

Barbara Pym Among the Moderns: The Case of Marcia in *Quartet in Autumn*

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Reading Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, as Barbara Pym certainly did, as early as October 1943, when she judged it to be "most delightful and profound,"¹ one is struck by the prescience with which Woolf seems to have predicted Pym as a novelist. Take the following passage, with its pair of women and reference to domestic rituals:

With the eye of the imagination I saw a very ancient lady crossing the street on the arm of a middle-aged woman, her daughter, perhaps, both so respectably booted and furred that their dressing in the afternoon must be a ritual, and the clothes themselves put away in cupboards with camphor, year after year, throughout the summer months.²

Woolf goes on to imagine that the older woman would remember nothing of her life, and so, she continues regretfully, "Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels, without meaning to, invariably lie. All these infinitely obscure lives remain to be recorded" (93). The minute details that make up ordinary women's lives are Pym's stock in trade, treated much as Woolf half-describes, half-predicts the female novelist's imagination to work: "it lighted on small things and showed that perhaps they were not small after all. It brought buried things to light and made one wonder what need there had been to bury them" (96).

Having identified this gap in the novel tradition, Woolf exhorts female writers: "you must illumine your own soul with its profundities and its shallows, and its vanities and its generousities, and say what your beauty means to you or your plainness, and what is your relation to the everchanging and turning world of gloves and shoes" (93-94). Readers of Pym will not need to be reminded that even a comparatively minor character such as Jessie Morrow, with her shape-shifting appearances in both *Crampton Hodnet* and *Jane and Prudence*, seems designed specifically to satisfy Woolf's request to address beauty and plainness and, if not gloves, then shoes and impulsively bought dresses of tender leaf-green or re-fashioned dresses of blue velvet.

Additionally, according to Woolf, the female novelist can give another perspective so often missing—the woman's view of the man. Woolf explains this capability: "she would go behind the other sex and tell us what she found there. A true picture of man as a whole can never be painted until a woman has described that spot [on the back of the head] the size of a shilling" (94). In this respect, Woolf notes too, "a tendency to the caustic and satirical, rather than to the romantic, in her treatment of the other sex" (96). Again, Pym's portrait of Jessie Morrow, with her clear-sighted view of Fabian Driver springs to mind, but so too might Mildred Lathbury's critical and sometimes rather ungenerous view of the men in her life, along with Pym's most humorously rendered but beloved man, Archdeacon Henry Hoccleve. And to explain the logic, or illogic of women's love, Pym gives us Jane Cleveland who, having met two objects of Prudence Bates's love, first the grey Arthur Grampian and then young Geoffrey Manifold, and left in a state of wonderment at her friend's professed love for this "colorless young man," muses "But of course ... that was why women were so wonderful; it was their love and imagination that transformed these unremarkable beings."³ Here too we find Pym in a mood analogous to Woolf's contemplation that "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of

reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (35).⁴

After seeing how closely Pym corresponds in many ways to Woolf’s projected authoress, it is surprising to find that in fundamental ways she departs sharply from the somewhat sanguine view of cultural progress, as expressed in *A Room of One’s Own*, particularly as it pertains to women. Regarding the restrictive roles of women, a topic persistently addressed by Pym as well, Woolf points out that, given time, these will alter: “All assumptions founded on the facts observed when women were the protected sex will have disappeared.” Then, in a whimsical tone, she predicts, “and will not women die off so much younger, so much quicker, than men that one will say, ‘I saw a woman today,’ as one used to say, ‘I saw an aeroplane’” (40-41). Woolf’s point, of course, however fancifully put, is that the culturally determined definition of “woman” will shift over time, to the point that the current definition will be barely recognizable to generations hence. As Woolf presents it, this shift will happen almost imperceptibly, so that the future holder of the perspective, by which “women” will be defined, will be surprised when happening upon an instance of the old, almost-vanished, perspective.

Such complete shifts in perspective can be alarming and disorienting, Woolf knows, and in the course of *A Room of One’s Own*, she works to make them less so. The Great War, she recognizes, did lead to a regrettable fragmenting of the poetic tradition.

