

INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI

A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
313/761-4700 800/521-0600

READING BARBARA PYM

by

DEBORAH A. INTERDONATO

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1996

UMI Number: 9707109

**Copyright 1996 by
Interdonato, Deborah Ann**

All rights reserved.

**UMI Microform 9707109
Copyright 1996, by UMI Company. All rights reserved.**

**This microform edition is protected against unauthorized
copying under Title 17, United States Code.**

UMI
300 North Zeeb Road
Ann Arbor, MI 48103

© 1996

DEBORAH A. INTERDONATO

All rights reserved

This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

September 13, 1996
Date

Rachel M Brownstein
Chair of Examining Committee

September 13, 1996
Date

Shelly
Executive Officer

Rachel M Brownstein
Rachel Brownstein

David Gordon

Louis Menand

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

Acknowledgments

My gratitude to Rachel Brownstein may only be exceeded by my affection.

My thanks, also, to David Gordon, who first suggested to me the potential for a Pym dissertation, and to him and Louis Menand for graciously agreeing to be a part of my committee.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1: <u>Some Tame Gazelle</u>	26
Chapter 2: <u>Quartet in Autumn</u>	71
Chapter 3: <u>Excellent Women</u>	112
Chapter 4: <u>Jane and Prudence</u>	153
Conclusion	195
Works by Barbara Pym	197
Works Cited	198

Introduction

In a letter to a friend written in 1976, Barbara Pym concludes, "having turned the potatoes (doing nicely) I can now go on to more mundane matters. And what could be more mundane than trying to type a novel . . ." (A Very Private Eye ("VPE") 284). Such playful teasing of perspective in which she both ironically affirms and yet casually undercuts the understood hierarchy of valued activities is characteristic of the Pym novel, as well as of her correspondence. By seeming to diminish it, her statement accentuates the importance to her of writing novels ("trying to type" understood here to suggest the creative, not the mechanical, activity), but it also does more. Just as earnestly, it registers delight in the pleasing progress of her potatoes, a delight which, though subordinated as the preliminary action to the more "mundane" task of novel-writing, is pulled back from subordination by the parenthetical aside "doing nicely." This has the effect of making the pleasure in the trivial activity seem complementary, rather than subordinate, to the creative one. It is more tedious, less tedious, and something else at the same time, for after understanding her thought to be simultaneously an ironic playdown of the not-at-all mundane act of writing, and also a humorously literal appraisal of the superior interest that cooking can command, the true understanding seems to be that the two matters cannot

finally be compared at all.

Doubtless Barbara Pym did not consciously craft this casual sentence in order to orchestrate the understanding she so effortlessly achieves. But the uniquely subtle narrative skill reflected in her personal letter also characterizes the style of her novels. Informed by movement and inversion and the conclusively inconclusive, Pym's prose resists, as John Bayley perceived, the typical vocabulary of "ordinary critical praise words." In an essay that is perhaps the most perceptive reflection to appear on Pym, "Where, Exactly, is the Pym World?," he writes:

Appreciative critics of Barbara Pym write of her subtle comic effects, of her world of 'high comedy'¹ . . . Perfectly just, and yet even such unexceptionable praise here seems wide of the mark. Criticism that would define the achievement of other novelists surprises the reader of her novels by its irrelevance to the experience they have actually had. (51)

Skeptical of the future of Pym criticism, Bayley goes on to predict that "[t]he academic industry inevitably growing up around her will in practice find itself behaving more like

¹ Bayley undoubtedly alludes here to Lord David Cecil's praise of Pym's novels as "the finest examples of high comedy to have appeared in England during the past seventy-five years." ("Reputations Revisited." Times Literary Supplement 21 Jan. 1977: 67.)

the 'Janeites', in Kipling's story, than a sober and productive branch of scholarship" (52). The problem as he sees it is that, "however often we reread her novels (and they are among the most rereadable today), we can never fix our gaze on how she does it, on how she obtains her effects" (51). Though Bayley's observations almost invite a scholar's retirement, they are also provocative, for the academic who wishes in fact to contribute "a sober and productive" work to Pym scholarship can only be challenged by such observations.

Fortunately, Bayley suggests the direction that profitable academic inquiry might take when he teasingly despairs of the "apparent inability of ordinary critical praise words to convey an impression of what actually happens in reading her" (51, emphasis mine), for this is what is uniquely possible with Pym. Pym's inconclusive novels may be difficult to write about (since critical writing strives for clarity and definition), but they impress volumes, and those impressions may be conveyed in turn by critically reading them, in a manner of speaking, out loud. Only when the effects of her prose are clearly apprehended may criticism address their implications for literature and for life.

However near or wide of the mark Pym criticism might be, there has been a respectable amount of it, particularly

since 1977 when both Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil, without collaboration, named her as one of the century's ten most underrated novelists in a Times Literary Supplement survey. Prior to this recognition, from 1950 to 1961, Pym had published six novels with Jonathan Cape.

Pym began writing during her term at Oxford from 1931 to 1939, when she studied English Literature (an influence that would inform the novels' many passing allusions to and quotations of poetry). After World War II, when Pym served in the WRENS, she returned to writing, revising the manuscript for Some Tame Gazelle, which Cape had expressed an interest in, but rejected, in 1936. In 1950, after revisions, it was accepted.

Pym was never a full-time novelist. In 1946 she had taken a job with the International African Institute ("IAI"), where she was an editor for its official journal, Africa. She remained with the IAI until her retirement in 1974, a tenure which informed many of the novels' familiarity with the world of academia and anthropologists.

Each of the six novels published by Cape centers around the trivial, everyday concerns in the lives of thirtyish, middle-class, mostly single women ("spinsters" in the Pym vocabulary--of 15 Pym heroines, 3 are married), who often assume subservient positions in parish or academic communities. The novels are not strong in plot or intrigue, but in episode and incident--novels, it was said, for a bad

day.

