

'Some Indefinite Music?' Tone and Indeterminacy in *Quartet in Autumn*

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Introduction

I'd like to begin with the story of my relationship with *Quartet in Autumn* and Pym's work as a whole. I discovered a copy of *Less than Angels* on a market stall in Manchester, England 10 years ago, almost to the month. I'd heard of Barbara Pym but knew very little about her. I remember reading the book – appropriately, although I didn't yet know it – in Rome, and laughing a lot – even though I didn't have the company of excellent women from England.

Like everyone here I suspect, I sought out Pym's novels – but not yet passionately. And the next ones I came upon were – all together, I think – *The Sweet Dove Died*, *A Few Green Leaves* and *Quartet in Autumn*. Bless that bookshop! I remember enjoying reading them, and being amused, but it wasn't until I discovered *A Glass of Blessings* a year or two later that I truly became a devotee. I'd read *Quartet*, which many consider to be Pym's masterpiece, very early on – it may have been the second work of hers I read. It did not strike me as a masterpiece, good though I found it. If anything, I liked *The Sweet Dove Died* more – it was odder, more unpleasant. *A Few Green Leaves* was sadder, gentler, more truly autumnal. For some time, I viewed *Quartet in Autumn* as a well-written but slightly contrived novel. When I discovered Pym's comedy – glorious, bizarre, surreal and even anarchic – this book could only seem pale by comparison. It was the kind of book, perhaps, that Anita Brookner would have done better: she would have been colder, sharper, bleaker – more definite.

I've come to realise – and this is the argument behind my paper – that the deliberately pale and unobtrusive, indistinct quality to *Quartet in Autumn* is its greatest virtue. With the benefit of her years 'in the wilderness' Pym produced a novel with the defensive, masking laughter of the 1950s works stripped away, a book that makes us question and think about the novel as a form more widely. It shows the true, mature art of Barbara Pym – and even the real Pym herself, her normally hidden sense of desolation. This paper will investigate the curiously indistinct tone to the novel, which explains why it is a work so hard to master, perhaps. It is more complex than being bleak, or melancholy, or even just understated. Pym's lovely phrase to describe the prelude to a church service – 'some indefinite music' – came into my mind when considering the problem: I realised that the phrase's suggestion of both indistinctness and formal art captured *Quartet in Autumn* exactly. I am with Annette Weld in her description of the novel as one of 'anonymity' which 'shrouds the working lives of these characters' (Weld 1992: 190). Her final conclusion is that rather than being a 'familiar Pym comedy of manners', this is more a 'darker, modern vision of social disintegration', although the comic elements remain. 'Anonymity' and 'shrouding': this is key.

Narrative and lack of events

Although most critics praised the novel at the time of its publication and after, one notable voice of academic dissent came in *The English Novel in History*, where Patrick Swinden complains that

Pym makes the whole story revolve around the efforts of one elderly lady to return a used milk bottle to another elderly lady. Is this another of those 'little useless longings' that make up most of our lives, and to which we are therefore expected to pay the kind of attention not willingly spent on

Grass's neo-Nazis or Solzhenitsyn's labour camps? (Swinden 1984:2)

Swinden seems to have misunderstood the novel in a major way, but his misreading throws useful light on what Pym is and is not doing here. Although *Quartet in Autumn* is clearly not principally about the milk bottle dilemma, it is a near eventless book: Swinden, unintentionally, identified what Pym was doing. Before we turn to a more detailed reading of *Quartet in Autumn*, then, I'd like to consider the narrative construction of the novel, which will help us understand its tone. To put it simply nothing, or at least, very little, happens. Let's think about the implications and tone of that word.

Nothing.

Chapter 1 – A Day in the Office, and Edwin and Norman's Evenings.

I'll come back to this chapter and its language. Clearly, this is a highly ordinary beginning to a novel – much more so than in *A Glass of Blessings*, *Excellent Women* or *Jane and Prudence*, for example. It is not marked by a surprising event, the arrival of newcomers or moving house.

Chapter 2 – Another Day in the Office – framed by Letty and Marcia in private, travelling to and from work.

Note the repetition of 'event' from Chapter 1. By the end of this chapter, we have seen each character with the other three, and alone – thus singing in the quartet, and singing alone.

Chapter 3 – Marcia arrives home. Ends with Janice's point of view, then cuts to Edwin.

