

Lessons from Across the Channel: What the French Can Teach Us About Barbara Pym and What Pym Can Teach Us About the French

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In preparing this manuscript for the Pym Society archives, I've added end notes and references, as well as a few extra details that were not in my talk at the AGM on September 5, 2021. One of those bits, advice from a French reader, made my heart sing, so I'll share it now: "When you close one of Pym's novels, dare to observe the world around you while you are still looking through her eyes. You will never know boredom, having discovered the great human comedy amid all its recurring trials."

Good morning. I am thrilled to be here in person to talk about a subject that has been on my mind since 1990. That was the year I fell upon a copy of *Comme une gazelle apprivoisée* in a bookstore on the Place St. Michel in Paris. The *Bede* sisters? And right near *Marcel Proust*? I snatched the book like a precious jewel. I eventually bought almost all of the Barbara Pym French translations, which were published between 1986 and 1992.¹

I once thought of this project as exploring the "French side" of Barbara Pym. That side is still fun to think about – the references to French food in the novels, the characters with Frenchified habits like Prudence Bates and Wilmet Forsyth, the delights of seeing how certain passages are translated from English into French. And of course there's also the quiet joy of spotting a little mistake – or a place where the translation needed a footnote.

Over the last few years I've become increasingly interested in what French readers think of Pym's novels and *why* – as well as whether French literature has a Pym equivalent. Soon after I discovered the translations 30 years ago, I managed to get copies of reviews written by journalists in *Le Monde* and a few other French publications. But I didn't know what ordinary French readers thought about Pym's novels until about three years ago. That's when I discovered Babelio, a literary website where French readers post book reviews.

Often when I'd mention my interest in Pym's translations, some of my friends would initially ask, "Why would the French care about Pym? She's so British! And nothing happens in the novels – don't the French like a lot of drama?" Yet many French readers care about her novels for some of the same reasons that we do. The tenderness she shows for her characters, her attention to detail, and the "oh so British" bits and pieces she inserts are not lost in translation.²

But what about Pym's sense of humor and her irony? Well, that's trickier. The French seem to view her humor as more caustic, more biting, than we do. And that may be the case because the humor that we find in Pym is so dependent on her exact choice of words. Characters seem snarkier in French than in English. Indeed, about a year ago I discovered an audio version of *Emma* in French. I could swear that Emma Woodhouse seems meaner in French than in English.³

As background, I fell in love with the French language in high school, majored in French in college, and about 10 years after graduation I met a wonderful Frenchman in New York and became close to his family in Normandy. Until a few years ago I worked as a research editor at Goldman Sachs. My work was somewhat like Barbara's, but she had anthropologists keeping her entertained whereas I had only economists and stock analysts. Loving English literature but having spent my undergraduate years trying to learn French, I enrolled in an evening English masters program at NYU in the mid-1990s. One of my favorite classes was titled "the Literary Chunnel." At the first lecture, our professor flatly declared that the English novel was about marriage and the French novel about separation (or the *ménage à trois*). Hmmm. That seemed kind of true.

For my master's thesis, titled "So Frivolous, but So Free: Attitudes Toward the French in Victorian Literature," I looked at how French characters were portrayed in English novels, and what happened when English characters went to France. Of course the French were often portrayed in a negative (though perhaps understated) way in novels, as well as in

guide books with titles such as *Travels in the Country of Frog Eaters*. Just one example from my thesis: Recall that the mother of Jane Eyre's pupil, Adele, had been French but had "gone to the Holy Virgin." At one of Mr. Rochester's evening parties, Adele, seven or eight years old, is allowed to sing a song about being deserted by a lover. Jane reflects that her pupil has "a superficiality of character, inherited probably from her mother [a *dancer*], hardly congenial to an English mind."⁴ So my interest in Pym's French translations is connected with my general curiosity about how the French and English view each other.