Some Tame Gazelle, published in 1950, owes its title to a poem by the early nineteenth-century poet Thomas Haynes Bayly. It is the only one of her novels whose characters were taken directly from life, a playful roman à clef in which Pym and her sister are imagined to be spinsters of fiftyish living in a small, unnamed English village presumably sometime in the 1930s. Pym was twenty-two at the time she began it and uncannily predicted the course her life was to take--she never married and later lived with her sister for most of her life. In Excellent Women, published in 1952, the protagonist, Mildred Lathbury, is Pym's first first-person narrator, a self-deprecating spinster living on a small, private income in post-World War II London, whose life, centered around a parish community, is upset by the arrival of new neighbors, a handsome returning naval officer and his anthropologist wife. Jane and Prudence, published in 1953, has two heroines--Jane, forty-one, married to a clergyman and recently settled in a new country parish, and Prudence, twenty-nine, attractive, single, working in a nondescript office in London and given to ironically dispassionate love affairs. In Less Than Angels (1955) (the title is taken from Pope's An Essay on Man), Pym uses her experience with anthropologists at the IAI to turn an arch glance at the world of academia and its competitive citizens, who are struggling for research grants while

trying to write papers and theses, and coping with relationships. The novel's female center, Catherine Oliphant, a writer of short stories for women's magazines, provides the novel's sharp, yet tender perspective. A Glass of Blessings, published in 1958, is Pym's second first-person novel. Wilmet Forsyth, the heroine, is a leisured, married woman who becomes increasingly involved in her parish and, separately, vulnerable to her desire for a man whose homosexuality she does not perceive. She comes to realize that her life is "a glass of blessings" (the phrase is from George Herbert's poem "The Pulley"). This novel is often compared to Emma in its subtle treatment of the "educating" of an attractive, privileged woman. No Fond Return of Love (1961) deals with the fringes of the academic community, the lives of indexers and editors for obscure scholarly books and journals. Dulcie Mainwaring, the protagonist, attends a learned conference to rouse herself from the pain of a broken engagement, and finds herself attracted to the handsome, wayward editor of a literary journal. Interested in investigating the lives of ordinary people (as Pym might be said to do in her novels), Dulcie is, as Pym's sister confirms, the Pym character most like Pym herself.²

² In 1990 or 1991, before I determined to choose Barbara Pym as the subject of my dissertation, I was invited as a Pym fan to meet Pym's sister, Hilary Pym, and Hazel Holt, Pym's longtime friend, biographer and literary

Each of the six novels was modestly successful, generally receiving positive reviews and affording Cape small financial returns. A popular readership developed, among whom could be counted, in addition to Cecil and Larkin, fellow novelists Ivy Compton-Burnett and Elizabeth Taylor, who wrote to Pym to express their admiration.³ However, despite six successful novels and a respectable readership, Pym's seventh submission to Cape, An Unsuitable Attachment, was rejected (in 1963) as being out-of-step with the racier literary climate of the sixties. She subsequently completed The Sweet Dove Died and Quartet in Autumn but, despite stronger themes (The Sweet Dove Died concerns the efforts of a vain, asexual, middle-aged woman to maintain the affections of a young homosexual man), she was unable to find a publisher for either until the TLS survey appeared.

executor, at the home of Jan Fergus, a professor of English at Lehigh University. It was then Ms. Pym told me of her sister's personal likeness to the heroine of No Fond Return of Love.

³ My source for this information is Orphia Jane Allen's Barbara Pym: Writing a Life (1994), 31. However, though letters from Cecil and Larkin have been reproduced in two biographies of Pym (A Very Private Eye, an autobiography in diaries and letters prepared by Hazel Holt and Hilary Pym, and A Lot to Ask, a biography by Holt), neither book includes letters from Taylor or Compton-Burnett, nor does Allen reproduce them. I do not doubt Allen's information (letters by Pym in A Very Private Eye confirm she knew Elizabeth Taylor), but I am ignorant of her source for this information.

With the attention that recognition provoked, publication resumed. Quartet in Autumn was accepted by Macmillan, Pym's new publisher, that same year, followed by The Sweet Dove Died in 1978, and A Few Green Leaves soon after Pym's death in 1980. Cape reprinted the earlier novels and Dutton would subsequently publish them all in the United States. An Unsuitable Attachment, the novel Cape rejected in 1963, was at last published in 1982. A novel which Pym had struggled with and abandoned in the 1960s was completed by Holt and published in 1986 as An Academic Question. Two novels Pym had written in the 1930s, but never attempted to publish, and her juvenilia (Crampton Hodnet (1985) and Civil to Strangers and Other Writings (1987)), would also appear for Pym devotees.

Quartet in Autumn departs from earlier novels in taking for its subject older and multiple protagonists, two women and two men, fellow office workers approaching retirement, who suffer, as well as perpetuate, their mutual isolation. A Few Green Leaves, the last novel Pym wrote, is considered a coda to her work in its return to a village setting as in Some Tame Gazelle. The later novel, however, is unambiguously set in the 1970s. Emma Howick, the protagonist, is an anthropologist who plans a temporary stay in the village in order to "write up" research notes, but finds herself more absorbed in the everyday life of the community. She will determine to abandon her academic work

in favor of writing a novel, and to seek romance with the unexciting, but dependably nice, widowed rector. An Unsuitable Attachment, the novel Cape rejected in 1963, revolves around the lives of the parishioners of an Anglican church in a slightly unfashionable (i.e., poor) section of London. Though the title refers to the romance that develops between Ianthe Broom, a librarian, and John Challow, a man younger and of lower class than she, other characters in the story--the attractive, but remote rector, Mark Ainger, his lonely, enigmatic wife, Sophia, an anthropologist and newcomer to the village, Rupert Stonebird, and Sophia's sister, Penelope, aptly described as a "pre-Raphaelite beatnik" by Rupert--are generally considered to provide more interest than the not-so-unsuitable attachment of Ianthe and John. Caroline Grimstone, the heroine of An Academic Question, is "a graduate wife," who becomes involved in stealing the papers of an academic rival of her husband's in order to help his career. Unfinished and abandoned by Pym in the early 1970s, the novel is her unsuccessful attempt to write something "sharp and swinging." Crampton Hodnet, written just before World War II, takes place in a North Oxford village. It follows the failed, but comic, flirtations between a middle-aged, married professor and a young student, and an attractive curate and the plain, sardonic, paid companion to a domineering old woman. Civil to Strangers, begun in 1936,

centers around the village life of Cassandra Marsh-Gibbon and her self-absorbed writer-husband, Adam, showing the renewal of their relationship with the arrival of a foreigner to the village who shows an interest in Cassandra. As with An Academic Question, Pym had not prepared these two early novels for publication, but unlike the later novel, they were not written under the constraint of writing in a self-consciously different way, and are worthy (and comic) precursors of her later work.