Why has Alfred ceased to sing ‘She is coming, my dove, my dear?’ Why has Christina ceased to respond ‘My heart is gladder than all these / Because my love is come to me’? Shall we lay the blame on the war? When the guns fired in August 1914, did the faces of men and women show so plain in each other’s eyes that romance was killed? (15)

But Woolf explains that the new post-war perspective, created by historical forces, does not invalidate the old but rather supplements it, and that the two perspectives together make for a fuller understanding of the truth. Using the metaphor of light, she poses the rhetorical question, “What was the truth about...the willows and the river and the gardens that run down to the river, vague now with the mist stealing over them, but gold and red in the sunlight—which was the truth which was the illusion about them...?” (15-16). Neither of these sights is illusory, of course, and so Woolf implies that truth results from a steady accumulation of various perspectives—of seeing things in different lights. As such, women’s fictional output does not overturn the predominantly male literary tradition but adds to it: “For books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately” (84). This view of truth as an accumulation of perspectives is a kind of modernism—akin to the modern scientific paradigm—in which truth will be arrived at by the gradual accumulation of data, of new discovered pieces of truth that will slowly complete a picture.

But however beautifully Virginia Woolf puts her point about the passage of time during which varying points of view are accumulated and perspectives smoothly added together, ultimately it will not do for Pym, and certainly not in *Quartet in Autumn*. Early in her life as a novelist, Pym experienced the disruptive effect of war on creative output, and, however well she may have documented the untold stories of women’s lives, the difficulties she had in publication later in her life are often put down, by publishers as well as critics, to a shifting cultural milieu with which her works did not keep pace, leading her to tell a friend, “it seems as if nobody could ever like my kind of writing again.”⁵

It is in *Quartet in Autumn* that Pym looks most pointedly at the dire results of the disjunction, unexamined in *A Room of One’s Own*, between the ongoing movement of a culture—progress, as Woolf implies—and the rhythms of the individual human lives lived within it. Pym explores variations on the way that cultural contexts, within which her four characters find their meaning and identity, have shifted and vanished, leaving her aging

quartet to perform increasingly futile, even meaningless gestures. In Pym's world people are very much bound to the perspectives of their time and find their meaning there, a meaning that will vanish with the appearance of the next generation's perspective. (The mummified crocodiles in the British Museum may be the most emphatic emblem of the unbridgeable gulf between cultural moments.) In Pym's novel, from the perspective of the next generation, the quartet will very likely be seen as disposable, as is the case with the job from which all four will soon retire, not to be replaced, knowledge that gives Letty a sense of "nothingness," a feeling "that she and Marcia had been swept away as if they had never been."⁶ When, upon return from Christmas holiday, the group discusses their lack of work to be done, they agree that this is because they made an extra effort to tie up all loose ends before leaving: "'To clear one's desk,' said Marcia importantly, using a phrase from long ago that had little or no reality in their present situation" (94). Past perspectives do not suit the quartet's present circumstances; when Letty considers her move to a new bed-sit, she realizes that: "Her own particular situation had hardly existed in the past, for now it was the unattached working woman, the single 'business lady' of the advertisements [rather than the Victorian governess], who was most likely to arrive in the house of strangers" (77-78). And her very move to her new room was occasioned by a cultural shift that she is unable to track, and that has left her completely dislocated, "How had it come about that she, an English woman born in Malvern in 1914 of middle-class English parents, should find herself in this room in London surrounded by enthusiastic shouting, hymn-singing Nigerians?" (65).

Pym in no way disparages this form of religious sensibility, an influx of energy that provides a welcome contrast to the drab Anglican services that Edwin still dutifully attends, where he finds himself "among the two or three gathered together" (61). And Pym portrays this erosion of the Anglican Church, within which Edwin has embedded in life, as a result of increasingly secular ways of thinking. When Edwin reflects on the hymn lyric that leads the congregation to see themselves "sunk in sin and whelmed with strife," he reflects, "People nowadays wouldn't stand for that kind of talk. Perhaps that was one reason why so few went to church" (16). And so the community within which Edwin has invested his life is dwindling to the bare minimum—the two or three required by the biblical phrase, turned so literally and ironically by Pym.

