

Bookends: *Some Tame Gazelle* and *A Few Green Leaves* Charles Hansmann

My discussion of *A Few Green Leaves* will focus on this last of Pym's novels as a bookend to her first published novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*. By way of introduction, and bearing in mind Pym's fondness for having her characters recite lines or verses from the hymnal, I would like to quote (though only with secular implication) the famous parable from the Gospels that "the last shall be first and the first last."

Belinda Bede, the protagonist in Pym's first novel, is some 30 years older than Pym was while she was writing it. By contrast, Emma Howick, the protagonist in Pym's final novel, is some 30 years *younger* than Pym was during *that* book's composition. Pym herself seems not unaware of this oddity. In fact, she offers an oblique comment on it: "It seemed entirely appropriate that Dr G., now in his late sixties, should deal with the young, while Martin [the young, junior doctor], with his interest in geriatrics, should be responsible for the elderly."

What a sly parallel that is to Pym's own approach as a novelist! The suggestion is that a separation in age creates a greater empathy. But Pym also suggests another reason for imposing these decades of distance between author and protagonist. Describing an early encounter between Emma Howick and Daphne Dagnall, she writes: "The two women – fifties and thirties – regarded each other warily."

We can extrapolate that this age disjunction between author and protagonist serves two opposing purposes – in addition to allowing the author a more intimate access to her protagonist, it provides the author with a further remove from, and more objective evaluation of, this character.

Writers are notorious for using their protagonists as an alter ego – someone who is like themselves, only more so – but in these two novels, with the author-to-protagonist age-correlation the reverse of what we might expect, first and last seem to have changed places – the last first and the first last.

In *Some Tame Gazelle* this *other I* (*alter ego* as it translates from the Latin) is projected into the future with almost preternatural accuracy from a *biographical* point of view – by the time she reached middle age Pym too was unmarried and living with her sister in a small Oxfordshire village. But from a *professional* perspective, and presumably from the standpoint of *sensibility*, Pym and Belinda Bede have nothing or almost nothing in common. The unemployed Belinda is, at the end of the first novel, constrained to a kind of self-accepting, but nonetheless dowdy, spinsterhood. Her final self-appraisal is that she is "pathetic," unrequitedly in love with another woman's husband; her saving grace is that "perhaps the very recognition" of her pathos "meant that it didn't really exist."

In contrast to Belinda's sackcloth sense of the "pleasantly melancholy" – her way of taking "pleasure in not doing something" – in *A Few Green Leaves* the author seems to have found an *other side* to the possibilities available to her heroine and even gives the life of her alter ego a kind of rewrite. But here it is the *biographical* aspect that diverges from Pym's own while the *professional* component – being a writer – is more similar. The anthropologist Emma Howick, in the final sentence of Pym's final novel, entertains notions that "*She* could write a novel, and even, as she was beginning to realize, embark on a love affair which need not necessarily be an unhappy one."

Moving backward from that last sentence of Pym's last book to the first sentence of her first book, we discover that the original cloth of Barbara Pym's literary career was spun from wool. The first sentence of her first published novel reads: "The new curate seemed quite a nice young man, but what a pity it was that his combinations showed, tucked carelessly into his socks, when he sat down."

Wool is a serious matter. There is speculation as to precisely what kind of wool the curate's one-piece long underwear might be. Belinda thinks Meridian – which was "nice and warm for pajamas,

too,” like “a woolly skin.” Researching whether Meridian refers to a particular sheep or weave or brand, I came upon this entry posted in a blog on December 5, 2008, in Worcestershire, England: “Don’t laugh . . . but years ago I picked up a job lot of 1930s woolen combinations which I still wear . . . They’re THE unsexiest garment on the planet . . . but they certainly do the job – now I know how people survived before central heating!”

“Unsexiest garment on the planet” – that seems to suit the curate just fine. He is wearing this body stocking on a September evening that Belinda considers “much too warm for such garments.” We get the impression that his body is somewhat reptilian and doesn’t seem to generate its own inner heat. Called upon to sing an Elizabethan love song, he does so “charmingly . . . but without much conviction.” And though he “almost defiantly” says that he “may not get married at all,” ultimately he wears this body sock of underwear wool at his own wedding, to a bride 8 or 9 years his senior, whom he once agreed was “more [of] an elder sister” to him, and who had to “help him out a bit” by making the marriage proposal herself.