The reviews of the reprinted and newly-published novels were predominantly enthusiastic and her books were in demand. Academic scholarship, precipitated by the TLS survey in her lifetime, swelled considerably through the decade after her death in 1980. Allen, whose book is the most recent on Pym (1994), counts among the Pym bibliography sixteen books, more than seventy articles in scholarly journals and collections, more than a dozen dissertations, and hundreds of reviews (132). Yet despite Allen's conviction that "Pym's novels warrant [further] study" (182), the future of Pym scholarship is doubtful.

The 1990s have shown a sharp falling off. Though doctoral students continue their interest (there are been three more dissertations written since Allen's survey), articles in scholarly journals have virtually ceased. The last one to appear in 1994 was published in an Italian journal. (Coincidentally, the first doctoral dissertation

on Pym was also completed in Italian in 1978 at the University of Pisa). Now that the respectable frenzy is over it remains to consider the substance and quality of the collective critical response that Bayley believed inadequate.

Prior to 1977, Pym commentary consisted almost exclusively of reviews.⁴ These were often sensitive, if brief, responses to the novels, betraying the difficulty Bayley encountered in being focused and specific. One of Pym's earliest reviewers, in 1950, described her first published novel, Some Tame Gazelle, as "an enchanting book . . . but no more to be described than a delicious taste or smell" (Jenkins 19). Another reviewer that same year likened the book to a bottle of wine, "with a bouquet of its own and more body than you might suspect from its lightness" (White 22). Such vague, sensuous descriptions did not stop with Some Tame Gazelle; one reviewer found No Fond Return of Love, Pym's sixth published novel, "a delicious book, refreshing as mint tea" (Hugh-Jones 13). Even with the attention initiated in 1977, reviews continued to be vaguely impressionistic. There persisted the "you've-got-to-read(taste)-it-to-understand-what-I-mean" criticism, as when

⁴ A brief, appreciative essay on her work by her friend Robert Smith, entitled "How Pleasant to Know Miss Pym," did appear in 1971, before the "rediscovery," in the journal Ariel.

a reviewer of The Sweet Dove Died, in 1979, claimed that "[t]here is a difficulty in describing the plots of Pym novels . . . They can be appreciated only in the reading" (Leighton C4). Still, however modest these reviews, they were the ingenuous impressions that academic criticism might have profitably explored. But this was not to be the case.

Although the 1977 rediscovery was prompted by the appreciation of two traditional, male, conservative critics, it was enthusiastically carried forward after Pym's death (in January, 1980, at the age of 66) by mostly American feminist academics. This was perhaps inevitable given the force of the feminist movement in the 1970s and 80s. A feminist bias would champion Pym as a woman writer silenced by the insensitive male publishers at Jonathan Cape. (There is nonpartisan agreement, however, that Cape's sudden, impersonal rejection of An Unsuitable Attachment, after having published six of Pym's novels, was indeed badly done.) Though Pym does provide material for feminists with heroines cooperating with, yet sometimes critical of, their supportive roles to helpless clerics, husbands, and academics, she also shows them enjoying moments of unmistakable pleasure in the performance of their services and fondness in recalling them. Thus, though Mildred Lathbury in Excellent Women may introspectively complain of cleaning up after the lunch she insists on making for a man, she will fondly remember it as a "privilege" to have done so

(161, 226). Feminist readings, however, disregarded the soft moments to emphasize the critical, or merely peevish, ones, discovering "subversive," "resistant," language in the texts, and much academic work emerged from that perspective.⁵

Friends of Pym deplored the trend. Holt claimed to have "fought to keep Barbara out of the hands of the feminists" (qtd. in Weld 204). Robert Liddell, a lifelong friend of Pym, decried "the worthlessness of many academic theses . . . to give the quality of thought and feeling which informs the books" (99). Particularly contemptuous of psychoanalytic readings of Pym, he wrote: "I hope (but without much confidence) that no imbecile will write a psychoanalytic article on 'Barbara Pym and Shoes'" (105). He earlier appropriates and retargets a line from one Pym article to suggest that the American ("transatlantic") critic is "the untrained observer from another culture [who] often misses the significance of what he observes" (66),⁶ as does a critic who incorrectly sees Prudence Bates's lunch in Jane and Prudence, more modest than her male employer's, as evidence of gender inequality.

⁵ A few titles will suffice. There is Laura Doan's "Text and the Single Man: The Bachelor in Pym's Dual-Voiced Narrative"; Barbara Bowman's "Pym's Subversive Subtext: Private Irony and Shared Detachment"; and Judy Little's "Humoring the Sentence: Women's Dialogic Comedy."

⁶ He quotes Muriel Schulz, "The Novelist as Anthropologist" 104.

I share the frustration with such (mis)interpretations. They have the effect of a wrenched accent in a smooth, iambic line of verse: their stress pattern forces a drastic alteration in the normal word (scene) accent.

Perhaps less discordant strains in Pym criticism are the numerous thematic, literary studies of, for example, her use of comedy, irony, satire, genre and literary allusions. Essay titles include "Love and Marriage in the Novels," by Mary Strauss-Noll, "Barbara Pym and the War of the Sexes," by John Halperin, "The Novelist as Anthropologist," by Muriel Schulz, and "Literary Allusions in the Novels," by Lotus Snow. Dissertation titles include "The Anglican Clergy in the Novels of Barbara Pym," by Isabel Stanley (University of Tennessee), "Elements of Satire in the Novels of Barbara Pym," by Bruce Jacobs (Fordham University), "Love, Marriage, and Irony in Barbara Pym's Novels," by Sun-Hee Lee (University of North Texas) and "Barbara Pym and the Novel of Manners," by Annette Weld (University of Rochester, published by St. Martin's in 1992).⁷ These studies, valid and helpful as they may be, often drift into repetitive summaries of the novels, failing to communicate why the novels are so uniquely worthwhile to read personally as well as to study academically.

⁷ I have read Weld's book, but only the abstracts of the other dissertations named.