Somehow I got my hands on photocopies of reviews of Pym's novels that *Le Monde* featured between 1987 and 1993 – maybe from the Alliance Française in New York. Also, the back cover of two of the paperback translations had excerpts from those reviews, which might have prompted me to find the full articles. We'll take a quick look at a couple of those early reviews shortly. Then about three years ago I discovered the Babelio website. Patterned after GoodReads, the English version, Babelio has about 1 million members. They are serious bookworms and about 400 of them have Pym on their reading lists. The reviews posted on the site have helped me understand what French readers currently think of Pym. Many of them are beautifully written, and some of the reviews appear on various blogs and on Amazon France.⁵

The French view of Pym's work and the role of French humor vs. British humor

Helping me in my quest to find out what the French think of Pym – and why – is a wonderful book called *The Bonjour Effect: The secret codes of French conversation revealed*. It was published in 2016 by a French Canadian couple. I've also spent time thinking and reading and asking bilingual friends about the difference between British and French humor. I think I understand British humor (and passages in Pym's novels make me laugh no matter how many times I've read them). But French humor is hard to fathom. So here are two things to keep in mind according to *The Bonjour Effect*:

First, the French think being negative is good. It makes you sound smart. (As a quick aside, French has no clear-cut word for "understatement." Sometimes it's translated as "euphémisme," which isn't quite right. No matter what, if you're French and you have a complaint, you're probably not going to play it down.)

Second, the French do not make jokes about themselves. In France, self-deprecating humor makes you sound stupid. The French do practice *esprit*, which is "a form of high-spirited wit" that can be quite funny according to the authors of *The Bonjour Effect*. They also note that it's a way for the French to show their "intelligence and culture."

Many people have written about French versus British humor. And I've asked for help understanding the subject. Barbara Pym Society member Ruth Pavans de Ceccatty, who is bi-lingual and lives in France, told me that she believes French humor can be somewhat "mean-spirited." She notes that this contrasts with "the light, ironic glance of British humor," which the speaker aims at himself more often than at others. Furthermore, "the French have no tradition of enjoying the absurd – unlike the British with their long-standing love of nonsense (Edward Lear, Lewis Carroll)."

Although the French may look askance at the English for *not* being negative and for happily making fun of themselves, the French do like certain English ways. *Downton Abbey* is very popular in France. Many French reviewers of Pym's novels delight in the cups of tea, jumble sales, church-going, gardening, and gossiping – in fact, Babelio reviewers often suggest (in a joking way of course) that you should prepare to read them by making a cup of tea, or crawling under a "plaid" (in winter), or putting the cat on your lap.

I believe that Pym captures a certain English way of life that the French admire but might not aspire to. These words often appear in Pym reviews: modesty, restraint, composure, kindness, calmness, detachment. (Many French readers admire these qualities in Mildred Lathbury, along with her good sense and great wit. Some even admire her self-deprecating humor!) Reviewers also comment on the role of the church and the clergy in the novels, which is "so British" too.

Nevertheless, in both English and French, Pym's coziness does not hide the sadness, disappointment, and resignation of some of the characters. On both sides of the Channel, Pym's darker side is appreciated and sometimes celebrated. Yet French readers sometimes comment on the cruelty they find in English literature, including in Pym.

Characters seem trapped in dreary situations. So commentators might highlight restriction, malicious gossip, rigidity, uselessness, despair, rule-following, “what the neighbors say.” The French do not like to follow rules. The spirit of liberty seems engrained in their character.⁶

We’ll look more closely at the French way of thinking when we examine what Babelio readers have written about Pym in the last few years. But let’s first look at a couple of those reviews from the late 1980s and early 1990s, when the translations were first published. I’ve tried to capture the spirit of what the reviewers said as closely as possible without giving an exact translation.

What the early “professional” reviewers said

Pascale Frey of the *Geneva Tribune* says this in her 1988 review of *Les ingrattitudes de l’amour* (*No Fond Return of Love*): Pym has the art of seasoning daily life like no one else, spicing up the most blatant banalities and creating a certain suspense in the lives of people who have none, without forgetting that sense of humor without which English literature would be duller.

Later, in a 1995 essay in *L’Express*, Frey declares that French intellectuals look down on novels with more or less happy endings, which are often written by women. But she thinks women novelists from Anglo-Saxon countries are different. To her, writers going back to Jane Austen as well as 20th century novelists such as Daphne du Maurier, Barbara Pym, and Anita Brookner have succeeded marvelously in creating a cocktail of intelligence, humor, suspense, and daily life.

Writer and editor **René de Ceccatty** wrote a fairly lengthy preface to the translations of both *A Few Green Leaves* and *The Sweet Dove Died* in 1987. In it he outlines Pym’s life – her years of not being published, her rediscovery, and her health problems. He even touches on her various romances – information that might appeal to the French in general, not just the intellectuals. De Ceccatty ends the preface by noting that Pym had the ability to make fiction seem real to readers, allowing them to live in the books they read – a philosophy of literature. In reviews of three of the novels, he describes Pym’s admiration for Ivy Compton Burnett and touches on her inclusion of homosexual characters. I do wonder in carrying out his research if de Ceccatty ever spoke to Hilary or Hazel. Or perhaps he simply got hold of *A Very Private Eye*. I hope one day to look into this question.