We haven't advanced far in terms of action or focus, apart from the introduction of Janice, and subtly deepening knowledge of Marcia. The move to Edwin at the end is interesting. Why? Pym is trying to unsettle the comfort of form, and also to 'dissolve' or fade from Marcia, perhaps.

Chapter 4 – Arrival of Spring – short office scene.

First indication of time setting, but same place setting as before.

Chapter 5 – Holidays.

The focus begins with Letty's holiday with Marjorie, which is given emphasis, and then moves to Edwin, then Marcia, then Norman alone at home. Later in the book we learn that Letty's visit was in the autumn. There is narrowing and diminishing, a sense of fading in the move from countryside (Letty) to small room (Norman).

Chapter 6 – Letty receives Letter from Marjorie, at home after work. Office next morning.

A letter is traditional dramatic device within fiction: here, it does not announce good news for Letty of course, but serves to negate action for her. Compare this with the arrival of letters in Austen, Forster and so on.

Chapter 7 – A Saturday morning. Janice visits Marcia; Letty alone in house.

We have fallen back from holidays and letters to repetition of previous events – Janice visiting Marcia – although this advances the oncoming tragedy. Letty's solitude builds on the letter. The Chapter 3 pattern is repeated: we fade away from Marcia.

Chapter 8 – The Office. 'Time went on'. **All Saint's Day** – Nov 1st – Edwin at church.

This marking of a date is significant against the earlier vagueness.

Chapter 9 – Just before Christmas. St. Lucy's Day. **Letty moves in with Mrs Pope**. Office scene next morning.

A move and change here, of course, interestingly just before Christmas – and not at the start of the book, as in *Jane and Prudence*.

Chapter 10 – Christmas Day. Four separate voices.

The message, of course, is that the characters are in company yet alone at Christmas, apart from each other. Harmony and lack of it, at once.

Chapter 11 – January 2nd. **Edwin goes to memorial service**, framed by two short office scenes.

It's New Year, but marked by death rather than new beginnings, preparing us for Marcia's death later that year.

Chapter 12 – **The Retirement Party**. The central chapter – no 12 of 24. The central event, in effect, is an end.

Chapter 13 – **Letty and Marcia's first Monday of retirement**.

Clearly, developing the theme of Chapter 12, in the same way that Chapter 2 carried on that of Chapter 1.

Chapter 14 – **After retirement**.

A week then a few weeks after retirement, Marcia and Letty (with Marjorie). Little change in their lives apart from not working. A deliberate lack of narrative progression.

Chapter 15 – **'Reunion' Quartet lunch** – then Marcia alone.

Pym could easily – to give it more obvious artistic unity – make the chapter contain only the lunch. Marcia alone heightens the pathos.

Chapter 16 – **A Summer evening**. Letty, Marcia, Norman separately.

Why is Edwin not part of this? It emphasizes the artificial nature of the quartet, perhaps.

Chapter 17 – **Letty in the country with Marjorie**.

Bluebells just over. Marcia alone in London, the same night. Edwin and Norman together. Pym clearly feels that constantly keeping each of the four either separate or in a four is too forced. This brings back the setting of Chapter 5; we have moved from autumn to late spring/early summer, which should mean a positive tone. This is the case for Marjorie and David, not Letty.

Chapter 18 – **Late summer**. Janice visits Marcia, again – developments in her situation.

Chapter 19 – **Marcia is taken to hospital**, and dies.

Chapter 20 – **Marcia's funeral**.

Chapter 21 – **Lunch after the funeral**. Letty alone with Mrs Pope.

Chapters 19 and 20 are the climax of the book. Pym, a spare writer, could easily have ended here.

Chapter 22 – Norman goes to Marcia's house; Edwin later.

Chapter 23 – Letty with Mrs Pope – news of Marjorie.

Chapter 24 – Edwin and Norman; then all 3 at Marcia's house.

This reprises the group of Chapter 16.

Looking at the chapters like this, we can see that some are centred upon occasions – Christmas, a party, a funeral – while some are focussed purely on a morning or evening. It becomes increasingly hard to find a title for each chapter, which is precisely the point. We can also see that the time elapsed is about 18 months, although this is not clear. The novel probably begins in the late winter. It ends in autumn – the quartet come together then, but only through one of them dying. The time gaps between chapters vary and are also often unspecified. When we compare the time progression and structure to a novel like *Emma*, which Pym knew well and was indeed influenced by, it is significant that she has – very deliberately I think – worked against symmetry and classical perfection of form here. The contrast between the satisfying closed circle at the end of *Crampton Hodnet* and *Some*

Tame Gazelle is striking: it is an advance in Pym's narrative methods, an experimentation.