An undeveloped opportunity for raising the level of Pym criticism lies in the conflicting responses of her peers. Many novelists have counted themselves as Pym fans and many (e.g., Penelope Lively, Joyce Carol Oates, Gail Godwin, Shirley Hazzard, Anne Tyler) have written brief appreciations or reviews. Others, most prominently A.S. Byatt and Anita Brookner, have written scathing reviews (Byatt of the posthumously-published An Academic Question and both of Robert Emmet Long's Barbara Pym (1986)) denouncing Pym's work generally.⁸ However, I have failed to find any novelist who, in writing about Pym, has addressed the oppositely strong response of her peers. This is regrettable since such a dialogue might have sharpened focus on the power of Pym's novels to provoke such definite, but so strongly opposed, responses. As it is, the "I-like-her, I-don't-like-her" lists necessarily removed Pym from the arena of serious artistic dialogue and relegated her novels to a matter of personal taste. It remains, then, to consider the source of this unacknowledged critical opposition.

The bitter reactions betray emotion disproportionate to the "lightweight" novels they dismiss;⁹ Byatt refers to Pym

⁸ I will address Byatt's review and refer to Brookner's in my discussion of Excellent Women.

⁹ The title of Brookner's review is "The Bitter Fruits of Rejection." In it she calls Pym's novels "lightweight," "a child's vision of a happy family" (31) (an ironic analogy

fans insultingly as "fogies of various ages" (862), while Brookner attacks Pym personally, calling her "something of a non-starter" (30). Pym was clearly more to these writers than just (as they believed) an overrated novelist. One can only speculate. Perhaps they saw in her work the challenge of a different perspective on literature that startled the high seriousness of the intellectually and psychologically charged views suggested in their own work. Just like the provoking (to Walter) patience of Griselda, Pym's "light" novels implicitly challenge the more ambitious goals of novels which do not seem to offer, as hers do, enviable satisfactions that can be equated to fine wines and mint teas. In this respect, Pym's novels represent the aesthetic challenge of the glass of wine (i.e., the Pym novel) which might accompany a reading of Possession; the novel might come to seem the accompaniment to the wine, and not vice versa.

This analogy is admittedly colorful, but the point I hope is not. Pym is a minor writer of major importance, not because she uses comedy or satire or irony or literary allusions, or writes of Anglican clergy or food or anthropologists, but because of the sensuous/simple quality of her narrative, seductive to some readers, childish to others. The simplicity that provokes these opposing

since Pym scarcely alludes to families or their lives in the novels).

responses is not predominantly of story, but of style, a style which reflects a natural response (not the affectation of a natural response) to the act of narration itself. Accordingly, it is at the level of the novels' language, at the level of sentence and sentence structure and the fluid narrative movement these constructions create, that this quality may be observed; it is where Pym's particular and unrecognized excellence resides. Hers is a sensuous prose, as the "taste/smell" reviews confirm, and whether the response to that prose is, broadly speaking, positive or negative, there is no question as to its unique power to move the reader, without any apparent effort to do so.

This study, then, particularly the first two chapters, will closely read Pym's text, not because Pym criticism has not "done" this before (though it hasn't) or because it is a critical approach to her work that I favor (though I do), but because it is the only response that can be fair to the claims of her text. Just as is hinted in the playful mingling of cooking potatoes and writing novels in her letter, Pym's prose seems itself poised to cast an arch glance at the self-conscious seriousness of any academic/intellectual exercise poised to address it. This is not to say her novels resist academic inquiry per se, but only the self-important pretenses under which it often proceeds.

This skepticism explains why Pym is not an "issues" writer. Her concerns are both smaller (cooking potatoes and writing novels) and larger (cooking potatoes and writing novels) than the contemporary issues (e.g., gender relations) she necessarily registers. If her novels are provocative, it is not because of what they do, but because of what they are--patient Griseldas in a skeptical literary world that is poised, like Walter, to doubt that something so apparently meek can be so strong. Pym's novels, however, are strong, quietly engaging concerns fundamental to every life--not just to women's lives--as this study hopes to show.

Though I will allude to noncontemporary thinkers and critics such as Lionel Trilling, Roland Barthes, George Orwell, Friedrich von Schiller, and Friedrich Nietzsche, and to noncontemporary novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Aldous Huxley, whose reflections (discursive or fictional) on life and art comment on Pym's, I will be in more direct dialogue with a variety of contemporary writers--critics, reviewers, and novelists--whose work on Pym reflects the inadequacy of "ordinary critical praise words" to address the Pym novel. Criticism of Pym falls "wide of the mark," not because it argues badly, but because it argues unnecessarily, often proceeding from inappropriate and unexamined assumptions about what a novel should do or be. Though it is the nature of assumptions to elude examination,

it is the task of criticism to recognize them, particularly when the literature that criticism addresses reflects premises different from those by which it is judged.

In addition to references to critics, contemporary and noncontemporary, comparisons to the fiction of other, mostly women writers, whose careers overlapped Pym's (e.g., Muriel Spark, Margaret Drabble, Anita Brookner) will be made in order to help bring the distinction of Pym's work into focus. Unlike the work of these writers which is often explicit in its knowledge, Pym's fiction is of a type that gives less, that "seem[s] to offer itself to the reader's completion, not to the writer's" (Wood, "Fact" 43); that is why, transposed into a novel, Pym's sentence on cooking potatoes and typing novels would not itself raise the issue of "which is more important"--but the reader might do so, as I have, without violating the playful spirit of the text.

Pym seemed herself to conceive novels in an inconclusive, ingenuous openness to image and impression in which the poetic and the prosaic do not clash, but cooperate. Her initial conception for A Glass of Blessings is illustrative:

WHAT IS MY NEXT NOVEL TO BE? It can begin with the shrilling of the telephone in Freddie Hood's church and end with the flame springing up--the new fire on Easter Saturday in the dark church. Hope and blaze of golden forsythia round the font.

But what about the middle? (VPE 194)

It is because Pym seemed to "build" her stories around images and feelings in this way that her work shows little sense of progress or development--impressions are vulnerable and yielding, not linear. Her novels suggest that she turned from one novel to the next, not with the sense of "how can I improve what I have done?" but with the eagerness and wonder (implied by the capitalized "WHAT IS MY NEXT NOVEL TO BE?") of "what shall I do now?" Though all her novels center around the lives and perspectives of women, each one and each novel is distinctly individualized. Equally individual is each novel's artistic success, unconnected to the achievement of the novel that comes before or comes after.

