlisting her friends to trail him through the streets of Oxford. Other far more obliging and attentive admirers failed to engage her sporting instincts, and got short shrift by comparison. When Harvey finally left Oxford, Pym received a copy of the Earl of Rochester's poems from Liddell for Christmas, together with a comforting poem of his own describing her besieged in the Bodleian by inevitable lovers, starting with Herrick and Milton ('... he John Milton, she Cassandra Pym / He for God only, she for God in him'). Here is the climax of Liddell's poem about Pym in the Bodleian (where obscene publications were catalogued in those innocent days under the Greek letter phi):

> But all the raucous myrmidons of Phi
> At her arrival lifted up their cry.
> My good Lord Rochester was at her feet
> With propositions that I daren't repeat.
> Havelock Ellis put her on her guard
> Against th'intentions of the Comte de Sade.
> Sure of success, poor Casanova's hopes
> Were dashed to pieces by a word from Stopes...

Rochester and his poems went straight into *Some Tame Gazelle*. So did Milton (who provides a critical diversion in the middle of the Bishop's vain attempt to persuade Belinda to marry him). But it is clear from the letters and diaries that this first love affair caused a great deal more suffering than similar affairs apparently do in Pym novels. *Some Tame Gazelle* was begun, according to Mr Liddell, as a way of subduing and containing in fiction feelings that threatened to overwhelm the author in fact:

> It seems to be *remedio amoris* — a cure for love — that no one ever thought of before, probably more efficacious than the Yeastvite tablets that Barbara took for the purpose, another original remedy.

Many novelists have, of course, turned to writing for therapeutic reasons. In Barbara Pym's case the therapy seems to work both ways: her admirers have consistently praised her books for what she herself called their cosiness, their soothing and restorative properties. This is what A. L. Rowse meant, when he said he could go on reading them forever. She acknowledged as much in a letter to Larkin listing the scenes in her current book that pleased her the most: 'I'm sure all these might be a comfort to somebody.' This was written in 1940 in the mood of self-deprecation that was her characteristic response during the two long periods when no publisher could be found to take her books. It gives an indication of the frame of mind in which her early books were written and read. By 'early books', I mean the seven or eight novels up to and including *An Unsuitable Attachment,* so notoriously turned down by Cape in 1963, at the beginning of what proved to be a by no means purely chronological break in Pym's writing career. These early books pitch their high spirits in a disconcertingly low key: they are finely observed, delicately ironic, intellectually restful and emotionally consoling. Their effects depend as much on what is left out as what is put in. This must have been the cream of the joke for the original readers of *Some Tame Gazelle,* who were themselves the principal characters in it. The author's triumph was to have turned both herself and the object of her grand passion into comic creations: she proposed the same remedy again, years later, in a letter written at the end of another calamitous affair:

> a complete break was the only thing: luckily we are both rather comic people so it isn't as bad as it sounds.

Sure enough, the hero of that affair turned up — or bits of him did — ten years later, transposed in the person of the fickle and adulterous widower Fabian Driver, in *Jane and Prudence:*

> "In many ways, of course, Mr Driver is a very charming man" [says Miss Doggett, an elderly neighbour and friend of the unfortunate Mrs Driver]. "They say, though, that men only want one thing – that's the truth of the matter." Miss Doggett ... looked puzzled; it was as if she had heard that men only wanted one thing, but had forgotten for the moment what it was.

This kind of absentmindedness is the logical last step in the process – undergone by all Pym heroines – of curbing emotion and desire, limiting expectation to 'nothing almost'. Their constant aim is to minimise any unruly or threatening element, generally sex of one sort or another, given that Pym heroines are seldom interested in power, and never in money or politics. Moral issues leave them cold, and so do aesthetics. Only one to my knowledge watches TV, and they care nothing for sport, travel, child-rearing or (with the exception of Sophia) for pets. Apart from Catherine, and possibly Leonora, they are poor to middling cooks. Paid employment, when they have it — secretarial, editorial, sub-academic — remains outside the novels' scope. Church work, on the other hand, is pursued with industry and enthusiasm. Pym heroines are never lethargic. On the contrary, they are diligent, well-organised optimists like the character in Waiting for Godot who got small thanks from his glum companion for his ingenious attempts to pass the time: 'It would have passed anyway.'

Sex, at the Pym level, is inextricably linked with survival: not so much physical (though that, too, begins to impinge on one or two of the later heroines) as psychological survival: the fundamental existentialist problem of how to get through the days. The pursuit of love brings with it the related, practical problem of sex, resolved with such elegant simplicity by Miss Doggett, who simply forgot all about it. Frailer sisters find themselves forced to resort to less drastic expedients — generally speaking, the forming of an unsuitable attachment to an object who is already married or definitively celibate, much too young, too glamorous, too grand, or — commonest of all — fully engaged elsewhere. The novel of that name — An Unsuitable Attachment—contains three heroines, all employing one or other of these devices, though the title refers principally to the unpromising match between Ianthe Broom and her seedy librarian, very much her junior and only too clearly on the make. Pym said she had originally meant to make him an altogether nastier piece of work, a fraudulent fortune

hunter, if not a bigamist: 'It is a rather a mild book,' she wrote apologetically to Larkin (who had reacted indignantly, like a great many of her friends, when the manuscript was rejected): 'I shall try to make my next book ... less so.'

She succeeded. An Unsuitable Attachment is the last of the reassuring early books: its successor, The Sweet Dove Died, is thoroughly uncomfortable. Courted in it by a highly eligible suitor – well-mannered, well-preserved, well-off, charming, cultivated and assiduously attentive – Leonora Eyre naturally prefers his nephew, who is not only young enough to be her son but homosexual as well. Both themes have been touched on before, most obviously in the unfortunate Ianthe, and in the married heroine of *A Glass Of Blessings.* But there is nothing in the earlier books to match the disturbing undercurrents, the open confrontations, sexual rivalry, suppressed jealousy and frustration of *Sweet Dove.* The first draft seemed sinister to a friend who read it. 'I didn't try to make it so,' Pym wrote to Larkin, 'but tended to leave out boring cosiness and concentrated on the darker side.' The manuscript (also, in its turn, eventually rejected for publication) was submitted to Larkin on whose advice the author clarified and recast the whole novel. 'Let me thank you... for telling me what my book was really about,' she wrote in October, 1968; and, almost a year later, 'I have cut out a lot of the characters, ruthlessly suppressed (or tried to) all "cosiness"...'