There is something frigid about Edgar Donne, who insists on pronouncing his surname to distinguish it from that of John Donne, the 16th and 17th century poet. John Donne of course was famous for his metaphysical conceit of equating passionate human love with love of the divine. In Edgar Donne’s case we get the impression that if sensual feeling were a measure of a person’s spirituality, he might very well have been an atheist.

Not only is he ineffectual as a physical specimen, but he’s no great shakes as a preacher either. The usually kind Belinda “rather doubted whether he thought at all, if one were to judge by the quality of his first sermon.” He is a man of sententious platitudes and clichés – quick to state the obvious moral – but one who “hardly ventured an opinion on anything.” Pale and thin, he had the usual “half starved” look common to young curates, and was somewhat bloodless. Without *too* much imagination we can see in the pallor of his appearance a certain premonition of the cadaver. For the purposes of our discussion, fortunately so, for in *A Few Green Leaves* it is indeed cadavers that are dressed in wool. After complaining about the cold rectory, Daphne Dagnall says, “Don’t talk to me about wool. You know my brother’s obsession with local history – now he’s discovered that in sixteen-eighty something people had to be buried in wool.”

One wonders what it is with these Pym clergymen and their affinity for this fabric shorn from sheep. Surely they are not simply taking their symbolic status as shepherds a little too seriously? In the case of Henry Hoccleve, decidedly not. Explaining why he will not accompany his adversarial wife on a getaway to Germany, he says in a “mocking tone”: “One cannot leave the flock without a shepherd” – Henry at his sardonic best. He has just let out a loud and public tirade against his wife for allowing moths into his suit with the result that they have eaten holes in the wool. But isn’t Henry himself a flawed suit when it comes to being an archdeacon? Even the devoted Belinda recognizes that: “Dear Henry was different, in some ways not like a clergyman at all. For although Belinda had loved him faithfully for over thirty years, she sometimes had to admit that he had very few of the obvious virtues that one somehow expected of one’s parish priest.”

If a Psalm is quoted Henry cannot be counted on to recognize it; he “took relish in disliking people” and would glance out at his congregation with “a look of malicious amusement on his face”; he was not above exclaiming, “Damn!” if a hole was discovered in his sock or wasting his time playing the card game Patience (Solitaire) on the floor of his study. Harriet thought that “the Archdeacon was definitely peculiar, perhaps even the tiniest bit *mental*.” For Henry a good wool suit represents the trappings of his office, and when Belinda remarks that, according to the Bible, “We are supposed not to take heed of what we shall wear,” the archdeacon responds, “My dear Belinda, we are not in the garden of Eden.”

In *Some Tame Gazelle* we have a curate who wears wool as a kind of second skin and an archdeacon who is concerned mostly with the superficiality of appearance, while in *A Few Green Leaves* we have a rector who considers that wool might be of comfort even to the dead, or at least to the living while contemplating the dead. Tom Dagnall thinks that “the idea of being buried in wool seemed quite attractive,” and this is especially true during moments of contemplation in “the chilly gloom of the chapel.” For Tom there seems to be a constancy in the comfort of physical warmth that the comfort of religious belief, with its corollary of doubt, cannot provide.

Tom’s belief in God has taken on many of the tones of humanism – he gives “a sermon about helping one’s neighbor” – and the unsettled part of him is whether his humanism is religious or merely secular in nature. He often spent mornings inside the church “not exactly to meditate or pray but to wander in a random fashion round the aisles letting his thoughts dwell on various people in the village.” In Tom’s view, “This was in its way a kind of prayer . . .”

Reflecting his uncertain faith, Tom has a visceral reaction to the monuments of death. He “shivered” and he finds that “the chilling of the mausoleum was beginning to get into his bones.” It is *religious* humanism in which he *finds the greater comfort*, but the humanism of the age in which he *finds himself living* is increasingly *secular*. “The idea of being buried in woollen . . . gave one a more comfortable feeling on this uncertain spring morning in the chilly study looking out onto the tumbled grave stones Nowadays, or course, it couldn’t apply – one was probably buried in some man-made fiber – ” Tom preaches “about heaven, or what people’s idea of heaven might be.” Emma considers this “bold and imaginative,” in part because people didn’t think “about heaven all that much now.” Tom is so uncomfortable with the notion of doubt that he would rather speculate on whether other people have it than examine his own. “He found himself wondering whether Miss Lee had ever had ‘doubts’ . . . had ever wondered whether the whole business wasn’t an elaborate fiction and asked herself what she was doing here, Sunday after Sunday and even some weekdays, subscribing to something she wasn’t sure about.” Clearly Tom is wondering whether Miss Lee has had doubts similar to his own.