In an article in *Le Monde* in 1990, de Ceccatty refers to Mildred Lathbury as “une chic fille” – which translates as “a cool chick” (not necessarily beautiful, but “with it”). Mildred knows how to listen, and always has a kettle on the gas ring for tea if someone stops by.

De Ceccatty believes that, more than Jane Austen, Pym has a taste for the everyday: Her characters don’t talk about how they feel (we will touch on this shortly), but reveal themselves through gestures, mannerisms, verbal ticks, and the objects around them. Their dreams may be frustrated, but they are faced realistically and rescued by humor. To me, de Ceccatty shows that he has an understanding of British humor and irony and “understatement” (in fact he uses the English word rather than translating it). He’s also comfortable with Pym’s settings, and her true and efficient dialogues. And he mentions that he doesn’t want to be interrupted when reading her!

Frank Bernard is described in his obituary in the November 6, 2006, edition of *Le Monde* as one of France’s last literary legends. Along with literary topics he also wrote about food – sadly (though perhaps in the line of duty), he died of a heart attack at 77 while dining in a Paris restaurant. In October 1987, Bernard wrote an article for *Le Monde* on *Un brin de verdure* (*A Few Green Leaves*), noting that it was his favorite book among those he had read in September of that year.

Bernard’s interest in good food is evident: “Who can’t appreciate a novel where between the Roman Catholic church, represented by Adam Prince (former Anglican priest and now inspector for a gourmet food magazine) and the good-natured Anglican rector Tom, we find Adam, suffering from over-rich/poorly cooked fare, declaring that he is incapable of eating anything but spaghetti cooked 12 minutes to al-dente perfection with a hint of parmesan and nois de

beurre – made from Danish butter, *not* Normand. Bernard writes, “When I read French novels today, even those that are beautifully written and thought-provoking, I always have the impression that they are on their guard and confined, that they don’t know how to relax, that (if the novels could talk) they would say “We’re not here for the fun of it.” The “pretension” of our national novel, as superb as that work is, keeps me from enjoying it as it deserves. *Un brin de verdure* has sparked within me an intense case of Pym-ness.”

Christine Jordis is head of the Anglo-Saxon literature division of Gallimard, the French publishing house. Let me digress for one moment and then return to Mme Jordis. In the late 1990s, I gave a friend in Paris a copy of *Comme une gazelle apprivoisée*. She said she enjoyed it, but immediately added, “elles ne sont pas gentilles ces petites dames” – “these little ladies are not kind.”

Jordis would agree with my friend. She is very well known in French literary circles and has written novels as well as works of non-fiction. She loves England with all her heart. After going through a difficult childhood in Algeria and in France after World War II (her mother was extremely strict and always worried about “what people will say”), her family moved to England where she discovered English literature. In fact, Christine Jordis credits *Jane Eyre* with saving her. She said “Great Britain is my country, for it was there that I was happy for the first time.”

Nonetheless, one of her topics of interest is the cruelty that certain female British authors, going back to Jane Austen, seem to inflict on their female characters. She devoted an entire book to the subject, *De petits enfers variés*, published in 1989. There’s no English translation, but “About Various Little Hells” or maybe even “A Tour Through Various Little Hells” could work for the title. Barbara Pym is one of the authors Christine Jordis covers in that book, in chapters that also refer to Molly Keane and Anita Brookner, noting that they are descendants of Austen. Jordis would be firmly on the side of Marianne rather than Eleanor in *Sense & Sensibility*. She questions the emphasis many English women novelists, such as Pym, put on creating characters who are reasonable and prudent. However, she admits that the sad state of male/female relationships is an inexhaustible source of comedy for Pym, who studies them with detachment.

De petits enfers variés was published more than 20 years ago. I think Jordis would be pleased with Paula Byrne’s new biography of Barbara Pym and the light it sheds on Pym’s romantic, unconventional side.

Finally, **Anne-Sophie** (last name not provided) of *La Voix du Nord* noted the following after the republication of *Des femmes remarquables* in 2017: Barbara Pym’s greatest treat is undoubtedly her way of writing about love, friendship, marriage, solitude, with a softness tinged with English humor, something we [French] painfully lack but which makes life less serious/more bearable.