The book was finished the following year but had to wait for publication until the 'rediscovery' brought about, in 1977, by Larkin and Lord David Cecil. Pym used this period of eclipse for a drastic reappraisal of her methods and aims as a novelist: rejection by her publishers proved, in Robert Liddell's words, 'a blessing in disguise, if very unkindly and thoroughly disguised'. *The Sweet Dove* shows her enriched and strengthened, more assured, more ambitious, able to draw more deeply on her own experience, but, though her diaries show how much she relied for material on recent incidents and relationships, the difference seems to be less a personal than a technical increase in range.

In 1936, when Pym was working on her first novel, she sent a painfully honest letter to Henry Harvey about their inconclusive affair. 'I am fed up with the whole business,' she wrote. 'Of writing gay flippant letters to you and expecting you to see that I don't really feel that way.' She went on to explain that, from her point of view, their relationship was based on falsity and distortion, on refusing to take anything seriously, on a persistent jokiness which concealed an ingrained mistrust of what she called 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'. She was writing about her technique for negotiating difficulties in fact, but she might just as well have been writing about what became her habitual strategy in fiction.

It was also round about this time – the mid-1930s – that Liddell first introduced her to the novels of Ivy Compton-Burnett, and from then on Compton-Burnett echoes turn up regularly in her letters, occasionally even in her novels. She used the Compton-Burnett style to cover or convey embarrassment, for exuberant self-mockery on the score of advancing age and lack of achievement, her personal failure to marry or leave home or find a publisher, as in this extract from a conversation between her mother and an inquisitive neighbour:

> 'How quickly time goes,' said Mrs Minshall, 'it seems only yesterday that you were married.'
>
> 'I have been married 26 years,' said Mrs Pym, in a firm, clear tone. Mrs Minsall looked surprised — 'But Barbara, she is how old — 18?'
>
> 'Barbara is 24,' said Mrs Pym in a clear, ringing tone.
>
> 'Yes, I am 24,' said Barbara in a low mumbling tone.
>
> 'Well, well,' said Mrs Minshall.

This is a charming and accomplished tribute from one novelist to another of a very different sort. Ivy Compton-Burnett did this sort of thing all the time, perhaps never more gaily or flippantly than in *A House and Its Head,* the new novel that had just knocked Liddell sideways in 1936. But it was by no means the only, or even the main thing that she did with her dialogue, which belongs in some ways more to a play than a novel: the sort of play — by Checkhov, Pinter, Beckett — where people say one thing and mean another. Compton-Burnett dialogue is a complex and extremely subtle instrument for conveying what actors call undertext: the undertow of emotional tension, perpetually shifting and heaving beneath the surface of ordinary conversation, threatening on occasion to erupt and blow it apart. Compton-Burnett dialogue is designed specifically to convey what Pym called 'the spontaneous overflow of passionate feelings'. This was not something that interested her in the least as a novelist at this stage: 'The influence of Miss Compton-Burnett is very powerful once it takes hold, isn't it?' she asked Liddell.

> For a time there seems to be no point in writing any other way, indeed there seems not to be any other way, but I have found that it passes... I have now got back to my own way, such as it is. But purified and strengthened, as after a rich spiritual experience ...

There is little sign of this particular sort of purification in the early novels, which are preoccupied, not so much with what goes on beneath the surface of the characters' behaviour, as with the weird, convoluted, sad, loopy and infinitely decorative encrustations of that surface itself. It was not until *The Sweet Dove Died* that Pym began to exploit and explore the powerful subterranean feelings which give the book its sombre, even sinister colouring. They thicken the air between Leonora and her rival, Ned, in manoeuvre and counter-manoeuvre for the possession of the naïve and fetching James. They underly the strange, memorable, three-cornered expedition on a wet day to Keats' house in Hampstead, where Leonora — who had set out with the highest possible expectations — is finally forced to eat her plateful of dust.

Glimpses of 'the darker side' were present in the novels almost from the start. It is already there in the strange vision of mortality that comes to Mildred Lathbury, in *Excellent Women,* forced to take refuge from a sexual predator first at the cosmetics counter of a London department store, then in the Ladies Room:

> *All flesh is but as grass* ... I thought, watching women working at their faces with savage concentration, opening their mouths wide, biting and licking their lips, stabbing at their noses and chins with powder puffs. Some, who had abandoned the struggle to keep up, sat in chairs, their bodies slumped down, their hands resting on their parcels. One woman lay on a couch, her hat and shoes off, her eyes closed. I tiptoed past her with my penny in my hand.

The scene is, in Liddell's words, 'something like an Alma-Tadema in modern dress with a touch of Goya.' Touches of Goya come thick and fast in the later novels. It is not simply that death and disintegration loom nearer, rather that they are seen in closer focus. Leonora in *The Sweet Dove Died* positions herself at the furthest possible extreme from the typical, self-deprecating, dun-coloured, dust-eating Pym heroine. Rash, gaudy, grasping, predatory, pretentious, she is a vamp-cum-cultural-snob who has 'had romantic experiences in practically all the famous gardens of Europe'. 'I started not at all in sympathy with Leonora, who began by being a minor character,' Pym wrote to Larkin,

'but as the book progressed I got more interested in her and really enjoyed writing about her best in the end.'

Perhaps it was this initial hostility that enabled Leonora's creator to probe so deeply into the pain of rejection. Leonora's unhappiness — and the growing sensitivity that comes with it — her bitterness, frustration and pride are explored with an intimacy and depth attempted in no earlier novel. She has none of the protective drabness of previous Pym heroines which makes her more vulnerable, and her misery correspondingly greater when she, too, comes to share Mildred's intimations of mortality. Only this time the scene is surveyed not from outside, by an observer, but from within, by someone who feels herself part of her own vision of dissolution. Leonora, at the height of her wretchedness after James has left her, takes refuge in a moment of near-panic in a self-service café in the West End, serviced by a haggard, elderly woman mumbling to herself as she moves between the tables:

> To make things worse, she now crashed down a heavy tray on Leonora's table on which were piled not only dirty cups, saucers and plates, but all kinds of food scraps —sandwich crusts, bits of lettuce and tomato, the remains of cream cakes and even squashed-out cigarette ends – it was really too disgusting.
>
> "Please take that tray away from here," said Leonora in an icy voice. "I must put it somewhere, Madame," the old woman grumbled. There was a hostile silence during which Leonora was conscious that she herself belonged here too, with ... the old woman and the air of things that had seen better days. Even the cast-off crusts, the ruined cream cakes and the cigarette ends had their significance. The woman, still muttering, removed the tray and dumped it on another table ... [Leonora] turned her head away and huddled into her fur coat, feeling herself debased, diminished, crushed and trodden into the ground ... I am utterly alone, she thought.