At times his uncertainty is so enervating that he cannot surrender himself either to belief or to doubt. After attending to some church business, Tom “found himself wondering if his morning had been wasted but was prepared to believe that it might not have been.” A very uncertain mental state – wondering one thing but prepared to believe its opposite. Against this chill of doubt Tom is comforted by reminding himself that even though the edict of 1678 requiring burial in wool had been repealed, “there was nothing to stop a person being buried in woollen now if he so desired . . .” Tom even considers how this might be achieved: “a note in a will to that effect . . .”

Even his own sister, the timid yet bossy Daphne, “wasn’t sure that she believed anymore.” She’s one up on Tom in that she can admit this – but she can admit it to herself only, because she adheres to the unwritten code that “one didn’t talk about that kind of thing.” It seems to have been a question of proper manners. Wondering whether Miss Lee had ever had such doubts, Tom decides that “if she ever had, she was much too well-bred ever to dream of troubling the rector with such a thing.”

One person who *is* willing to trouble the rector is Terry Skate, but he of course is not hindered by good breeding – he’s borderline “impertinent” except for the fact that he is obviously “guileless” – and he “wasn’t really all that worried about his doubts. He was accepting them . . .” The curious thing about Terry Skate’s loss of faith is that it lends some credibility to the importance Archdeacon Henry Hoccleve gave to appearances in *Some Tame Gazelle* with his petulant miff over the ruining of his wool suit and his giving up woollen crimson socks for those of “the most sober archdiaconal colours,” for according to Terry it was “not *books*” that undermined his faith, and not even “those talks on the telly,” at least not *per se*, but rather the way a certain clergyman on a discussion panel had been dressed. “One of them was the reverend somebody or other. But he was wearing a green turtle-neck jumper – I *ask*

you!” According to Terry it was “people like that” who were “throwing doubt” on religious belief.

Barbara Pym gets a lot mileage out of wool and its relation to the clergy in these two novels, what with socks and sweaters knitted or not knitted, and there is one clergyman who is a kind of wolf-in-sheep’s-clothing. Theo Grote, Bishop of Mbawawa, has taken a break from his African mission and has come to town to ply the complacent middle-aged spinsters in search of a wife. His relation to wool is more figurative but at the same time more organic. Recounting her first impression of him, “Belinda could not give a flattering description. After several attempts to soften the blow, she burst out, ‘Well, Harriet, there’s no getting away from it, he reminds me of a *sheep*.’” “‘But surely a very handsome sheep,’ Harriet protested.”

Theo Mbawawa spoke in a “bleating bishop’s voice” that sometimes “trailed off on a bleating note,” and he laughed with a “silly bleating noise.” Regarding matters of faith, he seems to have believed quite devoutly in himself. After he is spurned by Belinda, despite his assurances that she is “worthy” of him, he is not at all *sheepish* about making the identical proposal to Connie Aspinall.

While discussing faith, we have been talking of course about the Christian faith and its belief in a triune god. The other trinity that is much at work as a theme in these two novels is that of the *romantic* triangle. If it is true, as Emma Howick says, that “there are only a few twists to the man-woman story,” Pym proves that this *twist* of triangles nonetheless has innumerable *curlicies* of variation.

In *Some Tame Gazelle* the main triangle involves the archdeacon Henry, his wife Agatha and Belinda. Pym gives us a married couple, a clergyman and a spinster, all twisted up in one package. In *A Few Green Leaves* Pym *seems* to complicate matters by using *two* triangles for the same effect: Emma is the spinster, the married couple is Claudia and Graham, and Tom is the clergyman. This geometrical figure is more accurately described as a parallelogram. On closer inspection and taking another look at *Some Tame Gazelle* we see that Pym has actually *simplified* things in her final novel, because added to the triangle of Henry, Agatha and Belinda in her earlier book is the triangle of Theo Grote, Agatha and Belinda, and eventually Connie Aspinall, Theo Grote and Belinda; so in her first outing, with these three interconnected triangles, Pym drew the lines of a trapezoid for her plot of romantic entanglement.