In further contrast to Woolf's argument that the passage of time results in accumulating perspectives, time for Pym's individual is far from a medium of accumulation; it is a medium of loss—of narrowing rather than enlarging. Although Marcia is the most striking example of this truth as Pym views it, all four characters embody this narrowing. Edwin, for example, has become almost a parody of the church crawler, and while this habit, for such it has become, certainly gives him a way to organize his time, his actions have become somewhat robotic. While securing a place for Letty with one of his fellow churchgoers, Edwin imagines her life as his own, "governed by the soothing rhythm of the church's year":

All Saints' today, then All Souls'; everybody could share in the commemoration of the saints and the departed. Then would come Advent followed closely—too closely, it often seemed—by Christmas. After Christmas came Boxing Day, the Feast of St Stephen, hardly observed as such unless it happened to be one's patronal festival; then the Innocents, St John the Evangelist and Epiphany. The Conversion of St Paul and Candlemass (where one usually sang one of Keble's less felicitous hymns) were followed all too soon by the Sundays before Lent, but the evenings were drawing out. Ash Wednesday was an important landmark—evening Mass and the Imposition of Ashes, the black smudge on the forehead, 'dust thou art and to dust shalt thou return'—some people didn't like that, thought it 'morbid' or 'not very nice'. (73-74)

Surely we are meant to smile at this rather reductive rendering of time ticking by, recounted in a passage too long

to be quoted here in its entirety, but short when considered as Edwin's year-long itinerary.

Letty too clings to her life-long habit of dressing suitably, although Marcia's description calls into question Letty's insistence on "always buying new things and worried if she couldn't get a cardigan in the exact shade to match something" (29). But however one might want to keep up with the times, that will not do either, as any attempts at youthful haircuts or dress will seem slightly pitiful or at the worst ridiculous. In her diary, Pym (at age 42, younger than this quartet by a good bit) remarked, "I cannot reach up to pluck the prickly balls of a plane tree. Once it might have looked young, charming and gay, now only middle-aged and eccentric."⁷ So there is no question that Letty would attempt the "cruel fashion" of the mini-skirt; even so, fashion or the act of buying new clothes is the one thing she looks forward to, almost reflexively. After a rather depressing Christmas meal with her landlady, and finding that the carols on the evening wireless brought only "sad memories of childhood that can never come back," Letty "remembered that the Kensington sales started the day after Boxing Day and her spirits suddenly lifted" (90).

At the same time that Letty's focus on clothes may seem slightly absurd, when Marcia, after retirement, lets her appearance go completely, stops dyeing her hair, paying no mind whatsoever to the clothes she wears, it is an indication that her mind is slipping "round the bend," as Norman puts it to himself. The world, for the aging characters, is becoming more rather than less restrictive. Although the characters are repeatedly told the opposite, it seems, given the place of the aging within a changing culture, there is really nothing they can do.

With the character of Marcia, Pym portrays the narrowed life writ large. We are led to understand that at one time, Marcia's life was comprised by actions that Pym, in other novels, details as the unexceptional commonplaces of a domestic, even communal, existence, in this case shared with a mother. First on the list, of course, is drinking tea. But added to that timeless activity, we have: performing household chores, gardening, keeping a cat, keeping a well-stocked pantry, buying clothes, seeing after one's health, reading poetry in bed. Even stockpiling one's cupboard would have had meaning in the context of the wartime and immediately post-war years. But for Marcia, who now lives alone, all these activities have become obsessive gestures, often of a purely illusory nature: assembling what amounts to an unnecessary trousseau filled with unworn underwear and nightgowns, carefully storing plastic bags out of the reach of non-existent children. In these and other instances, her life has become a parody of the actions that once held some kind of communal meaning, as, for example, the thinking that leads her turn her shed into a repository for carefully washed milk bottles:

Sometimes she put out [a milk bottle] for the milkman but she mustn't let the hoard get too low because if there was a national emergency of the kind that seemed so frequent nowadays or even another war, there could well be a shortage of milk bottles and we might find ourselves back in the situation of 'No bottle, no milk,' as in the last war. (64)

Not only does Marcia lead quite a solitary life, in which almost all human contact has vanished—contact that might give these actions meaning—but she lives isolated from herself as well, in a world of illusion, imagining that she performs actions that she clearly does not. A meticulous housekeeper in her own view, she is shocked when she comes across Snowy's uncleaned bowl, for she prides herself on keeping his dish, "spotlessly clean" (139). Likewise, having food in the house is important to Marcia's sense of herself as a good housekeeper, but she seems not to realize that she doesn't eat it. "I always like to have plenty of tinned foods in the house," Marcia said in a rather grand manner when Janice tried to suggest that fresh foods would be better for her" (63). The figure of Janice, a volunteer worker for a nameless "Centre," may represent cultural progress, a method of seeing that the vulnerable members of the population are cared for, but Marcia has no intention of adjusting her thinking

to accommodate such social change and resists the young woman, whom she views as a condescending intruder trying to boss her around with unnecessary and misguided advice against buying tinned peas.