Late twentieth-century narrative theory has made much of plot and narration as a representation of readerly desire. The novel has traditionally been equated with the Enlightenment, and its inherent sense of journeying allied with nineteenth-century improvement and education ideology. Pym's narratives up until *Quartet in Autumn* were often impelled by quests or searches – this is particularly true in *No Fond Return of Love*. Here, however, we have what is in some senses a journey or plot without a point. We are reminded, perhaps, of the pointless waiting in Becket, the journey that is all for nothing in Conrad. Barbara Pym is not as bleak – and this seems to be a facet of her personality too – but it is a comparison to which I wish to return. The distance between Pym's characters and journeying is illustrated by Norman's 'confrontation' with the evening traffic after his visit to his brother Ken in hospital, and Ken's dreams of running a driving school: his 'vision of a fleet of cars...swooping and gliding over the North Circular' is at odds with his confinement to a hospital bed. Marcia's condition is also 'terminal' – it is, literally, the end of a journey.

In addition Robert J. Graham has quoted historian Barbara Tuchmann's observation that artist Edward Hopper 'catches people between the events in their lives, or at moments when they appear without purpose', and observes that 'Barbara Pym depicts exactly the same landscape' (Graham 1987: 143). This is highly interesting.

We may not seem to be comparing like with like, but in the same way as Becket and Conrad can shed light, so to do Hopper and Pym seem to share a sensibility. Is *Quartet* a visual novel? Not really, but the moments of stasis suggest a neutral, uncertain rather than overtly negative tone that writer and artist share. Barbara Pym is not so much nihilistic and pessimistic as indefinite. Like Hopper, she is melancholy. The four characters in Hopper's 'Nighthawks' (*below left*) – although they are in the wrong country – in tone are much more suited to illustrate *Quartet in Autumn* than the four often seen on the book's jacket (*below right*).

Language and Tone

Graham, in his article quoted above, pointed out the narrative innovation and mastery within *Quartet in Autumn* and particularly within chapters 12 and 13. With this in mind I began to think that Pym's prose did need some study. Fortunately, I discovered that Deborah Donato in her excellent book *Reading Barbara Pym* (2005) had thought the same way, and I was glad to see her thoughts mirror mine. The opening page of *Quartet in Autumn*, as Donato shows, sets the tone linguistically.

In her book (47) Donato notes that the 'monotone opening sentences' set the scene for the contemplative, poignant novel that is to follow, and that it is a 'vocabulary of the indistinct and indefinite':

That day the four of **them** went to the library, though at different times. The library assistant, **if** he had noticed them at all, **would have** seen them as people who belonged together in some way.' [Bold type here and henceforward is mine, to emphasize the point.]

In effect it is an unspecified day and we meet four unspecified people, who are not united. They are not noticed: they might have been, but they weren't. The lines contrast unity and separation: we can read them for tone and implication in the way we might read a poem. Donato rightly suggests that in the second paragraph we realise that 'that day' 'is present time unfolding, not the irremediable future, although the opening sentences delay confirmation, as it is unclear if the lunch hour is being recollected or recorded', and that 'this delayed confirmation supports the sense of aimlessness and disconnection in time' (47).

As the chapter progresses, we soon see descriptions of hair that mock ideas of realist character – they parody introductions of persons and work against sharpness of presentation. Plain prose is marked out by negations.

‘Norman had not come to the library for any literary purpose’, we are told: the library is a good place for the disposing of rubbish (Does Norman = No-man? I will return to the question of names). The negation continues with ‘...the position of an **un**married, **un**attached ageing woman is of **no** interest whatsoever to the writer of modern fiction’; Letty rejects modern fiction for biographies - she ‘hadn’t read Jane Austen or Tolstoy anyway’. This begins a theme of making institutions of the past disposable and meaningless.