I will discuss four novels that I believe are representative of the style of the Pym novel and the experience of reading Barbara Pym. Though I begin with Some Tame Gazelle, I will depart from the manner of most book-length studies of Pym, which often unnecessarily address all of the novels, chronologically and/or thematically. In the exhaustive retelling of the stories for discursive purposes, such books often seem to make the reading of them unnecessary. In this respect, criticism has often failed Pym not by saying too little, but by saying too much, failing to win for her the readership that appreciative criticism must intend.

Since the quality of Pym's narrative is necessarily reflected in all of her work, my choice of representative novels is determined by the critical reputation that particular novels have come to enjoy, and suffer. My reading of Some Tame Gazelle, Pym's first published novel, often said to foreshadow her later work, is followed by a chapter about Quartet in Autumn, her most critically acclaimed book, which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1977. Excellent Women, the subject of the next chapter, is considered her most generally popular, and Jane and Prudence, her most purely funny. I end with Jane and Prudence since the enthusiastic response to the simplicity of this novel--which is perceived, if not recognized, in its humor--will recall the ambivalent, often resistant responses to that same simplicity as it is realized in Some Tame Gazelle.

The first chapter is most important for explaining the view of Pym's work and the vocabulary I will bring to it (e.g., naturalness, simplicity, the Pymean real) which will carry through subsequent chapters. Some Tame Gazelle is examined as epitomizing the simplicity of style and story that typifies Pym's work and determines its force and quality. The danger in this chapter and all chapters was in communicating that simplicity without imperiling it. In the novels as in her personal letter, Pym indirectly sounded, with her usual comic insight, the risk in the attempt to

write about her work in the usual academic terms. In Some Tame Gazelle, two middle-aged sisters are remarking on the conjugal suitability of the vicar and his wife. One says with characteristic frankness:

'What a pity about Agatha. They have really nothing in common.'

'Oh, Harriet, you're quite wrong,' said Belinda stoutly. 'Agatha is a most intelligent woman. She knows a great deal about medieval English literature. And then there's palaeography,' she continued, as if her emphatic tone would explain its importance in the married life of Agatha and the Archdeacon. (40)

Belinda's comic/ironic invocation of Agatha's academic credentials may also be taken as Pym's comic/ironic deflation of the equivalent effort in literary criticism to determine the importance of her novels, e.g., "and then there are literary allusions," as if the critical emphasis can explain their importance in the Pym novel. And, in Jane and Prudence, Jane is described as "reading the review of a novel where a character was said to 'emerge triumphantly in the round', and somehow this had set her nodding" (60).

As these examples comically, yet seriously, suggest, it would work against the spirit of Pym's text to exploit it as the lifeless material for dutiful academic exercise. The attempt in the first chapter, then, will be to show that

what matters when reading a Pym novel is to respond to, and in, the unforced, yielding manner it enacts. As noted, this movement suggests a response to the act of narration that is natural, like unrehearsed conversation, enjoining the same spirit of response in the reader. The feeling, as Bayley noted, is that Pym "is not manipulating, is not in charge; that she gives herself up to the sensation of living" (54)--and to the sensation of writing.¹⁰ As suggested by the unrehearsed tone and perspective of Pym's personal letter, the directions in which such surrender leads seldom demonstrate the sustained arguments of even the finest learned inquiries.

Chapter 2 continues the discussion of naturalness of response. But in Quartet in Autumn it will be seen that this response, still effortlessly guiding the narrating voice as it did in Some Tame Gazelle, is inaccessible to the characters of the story, whose posture toward life and to one another is bound by the skittish and the tentative. A poignant depiction of the state of 1970s England, Quartet in Autumn suggests the way back to the healthier reality of Some Tame Gazelle through the pliant movement of the narrative. I discuss Quartet after Gazelle in order to show

¹⁰ I am reminded of an aphorism of Simone Weil's quoted in a recent book review: "[T]he virtue of humility is nothing more nor less than the power of attention" (qtd. in Bernstein 38). This is another way of describing the source of the simplicity reflected in, and by, Pym's novels--in their power to attend to the artfully inartful sensations of

that the natural quality of Pym's narrative is as unmistakably present at the beginning of her career as at its end.

Excellent Women, Pym's second published novel, is not as successful in its composition as Gazelle and Quartet. Though considered the most generally popular of Pym's novels, this reputation implies an artistic quality the novel does not have. I present it as a counter-example to show that Pym's narrative suffers when it fails of its usual, natural quality, and also to show that this failure, which occurs just before Jane and Prudence and after Some Tame Gazelle, is not typical of her work. But in Excellent Women, Pym did not respond to the needs of her story, but to the needs of her personal self, subtly manipulating the narrative with the burden of those needs. She did not yield to, but resisted the consequences of, her own story. The vociferously partisan response to Pym (by, as Bayley implied, the "Pym-ites") informed an unforgivable forgiveness of the book's problems and a failure to view her art with the impartiality and seriousness it deserves. When read according to the feeling of the text, Excellent Women betrays its weakness just as Gazelle and Quartet reveal their strength. Though reading Excellent Women does not afford the personal and aesthetic satisfactions of her other work, it does serve to confirm that the way to read Barbara

living and of writing.

Pym is to yield to the movement of her prose, to perceive its "taste"; and, to recall reluctantly the title of Brookner's review, Excellent Women tastes bitter.

My discussion of Jane and Prudence is my most sustained consideration of how the popular assumptions of "ordinary critical praise words," specifically as these attach to unexamined ideas of what constitutes "the full life," clash with the spirit of a text that refutes them. Unarmed with strenuous preconceptions about what a novel should do or be, the yielding response to the Pym novel discovers a comfortably unambitious perspective on life--or, seen oppositely, it discovers a perspective that is uniquely ambitious, but ambitious to know less, at a time when more is promised and expected, of novels and of life. In focusing on people content with lives they do not so much "make" as inhabit, Pym demonstrates that limiting and limitation, both as a novelistic and personal strategy, represent positive, effective efforts toward knowledge and happiness, and not the negative, self-defeating ones that both popular culture and academic criticism would imply. To focus on less is to enable one to see and know more about a particular space than a wider lens can afford. Much great art, after all, aims for the same effect that is the Pym novel's: of helping us recognize with greater clarity the joy in what is close at hand, the beauty to which we are all sooner or later saying goodbye.