This idea intrigues me. It may be that the French (particularly those who view themselves as intellectual – i.e., most of the country’s population) don’t really *want* life to be much less serious. If it were less serious and more bearable, would it become uninteresting and mundane – in other words, more British? And another thought: Could it be that the French language lends itself to drama and skepticism? Maybe everyday situations don’t work as well – or seem more boring – in French versus English.

What Babelio readers say about Pym’s novels

Here are excerpts from a handful of Babelio reviews as well as responses I received through the site after asking if French literature had a Pym equivalent. Pym reviews go back to March 2008 and continue right up until today. (Note that only a few of the Pym translations are still in print (for example, STG, EW, and NFRL) and reviewers frequently mention wishing that they could find them more easily.)

—I have been a librarian for 20 years, and I believe I know French literature pretty well. But I can think of no French author who has the same style as Pym, who manages to mix lightness and compassion for her characters, and has a caustic way of describing their lives and their little weaknesses. French authors sometimes have a tender regard for their characters. I’m thinking for example of Barbara Constantine. But her handle on humor is much less subtle than Pym’s; the comic scenes are more labored, more overdone; they could make you laugh in a film but the language is not as polished

(as well crafted). I like the old-fashioned side of Pym's work. I like the fact that her novels are slow. You can relish each page, and taste each sentence as though you were letting a petit four melt in your mouth.

—I've never found a French author who comes close to Pym, who knows how to gently poke fun at her characters but surrounds them with tenderness, and who also knows how to capture solitude so well, the passage of time, and everyday worries. Her writing is very British and thus a bit different from French literature. In any case, if some writer in France came close to her, I would be thrilled to know about it.

—Another novel of manners ... in the heart of a provincial community ruled by rigid codes of polite society, self-righteousness, beneficence, a strict sense of duty, pettiness, and deeply steeped in Judeo-Christian ways. But Pym's refined analysis of this narrow-minded world is always brilliant.

—I like Pym's heroines. There's something touching and a bit ridiculous about them that I find appealing. Maybe it's because they hold a mirror up for me so I can see my own doubts, my own foibles, my weaknesses, and my strengths. Because even at the heart of their small lives, the hope for happiness is inscribed, in whatever form it may take. How I love the so-very-British humor of Pym: discretely sharp and "second degree."⁷

—*Jane & Prudence*, published in 1953, puts us in the world of English villages, and focuses on a clerical family – the pastor, his wife, his daughter. Why does this happen so often in English novels? But let me get straight to the point: the intrigue here is *not* very interesting. The novel is built on its ambiance and restrained humor: tea at 5 pm with gossiping friends, analyzing and comparing outfits, comical rituals at the office, hints of maliciousness, tea again at a fixed hour. These details are finely sketched and pleasant. Consequently, we are *not* in the presence of a great novel. But why not enjoy the amusement of immersing ourselves in this England of routine and kindly decadence? And in France, didn't Proust attain glory by describing – and in 2000 pages (it was actually 4000) – the equally dull and ordinary lives of the petit bourgeoisie?

—The two sisters in *Some Tame Gazelle* cannot say "I do" because they cannot leave each other, and they certainly cannot marry and give up their liberty – notably the freedom to eat at the hour they choose. Their routine is organized around tea time, and conversations often center on housekeeping and meals. Old Lace without the Arsenic!

—Do you need a "feel-bad" novel? *Quartet in Autumn* is for you. Worse than Flaubert.

—In *A Glass of Blessings*, one enjoys the narration of the adventures of Wilmet Forsythe – a modern Emma Bovary. [And I would perhaps add "a modern Emma Woodhouse."]

A closer look at how the French "read" Pym

Two Babelio reviewers wrote to me after I asked them what made Pym's novel different from French novels – especially in terms of humor. Here are their main points:

—In Pym's novels, the situations are normal, everyday ones. I like how the people in the novels could live next door.

—In French novels, the situations are often crude ("lourdes"), for instance about sex, and the humor is not subtle or ironic; or it's like the humor you see in the theater – with people falling and punching each other. There is no reflection on the part of characters.

—What's amusing is the gap between what characters think and reality. I like Pym's humor because it's biting. She makes fun of her characters – these women who think they are interesting even though their lives are empty. They view themselves as charming or mysterious, but others see them as uninteresting and unimportant.