The ingredients of every love story are passion and impediment. In both novels the clergyman is the true object of our protagonist’s affection, and the impediment is the woman he lives with – in the case of Henry Hoccleve, his wife; and in the case of Tom Dagnall, his sister. Although these women rule the vicarage and the rectory respectively, being an impediment to the love life of a clergyman in a Pym novel is not without its health hazards. Both women suffer psychosomatic illnesses. Agatha’s face “looked drawn and harassed. She had rheumatism too, but Belinda realized that she would have to have something out of self-defense and perhaps with the passing of years it had become a reality.” Tom’s sister “Daphne was not exactly sure what, if anything, *was* the matter with her. She was depressed” and after Dr. Shrubsole gives her a prescription for “suitable tablets,” Daphne, “clutching her bit of paper” “felt decidedly better.”

In both books the psychosomatic illness of the female impediment pushes the story forward by providing the occasion for removing the female impediment from the scene. Agatha Hoccleve goes off to take the waters at a spa in Germany as a cure for her rheumatism. She has hardly finished saying her goodbyes to Henry before Belinda is “humming *God moves in a mysterious way*, and telling herself that it was not right that she should feel relieved because Agatha was going away . . . but . . . the first thought that came into her mind had been how nice it would be to be able to ask Henry into tea or supper without having to ask Agatha as well.” And it is indeed as a sort of after dinner cordial that Henry offers Belinda for the first time in 30 years the acknowledgement that they once meant something to each other and that they might be happier if they had ended up together. Alone in a tender moment, Henry and Belinda reminisce about their romance 30 years earlier when Henry used to read to Belinda, and Henry

remarks, “We can’t alter things, can we,” in a way that suggests he would like to. When Belinda relates this to her sister, Harriet “let out a shout of joy” and, convinced that Henry would rather have Belinda than Agatha, muses, “Now, if only he were a *widower*.” Belinda responds “stoutly.” “But he isn’t.”

In the novel published 30 years later, he – the male romantic interest – is indeed a widower. After a short marriage 10 years earlier Tom Dagnall’s wife died of leukemia. Tom is now “hemmed in” by his sister. He “realized that he ought to have married again after Laura died, but before he could even think what he was going to do, Daphne had come running, as it were, determined to do her duty.” Even Daphne recognizes that “If it hadn’t been for her doing this, Tom might have married again, probably would have . . .” Despite Daphne’s older-sister prerogative to “put [him] in his place,” Tom takes early notice of Emma, assessing her as “possibly capable of talking intelligently about local history, his great interest and passion.” But his attraction to Emma is something he takes pains to keep under wraps, not always successfully. Chased from his study for spring cleaning, Tom wanders about the village one morning: “Now he came to Emma Howick’s cottage and here also he expected to hear the tapping of the typewriter, but there was silence. She must be out, Tom thought, so he did not scruple to look more fixedly in at the window than he would otherwise have done. To his dismay he found himself looking straight at Emma . . .” Tom is reticent and passive when it comes to pursuing romantic interests. His actions are more of the “hoping to come upon Emma” type. For her part, Emma has also been noticing Tom, placing herself in position to see him, though not fully understanding her motives. Leaving the Sunday evening service after the flower festival, “she wondered why she had come to church, for it had not been to have another look at the flowers.” They are attracted to each other in that obtuse way of people who don’t know their own mind. It is not until Daphne has gone that the angle of their attention sharpens from the obtuse to the acute.