At lunchtime we learn that ‘the restaurant [Letty] usually patronized was called the Rendezvous but it was **not** much of a place for romantic meetings’. The meaning of the name is undercut and negative, producing irony, for Letty fails to connect with the two people there: Forster’s ‘Only connect’ is not likely to happen. Later, when Letty is having her nondescript lunch, another diner is introduced, as Donato rightly argues (49-50), poetically: she looks up, ‘perhaps about to venture a comment on price increases’, with ‘pale, bluish eyes troubled about VAT’. She is seen from a distance, the use of the word ‘perhaps’ suggesting blurring, and then we move to her eyes, which are a synecdoche. These are not blue but ‘bluish’ – they are just glimpsed. The brief glimpse of the figure in a crowd is a feature of modernist art.

Just after this, Edwin’s ritual offer of a jelly baby to Letty when he knows she won’t accept – ‘Only a ritual gesture’ – mocks the traditional meaning of ritual, adding to the sense of decay. In the same way Marcia makes coffee for Norman although ‘There was **nothing particularly significant** about her action – it was **just** a convenient arrangement they had.’ Later, Edwin reflects on the name ‘Master of Ceremonies, (whatever that might be).’

To continue the vocabulary of fading, negation and conditional tenses, there is a ‘weak British sun’, and Marcia and Letty ‘did **not** speak of or break into gossip about the two men’; we have ‘In the past...might have...no...neither’ and, when Norman visits what passes for family ‘They sat almost in silence’ and ‘**Nobody** heard him’ outside. We learn that ‘The evening had exhausted him and he **did not** even feel that he had done Ken much good’. As for Edwin at church, the church service had been empty, ‘**Nobody** standing next to anybody to make any kind of gesture’. When he goes to bed singing a ‘tricky’ plain song tune, he is clearly singing apart from the others.

What has the first chapter offered us, then? A portrait of four people, connected because of work, age and some circumstances, trapped with each other; a society in which real human connections fail, and institutions – from library to Church – which have become meaningless. It is a confused wasteland – I’m choosing that term deliberately. The tone is indefinite and indeterminate through the lexis; incidents are characterised by hesitation and refusal.

There is so much else in the book that continues this, so I’ve just chosen a few more examples of what I’ve discussed already before we move on to a key chapter. Here is a striking one in Chapter 5:

Seen at closer quarters and in ‘civilian’ clothes, Father Lydell was **disappointing**. He looked sadly **ordinary** in a ginger-coloured tweed jacket and grey flannel trousers with **something not quite right** about the cut of them – too wide **or** too narrow, **or at least not** what one saw people wearing now.

How can something be too wide or too narrow? Throughout Pym, as in this book, people talk ‘elliptically’ and ‘obscurely’, the latter a word that until considering Pym’s vocabulary in depth I’d thought was her only example of overuse. We have ‘The sentence trailed off’ and David Lydell thinking of Letty as ‘Miss Something, a not very interesting person whose name he hadn’t caught’: identity and clarity slip away.

I'd now like to turn to Chapter 12. It begins as follows:

The organization (*what is it called?*) where Letty and Marcia worked regarded it as a duty (*impersonal tone*) to provide **some kind** of retirement party (*vague*) for them, **when the time came** (*when?*) for them to give up working. Their status as ageing unskilled women **did not** (*negation*) entitle them to an evening party, but **it was felt** (*passive*) that a lunchtime gathering...would be entirely appropriate.

This sense of the passive, indefinite, vague, negative and merely possible continues throughout the chapter: 'Also at lunchtime sandwiches **could be eaten** ... and **it was felt by some** that a time like this it was "better" to be eating – it gave one something to do'. Retirement is 'incomprehensible' to most of the staff; the conclusions of a seminar on it 'had no real bearing' on the retirement of Letty and Marcia, for which 'no kind of preparation needed to be made'. The tenses that have become symptomatic appear again: '**If** the two women feared that the coming of this date might give some clue to their ages, it was not an occasion for embarrassment because **nobody else** had been **in the least interested**.' A vague, impersonal voice reflects that '...people like Letty and Marcia **probably** had either private means or savings'. Here is another section that struck me:

The (acting) deputy assistant director, who had been commanded to make the presentation speech, **wasn't quite sure** what it was that Miss Crowe and Miss Ivory **did or had done** during their working life. The activities of their department **seemed shrouded in mystery – something to do with** records or filing, it was thought, **nobody** knew for certain, but it was evidently 'women's work', the kind of thing that could easily be replaced by a computer. **The most significant** thing about it was that **nobody** was replacing them, indeed the whole department was being phased out....