—Take the Bede sisters preparing to entertain a man or men. Pym gives lots of details about how they carefully plan the meal, the flowers, what they will wear. What's humorous (and sad) is the gap: the sisters think these things are appreciated, but we readers know that the men don't care.

—In French literature, the main characters are always talking about their feelings. Pym’s characters do not. They show us that they are happy about entertaining vicars and helping at charity events, but you imagine them sitting on the sofa, sadly knitting and waiting for a visitor who doesn’t come. However, they don’t mention how they feel or express joy, anger, jealousy, deception. That would be too intimate. Too revealing.

Yet here is where I think the French may be wrong – and we can perhaps blame it on the difficulty of capturing Pym’s tone in the French language. Some French readers might not be grasping the intelligence and possibly the wit of the heroines (Mildred being the best example), who are often on the more optimistic side and able to poke fun at themselves – traits the French do not admire.⁸

The French side of Barbara Pym

Pym may never have set foot in France, but she certainly knew French – and a letter she wrote to Henry Harvey dated February 20, 1946 (published in *A Very Private Eye*) indicates that she would like to be “soaked in French literature.”

Both Pym and Proust loved weaving meticulous details into their work. But while Barbara kept track of bits and pieces in her notebooks, Marcel, from his cork-lined bedroom, would drive friends crazy by asking them for minute details about parties and so on. At some point Pym was advised to “Go over all [her] characters and make them worse – as Proust did.”⁹

Yet even though Barbara never traveled to France and didn’t seem particularly interested in the French, she (like many novelists before her) does sprinkle bits of French culture throughout her novels. From the tiniest mention – Letty fearing that the suit she is wearing to Marcia’s funeral (which the saleswoman had called “French navy”) is too frivolous. To Frances Cleveland and Barbara Bird’s plans to escape across the English Channel together and go to Paris.

Also, in *A Lot to Ask*, Hazel Holt notes that Barbara used to say that of all her heroines, in many ways the one she resembled most was Prudence. To me, Prudence seems more French than English: She dresses elegantly and with great care, decorates her face and finger-nails, and has a little Regency apartment worthy of *Vogue*. She likes novels with suitably unhappy endings. Speaking of this, after Fabian takes flight, Prudence treats herself to a solitary, rather expensive restaurant lunch (on a work day, mind you). She starts with a dry martini and ends with “no sweet of course” – perhaps a “really ripe yellow-fleshed peach”? – followed by “the blackest of black coffee.” This is so very French.

Just highlighting a few other French bits in the novels. You might recall Piers saying this about meeting Keith in a course he taught: “Imagine it Wilmet. The pathos of anyone not knowing French ... I mean *not at all*.” And then there is reference upon reference to French food and drink: Nuit St. George (properly or improperly “chambred”), camembert, French peasant meals. Well, we all have our favorites.

I’ll move on after two more French bits: There’s Jean-Pierre Le Rossignol gallantly unhooking a kneeler for Mrs. Dulke, whose family pew he has accidentally invaded, and later at lunch with Deirdre and her family, inquiring intelligently and politely – as one would expect of his countrymen – about “the social revolution in England.”

Less polite are Aylwin Forbes and Maurice Clive: At dinner chez Dulcie (duck with Clos Vougeot 1952), Aylwin can’t resist mentioning that across the street from him, where Laurel will be moving, he often sees “young girls coming and going through the trees – À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs.” Maurice, not to be outdone, promptly shows that he recognizes the quote by asking if anyone at the table has seen the exhibit of Proust relics.

Some problems of a translator

My favorite French translation problem to ponder is one that many foreigners encounter (as well as the French themselves), not just professional translators: How to decide whether to use the familiar “tu” or the polite “vous” for “you.” The internet is filled with advice about which pronoun to use when speaking, but I couldn’t find any guidelines for translators.

In Pym's novels, "tu" is used almost exclusively between spouses, siblings, parents/children, and long-term friends (such as Jane and Prudence, Wilmet and Rowena, and Mildred and Dora). Almost every other pair uses "vous" – including Mildred and Winifred for example. And Belinda and the Archdeacon most decidedly use "vous" – though they may have "tutoyed" at Oxford.

Things get more complex for the translator when you look at how the exactness of Pym's words creates much of the humor and sets the tone of her novels. Here are a couple of my favorite lines in the novels. Let's see what happens in translation. Is the humor lost? I am not sure, but I think it is.

From EW (Chapter 1): "The burden of keeping three people in toilet paper seemed to me rather a heavy one."