Daphne has been trying to relieve her habitual depression by “thinking about how she would one day get away from the village.” In the hope that she can escape this “intolerable burden” of village life, she goes to live with her friend Heather “on the outskirts of Birmingham” in “a very nice house in a very nice road” near a “delightful wooded common” where they can walk the dog they have “acquired.” In leaving her brother, Daphne wonders whether she had “protected him” or simply “stood in the way of his happiness.” As soon as she has left, this notion of *protecting* is transferred to Emma: “Some obscure desire to protect Tom . . . had come over her in a strange way.” When Tom walks her home from an unpleasant evening with Graham, she invites him in, and discussing the petty concerns of Daphne’s new domestic arrangement, “they began to laugh. The tension and irritation . . . seemed to go out of the evening.” Some days later, when they have dinner together, they find it “turning into a rather successful evening.” They finish a bottle of wine as they talk about Tom’s wife Laura and Emma’s “first love” Graham. They move toward a closer intimacy, finding that “honest” and “matter-of-fact” conversation between them is “less awkward than polite social murmurings.” They have fun: “Emma laughed.” “Emma laughed again”

So in both books the departure of the female impediment leads to a dinner where the protagonist and the object of her affection reveal themselves through a discussion of the past and approach an expression of their present feelings. In *Some Tame Gazelle* the opportunity for affection is acknowledged but not acted upon. Despite her absence, Agatha’s mere existence precludes anything happening between Henry and Belinda because Agatha is Henry’s wife. Henry himself is an impediment, or at least a convenient excuse, when Theo Grote makes his overtures to Belinda. She rejects the bishop by saying: “I don’t love you I did love someone once and perhaps I still do.” Fidelity in unrequited love that is 30 years dormant carries the same weight as fidelity in marriage. But in *A Few Green Leaves* such moral scruples are no longer in play. Daphne of course does not have the same claim on her brother Tom that a wife would, but in Emma’s triangle with Tom and Graham, her *interest* in Tom is not the least bit hindered by any lingering affection she might have for Graham; and

whatever physical interest Emma and Graham have in each other, culminating with their “amorous dalliance on the grass,” is not waylaid by any reverence for marital fidelity, the fact that Graham is married to Claudia. Their dalliance on the grass is simply a kind of casual nod to their old romance. Emma has lost something of herself, her capacity to love or at least to risk loving. In *Some Tame Gazelle* Belinda’s easy capacity for love is still intact, and the object of her love has not changed; what has been transformed in Belinda is the nature and expression of her love; she bestows it with no hope of reciprocity or any kind of physical fulfillment. By contrast, Emma indulges the physical act, but also with no fulfillment.

Old romances have not been fully laid to rest in either of the novels, and not just Belinda’s with Henry and Emma’s with Graham. In *Some Tame Gazelle*, with the return of Theo Grote from his mission bishopric in Mbawawa, we learn that it was he, in his earlier incarnation as a young curate, who inaugurated Harriet’s life-long infatuation with a succession of such clergymen. By the time he finally leaves, that old romance has given up the ghost. In *A Few Green Leaves*, when Dr G. is discovered in the de Tankerville mausoleum, to which he has his own key, there’s the hint of an old affection. He admits going there “quite often,” a habit apparently developed in the days of Miss Vereker, the last governess at “the big house,” who, Dr G. says, “was quite a young woman in those days” and liked to come to the mausoleum “to put flowers here at Easter and” – Dr G. trails off – “other times” This old romance, if no longer smoldering, is still warm in the ashes.

Old friendships are also featured in the two books. Miss Vereker, the long-ago governess, was greatly admired by Olive Lee who is “always going on about her,” much to the annoyance of Flavia Grundy. The counter example in *Some Tame Gazelle* is the great veneration in which the deceased John Akenside is held by Ricardo Bianco, who liked to “enjoy a melancholy talk about his old friend,” and is compiling an edition of his collected letters.

Other similarities are that in both books Pym uses the device of the Dickensian name, one which so aptly suits the character that it is almost descriptive. Four quick examples: Avice, with an abbreviated piratical *argh* would become *avarice*; Reverend Plowman is said to know “a good deal about the technical side of farming”; Daphne is often daffy; and Mr. Mold is practically sprouting spores – his “lack of breeding showed itself” in his “florid complexion and facetious humor” “making for the dining room with what Belinda considered indecent haste,” and possessed of a “vulgar, music-hall touch.”