Loneliness and isolation recur in the later novels. Life is bleaker and more brutal: we have come a long way from the well-upholstered world of Belinda Bede and her sister with their maid, their home comforts, their books and their bridge coats, their carefully-chosen menus, select friends and frequent parties. Prospects have shrunk, expectation has been pretty well blotted out, for Miss Crowe and Miss Ivory, the two heroines on the verge of retirement after lifetimes in the office in *Quartet In Autumn*.

> Their status as ageing, unskilled women did not entitle them to an evening party, but it was felt that a lunchtime gathering, leading only to more than usual drowsiness in the afternoon, would be entirely appropriate. The other advantage of a lunchtime party was that only medium Cyprus sherry need be provided, whereas the evening called for more ... expensive drinks ...

Death, decay and the sheer cost of living — spiritually as well as financially speaking — are the central themes of Quartet in Autumn. Miss Ivory spends her retirement classifying her collection of used plastic bags, contemplating with serene satisfaction her hoard of unopened tins and her shed full of empty milk bottles before finally dying of starvation. Miss Crowe spends hers alone in a strange bedsitter, watching television on sufferance under the eye of a bullying landlady. This was the book with which Barbara Pym made her triumphant re-entry on to the literary scene in 1977 for, in spite of its consistently dingy surface, the general impression is anything but harsh or mean. There is a new openness, a generosity and warmth of feeling, as if the author had loosened, if not lost the ironical smile that once distanced her and her characters so successfully from any threat of upset.

The difference between late and early Pym may be compared with the different approaches of the two doctors in the last novel, *A Few Green Leaves*. The enthusiastic, reassuring and far more popular younger doctor takes great pains over his mother-in-law, prescribing vitamins and exercise, swapping her sugar for saccharine tablets, refusing her white bread, cakes and pastries, only intermittently stopping to wonder why he is so eager to preserve her life by confiscating everything that makes it worth living. Where the young doctor struggles to counteract the evils of modern life, the old doctor lets things slide, rarely prescribing more for his patients than fresh air or an early bedtime. His finest hour comes when he is consulted by the local foodie, a gourmet restaurant inspector suffering from strain, tension and insomnia. The doctor's prescription – and it might almost be the novelist speaking – is to accept things as they are:

> Try not to be so critical – learn to like the processed cheese, and tea-bags, and instant coffee and beefburgers and fish fingers too – most of the people in the village live on such things, and they're none the worse for it.

This seems to me to be the perennial lesson of Pym heroines: eat dust and learn to like it. *Don't despise the diet.*

Paper first delivered to the Barbara Pym Conference, St Hilda's College, Oxford, July 1986

An unmistakable voice

P. D. James

When I was first invited to talk to you, I accepted with great pleasure. Only when I began composing my talk was I seized with serious misgivings. There is surely nothing so presumptuous and so potentially disastrous as to address an audience, all of whom know more about the subject under discussion than one does oneself. Some of you had the privilege of knowing Barbara Pym; that must have been a privilege indeed. I see too, from past conferences, that almost all aspects of Barbara Pym's talent have been discussed, so little I say will be new. But it is always a joy to be at St Hilda's and, most importantly, this talk gives me the opportunity of paying my tribute to a writer who has given me immense pleasure and one whom I greatly admire, both as a novelist and as a woman. I shall call her Barbara and I hope that this won't be seen as lese-majesty.

At the end of her sensitive, excellently structured biography of Barbara Pym, *A Lot to Ask*, Hazel Holt quotes Barbara:

> One of my favourite quiz games on television was one in which panellists were asked to guess the authorship of certain passages and then to discuss various features of the author in question. There were no prizes for guessing, no moving belt of desirable objects passing before their eyes, just the pleasure of recognising the unmistakable

voice of Henry James or Graham Greene, or whoever it might be. I think that'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.

It may be a lot to ask for, but the literary immortality of a distinctive voice was certainly granted to Barbara Pym. In every paragraph we hear unmistakably the authentic and unique Barbara Pym. She has been likened to other writers, principally Jane Austen, perhaps because both were ironists. But the world her characters inhabit is hers alone, and it is with joy and relief that we enter into it for our delectation and comfort in good times and bad.

The basic facts of her life will be known, I am sure, to all of you. The middle class, settled, comfortable and happy childhood in Oswestry, the Oxford years at St Hilda's College where she renamed herself Sandra and deliberately gained a reputation for flirtatiousness.

Oxford was followed by the war years and the disastrous falling-in-love with Gordon Glover and his rejection of her, her service in the WRNS, her success as a novelist and then the dark years from 1963 when her books were ruthlessly rejected. This was a prolonged period of disappointment and discouragement though which she triumphantly emerged when Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil named her in 1977 as one of the century's under-rated writers. It was a life lived through tumultuous years and yet one of little incident, leading in the end to a peaceful life with her sister in an Oxfordshire village and an all-too-early death from cancer.

It was, of course, in those young carefree years at Oxford that she met Henry Harvey, who was to be an influence both in her life and her writing until the day she died. It was perhaps fitting that, when she was dying, he should have been her last visitor. She fell deeply in love with him and, at Oxford, pursued him relentlessly, becoming in fact something of a benign stalker. In talking to the PEN Club in 1985, Henry Harvey gave a perceptive insight into the young Barbara he knew:

> I think the chief strand in my picture of her in the early days is the alternation in her between pretend play on the one hand ... and her trying or pretending to make her pretend play real. And she had some damn good goes at that, at turning pretend play into real, bouncing and bouncing along did our Barbara go and having some bumps too, which she was philosophical about. It didn't work. 'Being-in-love' and 'being-in-Oxford' were better kept as pretend play. That way they could be turned into art.