French: "Approvisionner trois personnes en papier hygiénique me paraissait une charge fort pesante."

From NFRL (Ch. 20): "Mrs. Williton ... sat down stiffly on the edge of the seat, like a bird on an unfamiliar nest."

French: "Madame Williton ... s'assit avec raideur au bord de son siège, pareille à un oiseau sur un nid inconnu."

From AGOB (Ch. 15): When Wilmet saw Mr. Coleman coming to the front door, she ran down to answer the door "before Rhoda could come grumbling up from the basement." In French we have her doing the same "avant que Rhoda ne monte en grommelant du sous-sol."

Finally, in J&P (Ch. 5), "my husband can't take toad" is translated as simply "mon mari ne supporte pas les saucisses."

The smallest words can give translators trouble. For example, "nevertheless" or even "as" if not translated properly – or left out – can confuse the reader. This is why publishers try to hire "backtranslators" to check translations. Tim Parks, a British writer and translator of Italian, discusses this in his 2007 book *Translating Style*. He devotes a chapter titled "Barbara Pym and the untranslatable commonplace" to the Italian translation of *A Few Green Leaves*. You don't have to know Italian or any foreign language to understand and enjoy the book.

Parks notes that Pym packs a lot of information into her writing and sometimes delivers it in a haphazard way: a sentence at the beginning of a paragraph often does not hint at how it will end. There are hundreds of these and they can be tricky to translate. For instance, Wilmet is thinking about Father Ransome's friend Edwin taking long walks over Exmoor to decide whether to go over to Rome. She then switches to asking herself whether Edwin might take a packed lunch like Professor Root and his sister do on their excursions. This may be an example of what has come to be known in some circles as "the Pym pivot" – where she moves from a general thought to an unexpected topic in a short space of time.¹⁰

Another pitfall for translators is forgetting to insert inverted commas or use italics – or leaving out an expression like "as it were." All of these can indicate that a word or phrase is spoken with a small degree irony or humor. If missing, that tone is lost.

Finally, we have the problem of translating such expressions as "going over to Rome." In the French translation of *A Few Green Leaves*, "passé à Rome" is used; however, it isn't put inside inverted commas or footnoted, so French readers (even those who are Roman Catholics) might not know what to make of it. And Helena Napier's "holy fowl" designation in *Des femmes remarquables* is "grenouille de bénitier," conjuring up the image of a joyful frog playing in the baptismal font rather than some dreary bird doing the brasses.¹¹

Here's a subtlety that might slip past even the most gifted translator. I caught it only because of a paper on "[Class in the Novels of Barbara Pym](#)" that Tim Burnett gave in 2003 at the society's meeting at Harvard. In *A Glass of Blessings*, Keith refers to Wilmet's lovely "home" on two different occasions when he is talking to her. "Home" is not put inside quotation marks, but Pym deliberately chose the word rather than "house" as suitable for Keith, who probably leans toward non-upper-class (non-U) expressions. In the French version, Keith refers to Wilmet's "jolie maison" – pretty house – in one place. But someone on the translation team may have had an inkling about "home" being non-U: A few pages later Keith refers to Wilmet's "très joli petit nid" – her very pretty little nest! Très non-U.

Let me end on another non-U note: In *A Few Green Leaves*, Beatrix Howick is asking Emma about some provisions that have been put in the cottage that Graham Pettifer has rented:

“Are the requisites all in the toilet?,” Beatrix quoted.

“Est-ce qu’il a bien tout le nécessaire dans les toilettes?” dit Beatrix, répétant une formule toute faite.

If this sentence had been back-translated – if the French had been translated back to English to check for accuracy – someone might have realized that Beatrix is not “repeating a canned expression” as the French version implies, but is instead quoting a line of poetry or something else literary. Because I heard Tim’s talk in 2003, I would have been able to suggest that the translator keep “Are the requisites all in the toilet?” in English, adding a footnote in French to explain that the question appears in John Betjeman’s 1958 poem, “How to Get on in Society.”¹²

Thank you. Merci.

References and Web Sites of Interest

Baron, Julie and Jean-Benoît Nadeau: *The Bonjour Effect: The Secret Codes of French Conversation Revealed*. St. Martin’s Press, New York, 2017.

Holt, Hazel. *A Lot to Ask: A Life of Barbara Pym*. Macmillan, 1990.

Jordis, Christine: *De petits enfers varies: Romancières anglaises contemporaines*. Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1989.