These brackets remind us of Lady Selvedge in *An Unsuitable Attachment* – usually known as Lady (Muriel) Selvedge, where 'the parentheses gave her a sense of not existing, un-being perhaps was not too strong a word'.

In the same chapter, Marcia's body comes to rather comically symbolise the indefinite tone. Very little of Marcia's shape is visible in her odd dress. '**She might have** provided unusual entertainment if one had had the courage to attempt a conversation with her.' '**It was difficult to imagine** what her retirement might be like'. It as if, paradoxically, Pym is clarifying her indistinctness, as at the end of the chapter Letty voices uncertainty to herself: "I feel quite..." [Letty] **didn't really know** how she felt or how to describe it; she was certainly **not** drunk but **neither** tiddly nor tipsy seemed suitably dignified'. Finally, the contents of Marcia's drawer are mysterious, and [Edwin] **did not really know** what to say now that it had come to the point. **None of them knew**....'

Musical Form

The implications and ironies of the novel's title have not been lost on critics and reviewers. Annette Weld noted that the novel is 'nearly eventless' and that the 'musical motifs indicated in the title operate for the most part ironically': the four characters never harmonise.' The *Church Times* noted that 'A more sophisticated, thematic approach has replaced the earlier narrative style – four strings each contributing its own peculiar strain in a technically harmonious whole' (Cocking 2013: 204). With this in mind, we can read *Quartet in Autumn* as a poetic or musical piece: we are more interested in the effect and tone produced by a particular voice than by a forward movement. We should remember Pym's great admiration for T.S. Eliot. There is little actual evidence of Pym's thoughts on Eliot's poetry, although she did rank him as a great poet, and Michael Cotsell noted 'the modern poets who seem increasingly to lie behind her work (for instance the surgeon God in Eliot's *Four Quartets*)' (Cotsell 1989: 129). Eliot, of course, has been argued to be a musical poet in a very particular way, on the level of rhythm and lexis, but Pym does share Eliot's interest in time, in the twentieth-century as a wasteland in this novel,

and in a mood of indistinctness.

With what we have discovered about Pym's language, narration and tone in mind, her deliberate indistinctness and neutrality, I'd like to read some excerpts from various parts of 'Burnt Norton', the first of Eliot's *Four Quartets*. The vocabulary and tone seem to mirror, at times, moments we have seen in *Quartet in Autumn*.

Time present and time past
Are both **perhaps** present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What **might have** been is an **abstraction**
Remaining a **perpetual possibility**
Only in a world of **speculation**.
What **might have** been and what has been
Point to **one end**, which is always present.
Footfalls **echo in the memory**
Down the passage which **we did not take**
Towards the door we **never opened**
Into the rose-garden.

And the bird called, in response to
The **unheard music hidden** in the shrubbery,
And the **unseen** eyebeam crossed, for the **roses**
Had the look of flowers that are looked at.
There they were as our guests, accepted and accepting.
So we moved, and they, in a formal pattern,
Along the **empty** alley, into the box circle,
To look down into the **drained** pool.
Dry the pool, dry concrete, brown edged,
And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,
And the lotos rose, **quietly, quietly**,
The surface glittered out of heart of light,
And they were behind us, reflected in the pool.

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.
Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

I can only say, there we have been: but I **cannot say** where.

And I **cannot say**, how long, for that **is to place it in time**.

Here is a place of disaffection
Time before and time after
In a **dim light: neither daylight**
Investing form with lucid **stillness**
Turning shadow into transient beauty
With slow rotation suggesting permanence
Nor darkness to purify the soul
Emptying the sensual with deprivation
Cleansing affection from the temporal.

**Neither plentitude nor vacancy. Only a flicker
Over the strained time-ridden faces**

Distracted from distraction by distraction
Filled with fancies and **empty of meaning**

Descend lower, descend only
Into the **world of perpetual solitude,**

Words move, music moves
Only in time; but that which is only living
Can only die. Words, after speech, reach
Into the silence.