Critics often diagnose Marcia's cause of death as anorexia nervosa, and in the novel, Norman warns her that she might "get so she can't eat," as he rather doubtfully understands this condition, about which he has heard on the radio. But although Marcia may obsessively hoard tins of food (an action that she considers the mark of a good housekeeper, a social role), she is not obsessive in her refusal to eat; rather, the opposite—far from being obsessed with eating or not eating, the actual act of eating comes to mean little to her, and she has lost the capacity as well to understand its significance as a social gesture. When the four meet for lunch, she refuses dessert and coffee, staying only when Norman asks her because "it isn't often we get the chance of a chat," and even then she is eager to leave—to buy tinned food from a store that she is shocked to find completely closed down, "almost razed to the ground" (135-36). Similarly, after she eats hardly a bite of Christmas dinner, her hostess thinks, "she might at least have had the manners to make a show of eating when so much trouble had been taken" (86).

I suppose, in the light of Pym's earlier work, Marcia's failure to eat could be understood as an extreme example of women's self-denial or abstemiousness or an in-grained habit of deprivation, left over from the war years. But in her earlier work, Pym never depicts women depriving themselves of tea, although the Archdeacon sarcastically suggests to Belinda that women enjoy martyring themselves in this way. "I never was a big eater," is the tag trotted out by rote, first by Marcia and then repeated by Norman—a refrain, dredged up from a past in which it might have had meaning, but unspeakably deficient to explain her current failure to eat anything at all. When Marcia does think fondly of food, it is exactly in a social context, which she has come to define exclusively as her days in hospital: "'Cup of tea, Miss Ivory? Sugar, dear?' It gave Marcia a warm feeling to remember those days and that nice woman—Nancy, they called her—coming round with the tea" (141).

Alone, Marcia simply forgets to eat, an activity she would gladly perform once a doctor tells her she should. All her combined erotic and devotional energy has been displaced onto those with whom she has her only degree of physical intimacy. And, within this circle, the one relationship that has the supreme value for her, also of course, illusory, is that with her surgeon—Mr. Strong—who, in a gutsy stroke of genius, Pym names in accordance with Marcia's personal allegory. But opening one of Snowy's tin of pilchards, so as to preserve her own hoard untouched, "She did not even remember that the young doctor at the hospital had told her that she ought to eat more" (87). When she does try to eat a very little, she is unable to open the tin and so falls back on her cup of tea and biscuits, "which was really all she wanted" (157). The drinking of tea and a nibbled biscuit become Marcia's only form of sustenance—a rather mordant commentary on "all those endless cups of tea" that feature so prominently in Pym's work. The love of "hot milky drinks," at which Pym has been known to poke sly fun, is carried to its extreme and logical end; a cup of tea becomes the only food Marcia can consider, and her last meal is the tea and biscuit from a tin over which she is found slumped and near death. Although this signal act, the habit of drinking of tea, may retain its power over her habit of mind, the figurative and social comfort that accompanies the tea ritual, that gives it its very significance, has been shorn off in the case of Marcia.

Marcia's death by starvation, literally caused by a combination of lack of interest, energy and memory, is also symbolic of her solitary existence within a culture that, figuratively, no longer feeds her. The loss of any significance to Christmas Day, owing to her solitude, makes this point explicitly: "After her mother's death Snowy had been enough company for Marcia, and when he had gone there was no special point about Christmas Day and it tended to merge into the rest of the holiday until it was no different from any other part of it" (84-85). Marcia's inability to find Snowy's grave, hidden from her now in an overgrown garden, is emblematic of time by-

passing her, moving much more quickly than she would ever be able to keep pace, and removing from her vision the reasons for or meanings of her actions. After Snowy's death, her acknowledgement of his grave was a mental ritual of a sort—"Snowy's grave," she would say to herself as she walked past it. But over time she loses track even of that touchstone in her life. And when she tries to find it again, in a confused attempt to uncover his bones, her loss of plain physical strength prevents her.