And of course these pretend games were turned into art. She was above all a writer. She had a writer's eye, a writer's sensibility, a writer's intelligence, which meant that nothing which happened to her, however apparently slight, went unexamined and that, except for the period of her deepest unhappiness, the whole of her experience, however apparently mundane, was put to the service of her art. A casually uttered phrase would evoke the thought that it would make a good title, and all her titles are excellent. Even when she went into the hospice and knew that she was dying, she took her notebook. If, as I like to think, she entered a traditional High Anglican heaven, her first thought would be, 'Plenty of material here'.

One of the questions every novelist gets most frequently asked is, how do you create character? Are all these people imaginary, or do you draw from real life? Even a novelist who apparently distances herself from the people she intimately knows, draws on real life, her own or that of other people. How else can fictional characters be created? Barbara Pym is foremost among writers whose life and art are inextricably one. In novel after novel we recognise Barbara herself or the people with whom she was most intimately connected. Perhaps we see this most clearly in *Some Tame Gazelle*, where Archdeacon Hoccleve is unmistakably Henry, and where the heroine Belinda, like Barbara herself, continues loving him even though he is now well into middle age and has been married for over 30 years. In her third novel, *Jane and Prudence* published in 1953, a clergyman's wife, a former English don, Jane Cleveland, is a portrait of Barbara's mother, and Prudence, Jane's former pupil whose love-life is erratic, and who has a predilection for falling in love with unsuitable men, again is Barbara herself.

It is perhaps inevitable that we ask ourselves why she never married. That question would not come so readily to mind about a contemporary novelist. An unmarried woman today can be assumed to be single by choice and may well have sexual relations outside marriage. But for a woman born in 1913, marriage was regarded as a natural state for a woman, and a girl who, like Barbara, was clever, attractive, sociable and kind, would attract comment if she had not achieved matrimony by the age of 30. There is evidence that Barbara would like to have been married, but I wonder if at some unconscious level she realised that marriage would be inimical to her art. In this, too, I feel that she resembles Jane Austen. This was probably the reason, apart from the lack of love, which caused Jane Austen to accept an offer of marriage and to repent the following morning.

Perhaps, too, men were a little frightened of that all-seeing eye. There are no heroes in Barbara Pym; we can expect no Rochester, no Heathcliff, no Darcy. Even when she loves she perceives the essential truth, not only of the relationship, but of the loved one himself. But she wasn't immune to the anguish of unreciprocated sexuality. It is apparent from her diaries that she was passionately in love with Gordon Glover and that the realisation that, for him, their relationship had always been temporary, caused her acute unhappiness. None of this anguish appears in the novels. There most marriages seem to be settled in a kind of amicable domesticity. Wilmet Forsyth in *A Glass of Blessings* copes with admirable forbearance with her boring Civil Service husband whose idea of a birthday present is to transfer a sum of money from his account to hers. In *Jane and Prudence*, Jane's marriage to her parson husband is certainly not unhappy but there is no hint of passion, although she does admit that his eyes are still as blue and his figure is as good as when they met in Oxford.

Perhaps the most unexpected marriage is that between Mary Beamish and Father Marius Ransome in *A Glass of Blessings*. Mr Bason's description of overhearing Father Ransome breaking the news to Father Thames is Barbara Pym at her most delightful:

> I heard every word, as I could hardly have failed to. Father Thames likes his glass of Tio Pepe before dinner – as who does not? And I was about to take the decanter in to him, having cleaned it – not *washed* it, I hasten to add – during his holiday, when I became aware of voices coming through the open door of the study... Ransome must have slipped into the room without my realising it, for the first thing I heard was his voice saying, "Father, I feel I ought to tell you that I have decided to get married." Father Thames is a little deaf in the right ear, you know, and Ransome's tone was of such a loudness that I judged him to be standing on Father Thames's right. "Married, did you say?" Father Thames repeated. "Yes", said Ransome. Then there was silence for a minute, during which Father Thames must have made some gesture of surprise or disgust, for he then said, "Well, Ransome, this *is* a shock, I must say. No sooner is my back turned than this happens. It is really *too*

bad. First it was the South India business and doubts about the validity of Anglican Orders, and now *this*. Oh it is *too* bad, *too* bad."

We have, however, little doubt that it will turn out reasonably well, although, as Wilmet reflects, the marriage of two people who had almost taken vows of celibacy ought not to be a riotous affair.

But then marriages in Barbara Pym are not riotous affairs, although the Rockinghams certainly had their moments of domestic drama. Many of the female characters, including the wives, expect little of life. One has a feeling that they live vicariously, observing and feeding on the emotions of others rather than embarking on the tumultuous seas of passion, jealousy, infidelity or despair. What is extraordinary is that Barbara Pym makes these lives so fascinating that we are intimately and continually engaged in the day-to-day existence of these educated middle-class people with their high Anglicanism, their scrupulous attention to the needs of others, their surmounting of small difficulties. 'Excellent women' indeed who, in the words of Mildred Lathbury, 'are capable of dealing with most of the stock situations of life' – birth, marriage, death, the successful jumble sale, the garden fête spoilt by bad weather. In their relationships with men they are content to cook, to correct proofs, to type, to take a subservient role even while they watch with a slightly ironic and critical eye the foibles of these lovable, if essentially inferior, creatures. With Barbara Pym we are never in any doubt as to which is the superior sex.

Some reviewers and readers were able to detect under the comfortable surfaces of a Pym novel the strain of sadness, of desperation uncomplainingly endured. Writing to Barbara in 1964 to praise *Excellent Women*, Philip Larkin detected

> a harsh kind of suffering very far from the other novels: it's a study of the pain of being single, the unconscious hurt the world regards as this state's natural clothing – oh dear, this sounds rather extravagant, but time and again one senses not only that Mildred is suffering, but that nobody can see why she shouldn't suffer, like a Victorian cab-horse.