I do not wish to go so far as to say that *Quartet in Autumn* is a reworking of 'Burnt Norton', or that it directly alludes to it. It's tempting to link the works because of the word 'quartet', but of course it was not Pym's first choice for a novel title. In some way's Eliot's tone is characteristic of late modernism, under the influence of which Pym is writing. Eliot, Hopper and Pym thus share an interest in the indefinite as a representative of the human condition in the twentieth century.

This, however, is not all there is to the story. John Bayley is, I think, the best critic of Pym. In an unshowy and highly astute way he has pinpointed the difficulty of understanding exactly what Pym is doing in her fiction, and how she does it. He states the following, which I think is highly pertinent to what I'm attempting to argue here:

The selfhood of her novels embodies a true sense of **duality**...it is a rare possession.... [H]er novels take entirely for granted the fact that we live in two worlds, one of extreme triviality typified by the work situation, social exchange, irritations, small comforts of eating and drinking.... On the other hand we live in a world of romance, aspiration, love-longing, loneliness, despair (Bayley 1987: 52-53).

The two worlds are a strong presence in *Quartet in Autumn*. Love, religious faith, death and the meaning of life are reflected upon, as are clothes, meals and social arrangements. It as if Pym is unconsciously aware here of the stark and bathetic contrast between the two, and perhaps the impossibility of reconciling or even understanding them. This gap produces a tone that is appropriately indefinite, minor and muted, rather than comic, as it was in the earlier novels.

I think the final key to the question of tone is Marcia. Marcia is absolutely not a muted, minor key figure – the contrast between her and Letty is much stronger than that between, say Jane and Prudence. It has been argued that Marcia's eccentricity is something that Barbara feared she had or could become. The impressive thing is that Marcia remains striking – to readers and characters within the novel – and at the same time unknowable.

To start with the most simple point, Marcia has one more syllable than her co-workers. This cannot have been accidental in a novelist so attuned to words and their sound. This extra syllable gives the name something of an elegance that is ironic in Marcia's case. What else does the name suggest? March, perhaps – the beginning of spring, again ironic. Finally, given how much Pym liked the work of Iris Murdoch, it's perhaps worth considering that behind Murdoch's 1973 novel *The Black Prince* lies the Classical figure who dies a tortured yet beautiful death is Marsyas. Marcia, Marsyas. Music operates for them, of course, in very different ways. I also wonder if the fact that Marcia is seen to have 'slipped through the net' (of the social services) could be an allusion to Wittgenstein/Murdoch's 'net' of language from which humankind struggles to free themselves. Marcia, at the end of this novel, perhaps achieves a strange kind of liberation, a release from shadowy identity into nothingness.

Conclusion

It is only in hindsight that we can see the achievement of *Quartet in Autumn* for what it is. True, it had excellent reviews when it was published in 1977, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and cemented Pym's comeback. But it may have been too easy to see it as a masterpiece of quietness, a depiction of marginal lives. It is this, of course; but in terms of its refusal to give answers and definition it is truly an example of late modernism, something to be compared with Conrad and Beckett. Most critics assert that, although muted, Pym's comedy is still present. It is – in a cursory way. It is the façade and covering of the excellent woman who always smiles or finds laughter: convention demands, and fictional convention demands it too. The real *Quartet in Autumn* is not life holding 'infinite possibilities for change', but decay and death. It is Marcia's story. The biggest irony of the musical motif is that harmony is only achieved when a voice is silenced – Marcia's silence means as much as her voice. If it is a quartet, then, it is not only lacking in harmony but challenging the very form.

Despite, then, its very memorable and important depiction of British life in the 1970s and the relationship of individuals to the community, *Quartet in Autumn*'s real achievement lies in its refusal to follow the then artistic vogues. Compare it to the work of Margaret Drabble, Malcolm Bradbury, David Lodge and Iris Murdoch. Unself-conscious, original, spare and boldly plotless, a poem in disguise characterised by negation and indistinctness, somehow it achieves beauty in monotone and silence. It's come, recently, to remind me of works by Anne Tyler, a writer who admires Pym. In Tyler's work, not only is there comically astute observation of social manners, but also a feeling of quite deliberate slowness and eventlessness. But Pym is also in *Quartet in Autumn* a minimalist, almost in the Raymond Carver vein.

When I was trying to find a home for a British centenary Pym conference, the head of department at one of my places of work, not being familiar with her, asked me what kind of writer she was. Was she an experimental modernist? I was amused by this. How far off the mark, I thought.

How wrong I was.

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