Chapter 1: Some Tame Gazelle

Some Tame Gazelle, Pym's first published novel, was begun during her years as an undergraduate at Oxford, completed in 1936, revised extensively after World War II, and published by Jonathan Cape in 1950. Beginning, "[t]he new curate seemed quite a nice young man, but what a pity it was that his combinations showed, tucked carelessly into his socks, when he sat down,"¹ the beginning of Pym's first published novel "foreshadows," as Mason Cooley observes, "to a remarkable degree the entire body of Pym's subsequent work" ("Barbara Pym" 366). Evoking an amused, quaint tone of community in the tradition of George Eliot, Gaskell, and Trollope, Pym's easeful retrieval of the village setting in twentieth-century postwar Britain gently seduces (and maybe, secondarily, gently startles) the reader with its unconscious simplicity.

It is this simplicity that determines the force and quality of Pym's writing and places it apart from contemporary novels. But this quality is not "simply" a matter of the elements of story (e.g., unnamed village, naive people, comically genteel concerns), but of style. The narrative of Some Tame Gazelle moves with a quality that feels natural--that is, as if it were the vehicle of unselfconscious expression. This literary quality that

¹ Combinations are long, woolen underwear.

distinguishes Pym's work beginning with Some Tame Gazelle has not generally been recognized.² Critics have instead stressed predictable features of its narrative such as irony, comedy, satire, etc. Orphia Jane Allen, for example, believes that

Some Tame Gazelle establishes the pattern that Pym would follow as a novelist. It exudes, line after line and episode after episode, a dry humor and a sense of irony. . . . [it introduces Pym's] use of literary allusion and quotation and the themes of unrequited love. . . . (8)

Emphasizing matters of theme and technique, Allen cites qualities that may characterize Pym's novels; but such elements do not determine their importance to twentieth-century literature.

Cooley makes a stronger claim for Pym, locating her significance in the discreet comedy which, beginning with Some Tame Gazelle, is "the guiding force of her writing. . . . the decisive element, the shaping spirit" (3). For Cooley, this comic spirit is a type of secular-religious force, "redeem[ing] the melancholy of the heroines . . . distanc[ing] suffering and often transmut[ing] it into humor" (4). Cooley believes the reader is offered this same

² Bayley is an exception, believing that the "unconscious selfhood" of Pym's novels is what distinguishes them from other contemporary novels which have become "totally self-conscious" (52).

redemption. This argument certainly makes a strong moral claim for Pym's novels, but it does not make a claim for the quality of their narrative, which is where I believe their peculiar excellence resides.

What is remarkable about Pym's novels is a prose that moves with unselfconscious ease (an exception, in Excellent Women, will be discussed later in this study). This narrative quality feels "natural," as if "no affectation exists in the matter . . . [and] no accidental interest comes into play" (Schiller 263).³ It is a state in which reason (i.e., self-conscious thought) does not resist what is sensuous. And what is sensuous in Pym is the movement of her prose and the relaxed/alert response, to life and to reading, it both enacts and enjoins.

This chapter will attempt to demonstrate the narrative movement of Some Tame Gazelle by identifying the force and nature of its simplicity--which is recognized, but variously misperceived and misvalued, by critics. As an early discussion of a single sentence from the novel will suggest,

³ In my discussion of the naturalness of Pym's prose, I am influenced by Friedrich von Schiller's essay "On Simple and Sentimental Poetry," written in 1795-96. In it, Schiller divides poets into two classes: the simple or naive poets (e.g., Homer, Shakespeare) who strove to project nature as they embodied it, and the sentimental poets (e.g., Juvenal, Milton) who lost contact with nature (as we have) and attempt to portray it as a sought-for ideal. The natural is "simple" when it is contrasted with art, in which the natural is valued sentimentally and self-consciously, but not experienced.

the critical enterprise breaks down when it fails to apprehend the movements and tonal modulations of Pym's narrative, for these suggest an experience of, and satisfaction in, the surface and emotional currents of daily life that is at odds with the more ambitious preoccupations and demands, both personal and literary, of modern life. This view, one that sees life as essentially nonstrenuous (if not uniformly content), is what determines what I refer to as "the Pymean real"--Pym's depiction of "[those] elements of actual life that . . . partake of innocence, and that the predominant pain of life leads us to forget [or to diminish as pastoral, not real]",⁴ and reaffirming their reality. Free of the urgent concerns and pretensions of most twentieth-century novels, Some Tame Gazelle offers a challenge not to reform, but to relax, into an understanding of life in which love is sure of its knowledge, and knowledge is sure of its limitations.

Some Tame Gazelle is the story of the everyday lives of two middle-aged, unmarried sisters, Belinda and Harriet Bede,⁵ who live contentedly in a small, unnamed, vaguely

⁴ I quote Trilling's summary of Schiller's description of the poet of a new form of unrealized pastoral, one that would be unsentimental and "real" (51).

⁵ The sisters' surname recalls the Venerable Bede, the Anglo-Saxon theologian and historian. Literary allusions in Some Tame Gazelle are particularly predominant, no doubt the consequence of its genesis at a time when Pym was still a

post-World War I, English village, presumably on a private income sufficient to support them comfortably. Though many critics are quick to claim Some Tame Gazelle as the most purely pastoral of all Pym novels, this predictable classification falsely attributes to the novel a deliberate and dominant naiveté it does not in fact have. The heedless confidence with which the novel plunges into the small (e.g., the nice, new curate and his unfortunately visible combinations) and omits the "dark" (war, death, poverty)⁶ does not announce an unreal, pastoral world so much as an essential world, a world of unexceptional lives, distilled into the predominant elements of the everyday, the modest, and the individual.

I do not believe that Pym necessarily wrote Some Tame Gazelle with a view toward "doing" a novel either of realistic or unrealistic life; such an effort would surely work against the narrative's unselfconscious quality. But I do believe Pym recognized that the self-consciously serious literature of the twentieth-century she knew gave a disproportionate view of daily life, overemphasizing its troubles as opposed to its comforts.⁷ Thus she could race

student of literature at Oxford.