The simile is interesting for me because it uncannily evokes a long letter written in 1938, jointly to Henry, his wife Elsie and their friend Robert Liddell, in which the pain of losing him and the prospect of continued spinsterhood are barely but gallantly disguised:

> And you will be asking now who is this Miss Pym, and I will tell you that she is a spinster lady who was thought to have been disappointed in love, and so now you know who is this Miss Pym. Well now, as I am telling you, this Miss Pym is looking out of the window, and she is looking into the field opposite the house, where there are many lambs frisking, it being spring, the sweet spring, when maids dance in a ring. But this Miss Pym, although she is, so to speak, a maid, is not dancing in a ring, no sir, and she is not frisking, no buddy, no how. She is seeing an old brown horse which is walking with a slow majestic dignity across this field, and she is thinking that it is the horse that she will be imitating and not the lambs. Old brown horse, she says, we have had our moments you and I, and she is singing in a faded voice an old song she is remembering and it is all about great big moments of happiness and such ... And now you are asking, what is this Miss Pym doing with herself in Oswestry? And I will tell you, she is writing, simply that. And she is writing a new novel, and Chapter One is nearly done, but it is not in rhymes, no sir, not even Miss Pym is as clever as that ... And you will be coming back to England, and you will be meeting this so dull spinster which is like the old brown horse walking with a slow majestic dignity, and you will be saying Well-for-goodness-sake, Miss Pym, like they say in the films. But this spinster, this Barbara Mary Crampton Pym, she will be smiling to herself – ha-ha she will be saying inside. *But I have that within which passeth show* – maybe she will be saying that, but she is a queer old horse, this old brown spinster, so I cannot forecast exactly what she will be saying.

She had indeed that within her which 'passeth show', and it is intriguing to think that Henry Harvey is best remembered today, not for what he personally achieved, but as the man whom Barbara Pym so faithfully loved.

In Sara LeFanu's biography of Rose Macaulay there is a sentence about the writer which seems to me singularly appropriate also to Barbara.

> Take away the fun from the story and you have underneath the delicate pattern of an unassuming and inarticulate tragedy.

It is this underlying note of the heartache at the heart of things which makes a Barbara Pym novel far more than a comforting saga of the minutiae of lives lived in a more innocent age which has passed almost entirely away. But of course the novels were always more than that and we never read them as mere exercises in nostalgia. We rejoice in the knowledge that before she died Barbara knew how greatly her novels were enjoyed and valued, and her reputation has not only lasted, but been enhanced by the years. The fact that this Society exists and that we are here tonight is one more assurance that she did indeed achieve the kind of immortality she craved, the unique voice, and that her novels have a secure place in the canons of twentieth-century literature.

Talk given at the Barbara Pym Society's Annual Meeting, St Hilda's College, Oxford, 30th August 2003

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Notice Board

The **Barbara Pym Society Spring Meeting** will be held on Sunday 5 June 2005, at St Alban's Centre, Holborn. Buffet lunch at 1 pm, followed by Elizabeth Proud and Sioned Wiliam sharing their memories of 'Hilary Pym: the Wild Beast'.

The theme for the 12th Annual **Mystery & Crime Conference** at St Hilda's College, Oxford will be "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly — Characters In Crime Fiction". It will take place 19-21 August 2005; the speakers to date include crime writers: Robert Barnard, Natasha Cooper, Colin Dexter, Jane Langton, Gillian Linscott, Jessica Mann, Val McDermid, Anne Perry, Peter Robinson and Laura Wilson. Andrew Taylor will chair the conference. Information from Eileen Roberts, St Hilda's College.

The **Barbara Pym Society Annual Meeting** will be held in Oxford, Saturday–Sunday 3-4 September, 2005, with the theme of Barbara Pym's novel, *An Unsuitable Attachment*. We hope that it may be preceded by a sale of Barbara Pym's personal library on the Friday evening, and it will include the Society's Annual General Meeting on Saturday morning.

Elements of the Maternal in three Pym novels

Chris Ward

I have looked at the role of the maternal in the novels following some psychological literary analysis based on the work of Julia Kristeva. She is a French psychoanalyst with a particular interest in language and women's issues. Most of this is based on her essay, 'Women's Time'.[1] It is interesting to work her theories out against Pym's stories. I am not looking at literal mothers in this, but where the maternal appears in Pym's novels.

I find that in the relationships between people, between men and women, in gay relationships and women's friendships with other women, maternal elements are significant. Although everyone has been an infant, and therefore on the receiving end of mothering, the role of birth mother is not given to everyone: however, anyone can adopt that maternal role, regardless of gender. What, though, constitutes the maternal? It is, inevitably, a caring, nurturing role, but it is also a power struggle, with the mother needing to contain and discipline the child in order to keep him or her safe, against the child's desire for independence.

Maternity is an act of creation, but women do not always look to having a child as the only act of creation which validates them as women. Kristeva asserts:

> It is in the aspiration towards artistic and in particular, literary creation that women's desire for affirmation now manifests itself.

Pym's characters, her women and men, whether feminized or not, are her children, her creative act. A novel itself is frequently compared to a baby - it is created by its author, nurtured, brought into being and worried about until its place in the world is safe. A story creates its own world (as a child has a world of her own) within the everyday one in which the readers live. Moreover, it remains in the consciousness of the writer who created it, forever, just as a child does in its mother's mind.

Thus the novels – and the characters in them – become a family of children. The reappearances of characters from earlier Pym novels, such as Sister Blatt running the nursing home in *An Academic Question*, show that the world of the novel is not contained in one book. It is somehow more surprising to find Helena or Prudence in the 'wrong' book than it would be to have a reference to a living character, such as the Prime Minister or a famous actor. This intertextuality expands the world of the individual novel, yet it also creates a family of characters whom the readers remember with fondness. We all like to know how the family is doing, who has got married, had a baby or died. We may not be connected directly, but we care about these people. For people such as us, avid fans of the books, we see them as a part of our lives. We dislike their being maligned, and delight to hear them praised, just as mothers defend and are proud of their children.

Kristeva has a theory that because all women have the potential to give birth, this is an issue for all women. Whether they decide to have a child or not, or whether the decision is taken away from them, affects them both consciously and subconsciously and makes their relationships not only with society, but with the concept of time different. Women are, she asserts, more aware of the cycles of time, of birth and death, gestation and biological rhythms. They have a different sense of space and a recognition of eternity. This perhaps is what makes Pym's women, whether mothers or not, look back and forward, have a faith which they rarely question seriously, be deeply aware of the changing seasons and given to bizarre flights of fancy, such as in *Crampton Hodnet*, Miss Morrow's imagining:

> the whole of North Oxford, its houses and inhabitants, lifted just as they were into heaven, where all the objects would be the same in themselves, but invested with a different meaning from that which they had on earth. They would all be dear treasured things because they would be part of the heavenly atmosphere.