Parks, Tim. *Translating Style: A Literary Approach to Translation; A Translation Approach to Literature*, Second Edition. Routledge, 2007.

Pym, Barbara. *A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters*. New York, E. P. Dutton, 1984.

Pym, Barbara. For a list of Pym’s novels in French, see endnote 1.

Links to French websites that mention or focus on Barbara Pym:

[Babelio: Barbara Pym](#)

[Parfum de livres literary forum](#)

[Le nouveau blog littéraire de Pierre Ahnne](#)

[Lire au lit: Un brin de verdure de Barbara Pym](#)

[A sauts et à gambades: Barbara Pym](#)

[My lou book: Barbara Pym](#)

End Notes

1. Below are the French translations of Pym's novels, some of which have been republished. The list may not be entirely accurate, especially in terms of republication. The three titles with an asterisk have no English equivalents to my knowledge, and appear to be collections of short stories or novellas. I will look into those.

Adam et Cassandra, Salvy 1989, Rivages poche/Bibliothèque étrangère" 2006. (*Adam et Cassandra* is the French title used for *Civil to Strangers*.)

Comme une gazelle apprivoisée, Fayard 1989, Belfond Vintage 2019.

Crampton Hodnet, Fayard 1986.

**Dans un salon d'Oxford*, Salvy 1990.

Des femmes remarquables, Julliard 1990, Belfond 2017.

Jane et Prudence, Fayard 1988.

La douce colombe est morte, Bourgois 1987, 2007.

Les ingrattitudes de l'amour, Bourgois 1988, Belfond 2021.

**Lorsqu'un matin d'orage*, Rivages poche/Bibliothèque étrangère 1991.

Moins que les anges, Bourgois 1992, 10/18 1994.

Quatuor en automne, Bourgois 1988.

**Secret, très secret*, Rivages poche/Bibliothèque étrangère 1991.

Un brin de verdure, Bourgois 1987, 2007.

Une corne d'abondance, Bourgois 1992, 10/18 1993.

Une demoiselle comme il faut, Bourgois 1989, 2007.

Une question purement académique, Julliard 1990.

2. In addition, Pym would have understood what Robert Gottlieb noted in a November 11, 2019, essay in the *New Yorker* on the writer Booth Tarkington. First, that "plot plot plot is not the usual road to distinguished fiction." Second, that fiction writers need to "develop a new understanding and sympathy for [their] central characters, acknowledging and respecting the fact that human beings not only have roles to play in a story but have developing inner lives." I think this idea of an inner life is particularly important to French readers, who are (or like to think of themselves as) cerebral.

3. You can listen to the audiobook for free on [Librivox](#). Librivox is a group of worldwide volunteers who read and record texts that are in the public domain in the United States, creating free public domain audiobooks for download from their website. Pierre de Puliga is listed as the translator of [the French version of Emma](#), which Librivox dates as 1817.

4. *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte, Project Gutenberg, Chapter 15, page 84.

5. Babelio members who regularly post reviews of English novels have a teacup next to their name, signifying their expertise in English literature.

6. Along with liberty, privacy is very important to the French. In fact, things happen in Pym's novels that might surprise or even shock a French reader. For example, characters sometimes invade personal space – as when Miss Doggett and Mrs. Pope peer into the dressing table drawers in Jessie's and Letty's rooms, respectively. Then we have Avis Shrubsole, who needs a bigger house for her family. Rather than using the ground floor lavatory at the vicarage, she heads up the stairs to take a look around and use the facilities there. Daphne cuts her off at the pass.

7. When the French refer to humor as "second degree," they mean it is subtle, ironic, tongue in cheek. (British humor is very much second degree.) Humor that is "premier degré" has no hint of ironic comedy; it's not cerebral; if it works, it might be immediately funny. The [word reference forum thread](#) explains this complex topic and provides useful examples.

8. Barbara Pym Society member Jean Harker notes that on January 1, 2002, in an interview on "Front Row," the BBC Radio 4 Arts magazine program, A. S. Byatt said the following about the French and their attitude toward Pym. "They love Barbara Pym – a diminished vision of the English lady spinster." Byatt devotes a not-very-flattering chapter to Pym in her book *Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings*, 1991, Chatto & Windus, London.