⁶ Cooley calls the setting of Some Tame Gazelle "idyllic . . . untouched by war, death, or poverty . . . the village of pastoral and romantic comedy" ("Barbara Pym" 366).

⁷ As Jane in Jane and Prudence comments to a

into a novel with a meek woman's comic view of a curate's peeping combinations, and she could just as blithely and believably describe something of more significance--the endurance of a thirty-year's affection--within a single sentence.

Belinda, the novel's meek heroine, is the elder of the two Bede sisters, whose loving and losing and still silently loving the long-married vicar of the local Anglican church, Henry Hoccleve, is neatly described in one sentence early in the novel:

Belinda, having loved the Archdeacon when she was twenty and not having found anyone to replace him since, had naturally got into the habit of loving him, though with the years her passion had mellowed into a comfortable feeling, more like the cosiness of a winter evening by the fire than the uncertain rapture of a spring morning. (17)

The prose feels candid and uncomplicated, informed by a pace that is fluid and easy. There is no sense of a need to "account for" Belinda's passion, to assume it is provocative or to anticipate a reader's disbelief. The clause

parishioner who approves her innovation of offering tea at often contentious parish meetings: "'I always think when I'm listening to some of these tense, gloomy plays on the wireless, Ibsen and things like that, oh, if only somebody would think of making a cup of tea!'" (136). A Pym novel is like Jane's offering of a cup of tea--an invitation to relax tensions in a less urgent perspective and posture than self-consciously serious literature affords.

beginning, "having loved the Archdeacon," is probably as brief and convincing a description of a love spanning thirty years as may be found in literature. The speed at which it moves on the vehicle of the past progressive dismisses the information it provides almost as fast as it provides it. Add to this the subordination that is the syntactic lot of any phrase and the effect is one to suggest a state of being, a fact to be taken for granted. Probing into the history of Belinda's love and the emotional mechanism of her heart is firmly de-emphasized. There is nothing further to reveal.

Yet one critic, Diana Benet, prefaces this excerpt by stating that "[f]ew of us, probably, can think of a situation more intrinsically horrible than Belinda's: the nightmarish idea of being stuck forever on the adored youth who rejected our girlish love is too terrible for words. But that is precisely Belinda's situation" (22). In opposition to the innocently wistful tone of the passage, Benet finds the longevity of Belinda's love "intrinsically horrible" and "nightmarish," implicitly neurotic. The text implies nothing of the kind.

Although the use of the word "naturally" to describe how Belinda "got into the habit of loving him" may carry an irony that anticipates Benet's skepticism, the easy description of Belinda's history just preceding ("having loved the Archdeacon when she was twenty") and the softness

of the snug comparison to follow ("like the cosiness of a winter evening by the fire") mutes that ironic potential to support an unquestioning appreciation of Belinda's enduring love. Benet intrudes issues of psychological/emotional aberrance on a passage that does not suggest them.

Of course Benet is not offering an interpretation of Belinda's affection as neurotic, but she is betraying assumptions about the healthy emotional life she believes her readers share. The Pymean real, however, implies different assumptions--in this passage, a nonstrenuous (which is not to say painless) experience of emotional life that cannot answer to Benet's comfortable incredulity. Benet's view of Belinda's constancy as horrible and nightmarish seems the reflex born of a modern habit of thought, a belief that such constancy as hers is not psychologically or emotionally healthy, not believable or "realistic." Yet there was a time when literature reflected love such as Belinda's, sure and unself-doubting, as beautiful and exemplary. Cordelia's love for Lear was such an affection, a love which, despite Lear's cruelty, does not provoke doubt of her emotional or psychological stability (although one could easily imagine the incredulity of today's undergraduates). Pym's description of Belinda's love similarly invites acceptance and belief, not probing analysis, for the Pymean real in this respect is like the Shakespearean real--some feelings simply are, and, in their

integrity and innocence, simply answer to their own necessity.

The unassuming opening paragraph of the novel provides the first impression of this unselfconscious tone of the narrative's "personality":⁸

The new curate seemed quite a nice young man, but what a pity it was that his combinations showed, tucked carelessly into his socks, when he sat down. Belinda had noticed it when they had met him for the first time at the vicarage last week and had felt quite embarrassed. Perhaps Harriet could say something to him about it. Her blunt jolly manner could carry off these little awkwardnesses much better than Belinda's timidity. Of course he might think it none of their business, as indeed it was not, but Belinda rather doubted whether he thought at all, if one were to judge by the quality of his first sermon. (7)

This opening paragraph establishes the tone of narrative innocence that is the perfect vehicle for the simplicity of the character and story it introduces. Belinda herself, genteel and delicate, seems a literary descendant of Cranford's Miss Mattie, updated, as it were, with the

⁸ This discussion will take for granted that tone is as much a quality of written as of spoken discourse, expressive of the essential "personality" of the text and its unarticulated view of life.

sardonic wit that informs her private critique of the curate's intelligence. Her arch observation makes it clear that, however much her sister Harriet, described as "blunt" and "jolly," and the nice, young, nondescript curate promise a Dickensian dependability of character, Belinda herself will exceed the merely quaint. Yet the elements of story (e.g., combinations and curates and the innocent affections of genteel spinsters) will remain modest, continuing to support the movement of the narrative and the content of the story.

But what that surrender to small concerns will discover is that the trivial comprehensively exceeds the standards by which it is commonly diminished. The first paragraph hints at this potential, for what Pym lightly shadows in the progress of Belinda's thoughts is a mind that is expanding to something more and something larger through the provocation of something small. Thus Belinda's comically genteel embarrassment leads her to consider how to correct the curate which in turn leads her to consider qualities of character (Harriet's and her own) and, in so doing, to demonstrate qualities of affection (for her comparison with her sister is neither competitive nor moral). Admittedly, this movement from the smaller to the larger (with currents I have not exhausted) remains within the modest, essentially insignificant context of the curate's negligible untidiness. But the note that carries through all of Pym's work is,

however sparely, sounded here--that the trivial in life, and in literature, is more than merely trivial.