Aging, in Pym's novel, brings about losses for which there can be no compensatory adjustment. Changes come in ways for which human beings sometimes have no adaptive capability. In the most bluntly put of these, Norman, complaining about rising costs of butter beans, reminds the women to consider the effects of inflation on their pensions, bringing Letty's comment, "Inflation isn't exactly the kind of thing you can consider.... It just comes on you unawares" (70). The stealthy quality of inflation is reminiscent of Woolf's description of the stealthy shift by which the term "women" will be redefined. But for Woolf, the shift implies the gradual loosening of restrictions placed on women; for Pym it implies a loosening of moorings that result in the fatal restriction of isolation, both literal and spiritual.

Jonathan Swift would have labeled Virginia Woolf a "Modern"—a figure he described with much paradoxical verve in an early work, *A Tale of a Tub*, and later as well in *Gulliver's Travels*. On one of his lesser-known travels, Gulliver runs across human creatures called the struldbruggs, or the immortals. He immediately fanaticizes about the usefulness of such beings, who would, owing to their infinite experience, accumulate infinite amounts of wisdom which they could then use to set mankind to rights. He calls the population that has such beings at their disposal, "Happy people who enjoy so many living examples of ancient virtue, and have masters ready to instruct them in the wisdom of all former ages."⁸ To Gulliver's dismay, he finds, instead of "living examples," entirely isolated creatures, unable to speak the current language, "living like foreigners in their own country", and "dead to all natural affection" (171, 172). This episode can be understood as mocking the "modern" doctrine of steady progress and the view of knowledge as a process of steady accumulation. Given a literal reading, the struldbruggs can also be seen as an extreme portrait of aging. Both literal and figurative readings are applicable to Pym's portrayal of aging in *Quartet in Autumn*. By contrast Virginia Woolf's version of *Gulliver's Travels*, *Orlando*, is a *jeu d'esprit*, in which the title figure travels through time as both male and female, adapts to the spirit of all ages, however reluctantly, and remains super-naturally youthful—a falsification in both Swift's and Pym's view, of the harsh case of human life.

It is a credit to Pym's fictional prowess, steely sensibility, and strength of vision that she can create four very different characters, subject them to all the inevitably isolating forces of life, and show them bearing up even so. Deluded as Marcia may be, when she spontaneously decides to undertake her quest to see Mr. Strong's vegetable garden, she has the wherewithal to see herself as others might see her—as an unwanted spy. Given Marcia's mental state, this act of self-knowledge rises to the level of the heroic, places her above the level of any pity, and yet seems completely plausible. And, true to the Pymian ending, the others begin to see possibilities open before them, an effort of individual will combined with (in one of Pym's favorite phrases) "hope springing eternal," but also owing to a new feeling of community within the remainder of the quartet. Even Marcia dies with her Lear-like delusion of happiness, smiling up at Mr. Strong, who "seemed to be smiling back at her" (181). So complete is Pym's rendering in *Quartet in Autumn* that, as Philip Larkin wrote her, "It all sounds true: I can hardly believe it hasn't happened."⁹

Works Cited

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- ³Pym, Barbara. *Jane and Prudence*. Kingston, RI: Moyer Bell, 2004, p. 217.
- ⁴Judy Little also notes this similarity in thought between Pym's character Jane and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* in "Influential Anxieties: Woolf and Pym," *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, no. 39 (Fall 1992): 5-6. By means of this parallel, Little argues, "Jane, like Pym, maintains a nervous dialogue with Woolf's more radical vision."
- ⁵Holt, Hazel. *A Lot to Ask. A Life of Barbara Pym*. London: McMillan, 1990, p. 217.
- ⁶Pym, Barbara. *Quartet in Autumn*. New York: Plume/Penguin, 1977, p. 114. Further references will be noted parenthetically.
- ⁷*A Very Private Eye*, 192.
- ⁸Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings*, ed. Louis A. Landa. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960, p. 167. Further references will be noted parenthetically.
- ⁹*A Lot to Ask*, 248.

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