9. In their introduction to *Combray* (Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., edition, 1952), Germaine Brée and Carlos Lynes, Jr. note the following: "Thus without upsetting the essential order or the unity of his novel, Proust could insert new details or even whole new 'blocks' of experience or fragments of time as he revised and enriched [*À la recherche du temps perdu*]. There was, from the start, a basic architecture which is still clearly discernible in the completed novel. It was, however, a design that permitted indefinite expansion and enrichment, since additions could always be placed between other discontinuous 'blocks.' The additions could then be incorporated into the dynamic organism of the whole by the unifying matrix of the narrator's consciousness." Pym, working on a smaller canvas, did the same in her novels, as she notes in this Febru-

ary 14, 1979, entry, in *A Very Private Eye*: “In the afternoon I finished my novel in its first, very imperfect draft. May I be spared to retype and revise it, loading every rift with ore.” I like to imagine Barbara flipping through one of her little notebooks for a detail to upload – perhaps the tin of baked beans that Miss Lickerish contributes as one of the prizes at Miss Lee and Miss Grundy’s coffee morning.

10. As part of Forest Grove City Library’s “Festival of Forgotten Authors,” on August 11, 2020, the “Pym pivot” is mentioned in a conversation between guest author Deborah Kennedy and host Bob Abbey, adult services librarian ([Click here to watch](#)). They note how Pym can go from one subject to another with great subtlety, surprising readers. The host offers an example from Chapter 3 of *Excellent Women*. Mildred is thinking about inviting Mrs. Napier for coffee, but wanting to make sure that the invitation is interpreted as a civil gesture rather than a friendly one — that it won’t be a regular thing. Suddenly Pym pivots, and Mildred tells us that one day a roll of rather inferior toilet paper appeared in the bathroom and an attempt had been made to clean the tub. Deborah Kennedy notes how Pym is never in a hurry and turns to focus on something that seems irrelevant. She lets the story breathe, telling us about Mildred in a leisurely fashion.

11. When “plain” is used to describe someone in English, translators seem to have no good equivalent in French. Oddly enough the French word “laid” is sometimes used, though it’s defined primarily as ugly, unsightly, and unattractive in French-English dictionaries. For instance, in an early translation of *Emma* (see endnote 3), Jane Fairfax’s friend Mrs. Dixon (née Campbell) is described by Miss Bates in this way: “Mlle Campbell a toujours été laide, mais extrêmement élégante et aimable.” (I find comfort that in French one can be ugly and elegant, hinting at the expression “jolie-laide,” used in the fashion business.)

In reviews, Babelio readers often refer to Pym’s female characters as “ni belle ni laide.” In *Des femmes remarquables*, the translator has Mildred Lathbury remind readers that she is not like Jane Eyre, who gave hope to “tant de femmes quelconques.” “Quelconques” may be the best word to use, though it lacks the plainness of the English “plain.” Note that Mildred is described by one reviewer as “ni riche, ni pauvre, ni laide, ni vraiment jolie, ni bête, ni très intelligente.”

12. **How to Get On in Society**
by Sir John Betjeman (1958)

Phone for the fish knives, Norman
As cook is a little unnerved;
You kiddies have crumpled the serviettes
And I must have things daintily served.

Are the requisites all in the toilet?
The frills round the cutlets can wait
Till the girl has replenished the cruets
And switched on the logs in the grate.

It’s ever so close in the lounge dear,
But the vestibule’s comfy for tea
And Howard is riding on horseback
So do come and take some with me.

Now here is a fork for your pastries
And do use the couch for your feet;
I know that I wanted to ask you –
Is trifle sufficient for sweet?

Milk and then just as it comes dear?
I’m afraid the preserve’s full of stones;
Beg pardon, I’m soiling the doilies
With afternoon tea-cakes and scones.

The following description of “How to Get On in Society” was written by Jeremy Nicholas, who gave his approval for its use here. It appears [on his web site](#).

This delicious mockery of the nouveau-riche British middle-class is spot on. Betjeman has, it seems, made a note of all the pretentious vocabulary he has ever heard used by the likes of Mrs Bucket (pronounced ‘Bouquet’ by its owner, of course) and put them into the mouth of a (presumably) female narrator. Many of these solecisms were noted by Nancy Mitford in her ‘U and Non-U’. If you’re wondering how the lady of the house betrays herself... ‘phone’ instead of ‘telephone’, ‘cook’ instead of the person’s name, ‘serviettes’ instead of ‘napkins’, ‘toilet’ instead of ‘lavatory’ or ‘loo’, ‘lounge’ instead of ‘drawing-room’, and so forth.