Kristeva also describes certain feminist beliefs as an ideology that has "affinities with so-called matriarchal beliefs: in other words, those beliefs characterizing matrilineal societies." Perhaps it is a flight of fancy of my own that Pym's work shows that she is attracted to such feminist beliefs, even if she would not have called them that, as her work at the International African Institute seems to have given her a fascination for matrilineal kinship groups, which crop up in three of her novels. Certainly, her defence of women's roles argues for a more matriarchal structure.

Crampton Hodnet and *Some Tame Gazelle* in particular are cyclical, set in an unthreatening past, and their nature – as they both begin and end in the same geographical places and in much the same way — nurtures and protects the reader. They were both published after that pre-war life had changed dramatically, to be reinvented by TV and film as a paradise lost. The modern reader has to be influenced by the genteel poverty and class-consciousness which has been conveyed to us in that way. The reason I think the novels remain appealing is because they do not deal with historical or political affairs, but the universal issues of love and loss, disappointment, social power struggles and the beauty of the unregarded life which, I suspect, most of us live.

Julia Kristeva writes about the idea of the chora. I am going to try to simplify this for anyone who has never heard of it and offer my apologies to anyone who has. This is the place – a mystical, indefinable, essential space in the psyche where the memories of the early weeks of life are stored; the time in which a baby exists before it is able to speak. It is generally agreed now that these first few weeks of life are very important for a baby. This time is, or should be, a state of bliss in which the (m)other and baby are at one, interdependent physically, emotionally and, to an extent, telepathically. They both give and receive. (This doesn't have to be the birth mother – any primary carer, man or woman, can fulfil this role.) As the baby grows, it becomes separated from (m)other, and its desire always is to return to that state of bliss. The chora is wordless, so no one is able to articulate properly what they desire. The separation from this state of bliss is traumatic, and this trauma is also wordless, but it surfaces in inarticulate distress and 'useless longings' in times of crisis. Memory is constructed with language, which is why most people do not remember the times before they could speak. Nonetheless, feelings are powerful and remain in the memory. It is our memories of feelings – such as fear or a sense of

security--which drive us.

Some Tame Gazelle and *Crampton Hodnet* are, to my mind, dominated by maternal issues. *Some Tame Gazelle* is set in the 1930s, in a small village where the sisters, Belinda and Harriet Bede, still live in their deceased parents' house. Two men arrive in the village and threaten to disrupt this comfortable existence, but the crises are resolved without any real change to their lives. *Some Tame Gazelle* opens and closes in the same way, with Harriet looking forward to mothering a curate. However, she in turn, is mothered by Belinda, who takes over her knitting: 'begun by her [Harriet] in a burst of enthusiasm and usually finished more soberly, by Belinda,' as many mothers have done with their children's hobbies, chores, pets and so on. Nor is this ability to mother one sided. When Belinda has spent what she feels is a slightly illicit time with Henry, Harriet is eager to hear the details.

> 'But Harriet,' she protested, 'there's really nothing to tell. Henry read aloud to me and then we talked a bit and then he persuaded me to stay to supper which I did. But I don't know if I ought to have done that,' she added rather unhappily. 'I mean, I shouldn't like Agatha to think ...'
>
> 'No, no, of course not,' said Harriet soothingly. 'Now, wouldn't you like a nice cup of Ovaltine?' she said, fussing round Belinda like a motherly hen.

Considering that Belinda has spent her evening in a romantic and sentimental mood, this sounds a bit like: 'Honestly, Mum, nothing happened!' followed by Harriet's 'Oh, you poor lamb! Never mind.'

Both women remain, to a degree, under maternal influence as they continue to live in their childhood home - their parents' house. This can be seen to represent the chora. At one time, Harriet had wanted to call the drawing room the lounge:

> but Belinda would not hear of it. She had finally won her point by reminding Harriet of how much their dear mother would have disliked it.

Belinda's desire to remain in this state is powerful. When the bliss of her condition is seriously threatened, Belinda panics.

> ... had she known what was going on, [Mr. Mold's proposing to Harriet] she would probably have rushed into the drawing room, even if she had been wearing her old gardening mackintosh and galoshes, and tried her best to stop it.

The disruption of the bliss of the chora is an even greater threat than the maternal disapproval which would result from such behaviour. Nor is this one-sided, evinced by Harriet's reaction to hearing that Belinda had refused to marry Theo Grote.

> 'No!' Harriet's surprise was a little uncomplimentary, but her joy and relief at having her sister spared to her more than made up for it.

There is no dialogue to convey this 'joy and relief' because to live in a close and loving relationship is to live in some degree telepathically – with no need for words. The sisters and the readers are aware that the intensity of this relationship is real and strong, yet fragile, as a child and mother know that after the trauma of the initial separation, other separations might, and probably should, follow. Harriet listens to Ricardo's frequent proposals seriously, asserting her right to marry if she wants to. The possibility of separation is always there. The happiness of being accepted and valued, as she was in the chora, are reflected in Belinda's own moments of joy: her sense of Miss Prior's forgiveness, the Misses Bede's superior catering, and famously, the successful pasta, 'finer even than the finest chamois leather'.

The unrequited love of Belinda's life is Henry, the Archdeacon. Belinda's rivalry with Henry's wife, Agatha, reflects a mother/daughter dynamic. They compete for his favour, as a mother and daughter compete for father's attention, yet they accept each other's territory. Whilst Belinda may mourn the lost romance of her youth, she accepts that Agatha manages Henry better than she could. Belinda has Henry's intellectual heart, but no real sexual desire for him. He is a safe fantasy, as a father is a safe haven for his daughter.

Crampton Hodnet, Pym's first book (although published posthumously), is also set in the 1930s, but this time largely in North Oxford. It covers the time of one academic year. Miss Doggett lives here with her paid companion, Miss Morrow and a young curate, Stephen Latimer. He proposes to Miss Morrow and is rejected, only to marry a more suitable girl in the end. This tale is woven into the mid-life crisis of Miss Doggett's nephew, Francis, and his hopeless romance with one of his students.