Some additional corresponding features in the two novels are that the narrative sequence is tracked through the church calendar; people take courage in drink and comfort in food; clergy drawing rooms are gloomy, their guest beds uncomfortable; and God is forever moving in mysterious ways. The almost toss-away counterparts are among the most amusing. In *Some Tame Gazelle* Belinda retires to her room “and took the parish magazine to read in bed. There was a nice new serial in it, all about a drunken organist.” In a letter to Agatha she writes about the actual “organist’s illness and Miss Smiley’s brave attempt to play at Evensong.” We’re not told what this illness is, but perhaps we can guess. At the Christmas “midnight service” in *A Few Green Leaves* there is “a magnificent burst of sound from the organist” and Tom “wondered if it could be the effect of the apricot brandy which he had laid on the organist’s doorstep as a Christmas present.” No further mention, and no function in the story-line of the plot, and perhaps for that reason, this mention of the drunken organist, along with dozens of other little touched-upon observations, lend a great deal to the novels’ verisimilitude, the sense that these people really are alive and this place really does exist.

When we look closely at recurrences such as these in Pym’s first and last books, it’s clear that she hasn’t merely reworked her material; rather, we see how she applies her narrative technique – and her wit – to the variety of plot situations, character types and appurtenances of daily life that interest her

and that give her work a narrative and thematic unity. The themes of both novels are expressed in their titles. *A Few Green Leaves* starts with Emma observing the villagers “in the time-honoured manner from behind the shadow of her curtains.” Time has indeed honored this custom since at least the heyday of the Bede sisters in *Some Tame Gazelle*, who watched Agatha’s departure from Harriet’s bedroom window, Belinda “careful to display the duster in her hand” to camouflage her activity, and Harriet a bit less discreet with a pair of binoculars “unashamedly” “glued to her eyes.” They are spying on, among others, the *someone* whom Belinda loves. “Something to *love*, that was the point.” This is what gives Belinda hope. She summons “a picture of daffodils . . . in her mind” and thinks “what a good thing it was that hope sprang eternal within the human breast.” Of course, her hope is only that “things could return to normal and be as they were before.” Emma, on the other hand, “was becoming rather tired of daffodils. Their Wordsworthian exuberance had been overdone.”

Though Emma is Belinda’s counterpart as protagonist, Belinda’s counterpart in sentimental sensibility is Daphne, whose embrace of Belinda’s sentiment ironically underscores Emma’s more cynical view. “‘One goes on living in the hope of seeing another spring,’ Daphne said with a rush of emotion. ‘And isn’t that a patch of violets?’” She points to “a twist of purple on the ground” which turns out to be only “the discarded wrappings of a chocolate bar.” The theme expressed in the title *A Few Green Leaves* is that some small gesture can be sufficient to revive faith and give it a freshened life, and this benefit applies whether it’s a religious faith that is fading or our ability to sustain the belief that the things to which we give our effort and attention really do matter. Tom has just “remembered that having doubts was no new phenomenon. We all have them at times.” He is feeling “much out of touch” “in the November gloom,” and wondering why “so much of his life . . . seemed to be wasted in profitless discussions” about brass rubbing and flower arrangements. He’s dispirited “and made his way towards the altar where Miss Grundy was putting the final touches to an arrangement of roses.” It’s late in the season for flowers, and Flavia Grundy says in her “flutey voice”: “I think these will do for another week, with a few more leaves. A few green leaves can make such a difference.” It’s very practical advice: a little *sprucing* up can *cheer* us up, and can help us retain our belief in whatever it is that gives value and meaning to our lives. Such faith implies the love inherent in our humanity, and this is where the themes of the two novels merge. A few green leaves of encouragement, even self-encouragement, can help restore our belief that there is value in having something or someone to love.

Among the characters who have situational or type counterparts in these two novels is the author herself. There are of course Pym’s self-professed elements of the biographical in the character of Belinda Bede, who has been spurned by Henry Hoccleve (read Henry Harvey) and enjoys a close relationship with her sister Harriet (read Hilary). That details such as the sister-shared cottage in an Oxfordshire village should have proved so self-prophetic for Pym in middle age make *Some Tame Gazelle* all the more tantalizing. This flash forward in the first novel becomes a flash back in the last. As we consider again the first point of this discussion, that the first shall be last, we see the young Pym, just setting out in life, appear in an off-stage cameo role in the closing pages of *A Few Green Leaves*. When Emma decides to remain in the cottage, she is determined that her mother’s plans are “not going to happen.” Her mother had said “something about wanting to let the cottage to a former student, who was writing a novel and recovering from an unhappy love affair.” How readily we can see in this potential renter the young Pym, at work on her first book, signing off at the end of the dying Pym’s last one.