Crampton Hodnet has a bossy, dominating presence in Miss Doggett, but there is more than a passing resemblance to mothers who are, shall we say, difficult. She orders Jessie Morrow about and condescends to her as if she were a small child –

> 'Miss Morrow ... you are not a woman of the world. You cannot possibly know what goes on outside Leamington Lodge.'

This novel lends a certain womblike quality to Leamington Lodge: it is dark, quiet and its occupants emerge from its strange world into daylight, only to return to it at the close of the book. It may be Miss Doggett's chora.

The Bodleian Library is another dark and womblike place, where there is calm and security:

> the one place left in Oxford where scholars and elderly people can spend a peaceful afternoon

and where romances are conceived. However, in order to live, one has to leave this place – romance and real life flourish outside Leamington Lodge and the library, not in them. Stephen Latimer, Barbara Bird and the other students all move on, but Francis and Miss Doggett stagnate. To deny change is to be defeated by it.

Part of the problem, seems to be that many of the women mother their men and it infantilizes them – it is assumed that they are incompetent, not only in the domestic sphere, but generally. It is not enough for Margaret Cleveland to mother her daughter Anthea. She no longer encourages her husband with his work

> because she feared that with her help it might quite easily be finished before one of them died, and then where would they be? Francis was like a restless, difficult child if he had nothing to occupy him.

When he returns from his failed affair, she punishes him by ignoring him (and because her real child is in real distress). Francis sulks like a child and then retires to bed to be fussed over, and the roles are re-set as if nothing has happened.

Less than Angels has quite a different and more modern feel to it. The story centres around an anthropologist, Tom, and the four women who are involved with him: Catherine, with whom he lives at the beginning, Deirdre, who is besotted with him, his sister and Elaine, an ex-fiancée. It is a less comfortable book than *Crampton Hodnet* or *Some Tame Gazelle*, and deals with more tangled emotions, but it is still full of women who seek to mother their men rather than seek a relationship which is a balanced partnership of equals. It is concerned with writing as a creative act – its demands and satisfaction. Creating writing and separating oneself from that written work concerns Catherine, Tom, Alaric Lydgate and all the other anthropolo-

gists. The anthropologists' work is not creative – it is factual and limited in its appeal and it imprisons rather than frees Tom and Alaric. Catherine's is creative, but her heroines' stories end at the altar, and so she cannot write her own story: in this way her creative output is stunted. Her tales are no substitute for the children she would like, but she is just as protective about them. When Digby reads aloud from her story in progress, she is distressed.

> Catherine ran into the room and snatched the sheet out of the typewriter. "You mustn't look," she cried, "it's not your kind of story."
>
> "Will you say that to Tom when he gets back?"

Digby's response is telling and he wisely changes the subject without following it up. Catherine, who feels that she is unlikely to have children with Tom, tries to find her affirmation as a woman in writing, but she writes romantic fiction which she herself does not value highly.

Catherine's distress around Tom relates to separation and the wordless trauma it engenders. On the bus, after Tom's departure for Africa, she finds herself thinking of trivial things, and

> underneath all this, in the bottom layer of her thoughts, was a dark and confused sadness about Tom she did not attempt to bring out and analyse.

Catherine mothers men. She admits that she 'tended to regard most men, and Tom in particular, as children.' Catherine automatically feeds Mark and Digby when they turn up, like errant sons, and Tom, who types while she cooks. Deirdre wants to share Tom's work, but it is beyond her because she is a first-year undergraduate and he is working for his PhD. Catherine doesn't understand it at all and doesn't think she needs to, and Elaine breeds dogs and has grown away from Tom. This leaves little more than the domestic area of life, as none of them appear to share any other interests with Tom. His thesis dominates his life and cuts off these women who want to keep him dependent: from Catherine, who (stunning the modern woman) does his washing and mending for him before he leaves her, from his sister and his fiancée who want to domesticate him into conventional husband material and from Deirdre, who is in love with love and is no more able to understand his work than his subconscious. Alaric Lydgate's notes work in the same way, cutting him off from proper relationships with people. Catherine acts as his psychotherapist, getting him in touch with his past as he literally touches his notes. When they are burned, he is free from their tyranny and Catherine feels somehow responsible for him ...

> Like so many men, he needed a woman stronger than himself, for behind the harsh cragginess of the Easter Island façade, cowered the small boy, uncertain of himself.

The working out of what can be seen as maternal characteristics is not exclusively in the realm of the maternal. We all care for, worry about and nurture our families and our friends, and men are often as maternal as women without being feminised or compromizing their masculinity in any way. It is now held a virtue for a man to be in touch with his feminine side. These truths about the way women and men react to each other are central to the work of Barbara Pym and our own psyches, and that, I think, is something we subconsciously recognize and relate to, and so a part of what makes the novels both appealing and memorable.

1. Kristeva, Julia. 'Women's Time' in *A Kristeva Reader* ed. M. Toril; Blackwell, 1987

www.barbara-pym.org

The Barbara Pym Society website is something all of us can be proud of, as well as benefiting from. Organized by Ellen Miller and Sherrie Saint John, it contains much informative material, cleverly linked and fully illustrated.

The Home Page presents readers with a photograph of Barbara, and the list of contents, each to be clicked on to access those pages, including:

About Us
contains links to St Hilda's College, the Bodleian Library, Moyer Bell and Amazon.

Barbara Pym Biography

Books by Barbara Pym

Pym Society in the U.K.

Pym Society in North America
— both allow printing of New Membership Form and Membership Renewal Form

Past Conferences
This offers:

Pym Conference 2005 Photos - 165 of them

Selected Papers from the U.K. Barbara Pym Meeting at St Hilda's College, Sept. 2004
papers by Katherine Ackley and Maggie Lane

Pym Conference 2003 Selected Papers and Photos
papers by Tim Burnett and Gabriel Myers, and 90 photographs

Pym Conference 2002 Selected Papers and Photos
papers by Katherine Ackley, Judy McInnis and Catherine Wallace, and 38 photographs

2001 Pym Conference Report

2001 Pym Conference Photos — 111 of them

U.K. Pym Society Meeting Report, Sept. 2001

Pym conferences in the U.K. (1986-2003)

Moyer Bell Publishers

"Green Leaves"
with link to the index to Volumes 1-9, 1994-2003

Barbara Pym Walking Tour
An illustrated literary tour, *Following Barbara's Footsteps* by Ellen Miller, is a guide to 'Pym places' in Oswestry, Oxford, Bristol, London and Finstock, with details too of churches where Barbara worshipped, places she visited and settings in Pym novels. It is available as a free download, 25 pages in PDF.

"'All This Reading': The Literary World of Barbara Pym"

NEWS

David Levine Drawing of BP

"No Soft Incense: Barbara Pym and the Church"

Pym gleanings

** A revised, 60-volume edition of the *Dictionary of National Biography* (from the Oxford University Press) was published in 2004. Among the 50,000 entries is a long one for Barbara Pym, written by C. A. R. Hills. *Excellent Women* is deemed 'the most typical of the books', *A Glass of Blessings* 'the most subtle', *Quartet in Autumn* 'her best'. He pronounces *No Fond Return of Love* 'overlong', and that 'it is doubtful whether at least two of the [posthumously published] novels, and the compilation, really merited print'. Hills concludes, 'She will be remembered ... for the luminous works which she contributed to literature'.

** The *Times Literary Supplement*, on 28 April 2005, wrote in its 'Commentary' section:

> News from another imaginary realm: James Runcie's foreword to *No Soft Incense: Barbara Pym and the Church*, edited by Hazel K. Bell and published by the Barbara Pym Society, contains the interesting statistic that there are some seventy-five clergymen in the work of Barbara Pym, "which averages out at 5.76 a novel". Runcie considers Pym's admiringly critical attitude to these characters and commends the volume's other contributors who write on such matters as "Roman Catholicism in Barbara Pym's Novels", "Clergy Wives" and "Miss Pym and the Victorian Hymn". Gerard Irvine provides a clerical directory compiled from the novels, a small-scale thorough investigation of the sort which was close to the novelist's heart. *No Soft Incense* is available from St Hilda's College, Oxford, for £7.50 plus 56p post and packing.

** In the March 24, 2005, edition of *New York Review*, Frank Kermode, reviewing John Bayley's *The Power of Delight*, writes:

> [Bayley] doesn't seek universal assent; for example, he has his favorites, who pop up in all sorts of contexts as touchstones of excellence: Pushkin is chief among them, but they also include Barbara Pym, John Betjeman, and Anthony Powell ...

** Alexander McCall Smith, in his "daily novel" in *The Scotsman*, "44 Scotland Street", in the instalment of 15 February 2005, again refers to Pym, with a woman presenting the hero with a pound of sausages and the line, "You do remember that wonderful line from Barbara Pym, do you not, where one of the characters says that men need meat?"

No prize offered for placing the quote.

** In the Feb. 2005 issue of *The Oldie* Mavis Nicholson asks in her regular column, 'Dear Mavis...', 'Who wrote this, and in what book? –"It is better taste somehow that a man should be unfaithful to his wife away from home."'

Answer given in the March issue – Barbara Pym in *Jane and Prudence*, which of course all *Green Leaves* readers would have recognized at once!

** Dale Salwak was one of the contributors to the *Guardian*'s Christmas Books list for 2004, and selected *Excellent Women*. He wrote:

> Great comfort comes to me whenever I settle down to read one of Barbara Pym's novels. These exquisite works of art remind us of the importance of staying connected with others and, ultimately, with a hope, with a simple faith in the durability of the human spirit. Like all great writers, she has created a world that is uniquely her own, an enchanted place both real and varied. With the 25th anniversary of Pym's death fast approaching, I will give to my closest friends who haven't yet fallen under her spell a copy of *Excellent Women*.

** *The Spectator* review of Simon Garfield's *Our Hidden Lives: The Everyday Diaries of a Forgotten Britain, 1945-48* (11 December 2004), observes of one of the diarists included:

> Maggie Joy, the single woman, struggling to make ends meet, fond of her cats and frequently run down, reminds one of a character from the novels of Barbara Pym.

** The memoirs of Tom Maschler (readers, feel free to boo) were published in March 2005: *Publisher* from Picador (with no mention of Pym). Among advance publicity, the *TLS* 'Commentary' column (by J. C.; 12 November 2004) reported that 'at Jonathan Cape, which he ran from 1961 until the company was absorbed by Random House' Maschler –

> introduced a good many successful writers, but at the expense of others. Barbara Pym was ditched after she had published several respectably selling novels.

While on 'The Elegant Variation: A Literary Weblog' (URL http://marksarvas.blogs.com/elegvar/), a reader wrote in about these memoirs:

> ... it was Maschler who declined to publish Barbara Pym's novel *An Unsuitable Attachment* in 1963 after Cape had published her first six novels ... To those of us who are great Pym admirers, Maschler is a villain. ... Cape threw Pym out because her work wasn't fashionable anymore.

** Nancy Mulvany, reviewing Hazel Bell's *Indexers and Indexes in Fact and Fiction* in *LOGOS* Vol. 15 Issue 2, 2004, quotes:

> Bell proclaims, "Barbara Pym may be regarded as the patron novelist of indexers. Not only do several indexers appear among her cast of characters, but characters from one story may make some appearances in subsequent novels, forming a network of allusions, addenda and cross-references in true indexerly style."

** Sherie Posesorski, reviewing *Alone! Alone!: Lives of Some Outsider Women* by Rosemary Dinnage (New York Review; itself reviewed in *Green Leaves* November 2004) in *The New York Times Book Review* (11 July 2004), notes:

> Dinnage writes admiringly of (Stevie) Smith's "wry amusement" and "stoical sorrow," qualities shared by the novelist Barbara Pym, whom she dryly describes as an "unmarried lady novelist who produced ten books, very gently satiric ones."

Carole Angier, reviewing the same book in *The Spectator* (16 October 2004), commented:

> 'Stevie Smith' and 'Barbara Pym' were very good; I felt Dinnage had a special sympathy for these beady-eyed, stoical, very English old maids.

** In March 2004, reviewing Kate Fox's *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour* (Hodder & Stoughton) in the *Sunday Telegraph*, Anthony Daniels observed:

> On the whole, the author takes a benign, almost Barbara Pym-like view of the English – far too benign, in my view.