Certainly Pym is not the first writer to focus on trivia and imply its importance. Of the tradition of writing about the details of life, Virginia Woolf had predicted that "when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values--to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important" ("Women" 146). But the hint of intended provocation in Woolf's prediction ("wishing to"), the sense of correction by distortion ("alter") of previous male literary emphases, informs the difference between Woolf's use of detail and Pym's.

Pym establishes a tone in the opening paragraph of Some Tame Gazelle that does not feel like a challenge, either in the sense of innovation (I will do something new) or change (I will do something different) or competition (I will do something better). Pym may intend any or all of these things, but her narrative does not betray it. In contrast to the intense lyricism of Woolf, the sentimentalism of Dickens, the nostalgia of George Eliot, the cynicism of Spark or the intellectualizing of Drabble and Murdoch, Pym's treatment of the everyday is, simply put, ordinary. And what is sometimes discovered in the ordinariness she depicts is a progress toward depth and expansiveness (not so much

ideas in things as ideas from things) that raises, though it does not force, philosophical/literary questions about what matters and what does not matter in life and in literature.

And what matters according to the movement of the first paragraph is to yield. The note of familiarity sounded in the opening sentence encourages this surrender to story.

"The new curate seemed quite a nice young man, but what a pity it was that his combinations showed" is fast and unqualified, taking the reader's interest for granted, not with a sense of presumption or manipulation, but of familiarity and trust. The narrative itself feels vulnerable and ingenuous, ironically like the curate oblivious to attracting notice. Without a sense of guile or provocation, Pym's novel continues a conversation (sometime begun) as if nothing could be more natural. Relationship between reader and text is not so much established as inhabited like two chairs. Pym does not seem to "use" free indirect style but to relax into it, conveying a sense of community in progress, a relationship strengthened by the absence of any distancing narrative assists such as, "Belinda thought that the new curate seemed quite a nice young man," which would inform a narrative aware of itself, however subtly, as narrative, with the distance from the story such awareness requires.

In The Rhetoric of Fiction, Wayne Booth demonstrates how Austen's control of narrative distance serves to balance

the effects of judgment of, and sympathy with, Emma, responses which are both essential to a proper reading of the novel. In terms of narrative perspective, Pym is much closer to Belinda than Austen is to Emma, because Pym's heroine inspires no call to judgment. The narrative balance Austen achieves is to make us look at, and with, Emma; Pym's is to make us look with Belinda, but scarcely at her. A cynical reader might do so, of course, but the text does not encourage it. Pym's perspective is not a moral one or even a personal/emotional one (i.e., Pym and we empathize with Belinda), but an aesthetic one (i.e., Pym and we see like Belinda).⁹ Such distance from Belinda as the narrative requires is supplied by Belinda herself, as the final sentence of the paragraph illustrates. Of her imagined strategy for "correcting" the curate, Belinda inwardly rejoins,

Of course he might think it none of their business, as indeed it was not, but Belinda rather doubted whether he thought at all, if one were to judge by the quality of his first sermon.

Awareness of her presumption does not disturb Belinda, nor presumably, her incipient plan for the curate's correction, a plan virtually forgotten as she follows

⁹ As Bayley sees it, Pym "gives herself up to the sensation of living . . . as much as her characters do, living in them as they in her" (54).

different currents of thoughts about what he might, if he could, think. Belinda does not attempt to make small hypocrisies matters for exaggerated reform (as Emma, in the penitent spirit after her unkindness to Miss Bates, does). Dropping the issue of Belinda's right to correct the curate as lightly as a four-word feather ("indeed it was not"), the narrative playfully picks up the word "think" to follow a progress of thought in which judgment is softened into a genial, knowing wink. Syntactically and thematically, then, the subordinate (i.e., the less important, trivial) clause ("of course he might think it none of their business") is pulled back from subordination to become the point on which the paragraph comes to rest--on the questionable thinking capacity of a harmlessly dim curate at whose unknown expense it is more natural to smile than to test an over-active virtue.

Thus Pym's narrative impishly subordinates an exaggerated, strenuous perspective on the minor complaints and criticisms of daily life to the humorous and (self-) tolerant ones enjoyed by Pym and Belinda. If a hint of mockery is sounded in the first paragraph (and I think it is), it rings as involved, self-criticism--not "how ridiculous she/this is," but "how silly we are"--that does not seek to demean or diminish its subject. The implications of this tone may be distinguished more clearly in comparison with another writer whose career briefly

overlapped Pym's.

In Anita Brookner's Latecomers the narrator observes of a long-married couple: "In the blind state to which he and Christine lived, there was a genuine fear of taking on the world's complications that could pass for innocence, but was in fact nothing but cowardice" (129). In Some Tame Gazelle, there is no such clever exposure of final, ignoble motive (in which the couple is almost made to seem morally culpable), but rather an ironic appreciation of the inescapable interplay of motives, laudable ("innocence") and petty ("cowardice"), as when Belinda wonders if her decision not to knit a sweater for the Archdeacon was "proof that her heart had now become the convert of her head? Or was it just fear of [his wife]?" (129).

Belinda's ironically amusing rhetorical questions sound the easy answers at the same time as they sound the questions. In this manner, Pym/Belinda surrenders the claim to sure knowledge of character implied by the Brookner text, to privilege humorously a claim to sufficient knowledge. As Cooley observes: "[i]n Pym's world issues are not so much resolved as simply left behind by the progress of daily life from meal to meal and from day to day" ("Barbara Pym" 366). In sparing Belinda and her narrative from disproportionate, necessarily speculative inquiry into the blameless motives of innocent lives, Pym suggests that she either knows when to stop, or when not to stop, pressing for surer knowledge--

but in either case, her posture is not an issue or a pose, but simply a matter of respecting life as it teasingly eludes certainties, endlessly asserting itself in new claims on the attention.

Those new claims include the abiding interest in all things trivial, great and small. Modern writers with self-consciously serious goals often use the distracting, trivial preoccupations of life to ridicule, condemn or patronize the presumed weakness they expose. Muriel Spark's Memento Mori shows the pettiness of aging people. Ivy Compton-Burnett's novels depict the pettiness and malice of people generally. Other writers have exploited such preoccupations for comedy. In any case judgment is implicit; whether we laugh derisively or indulgently, people who betray small, self-concerned thoughts are not meant to be us and they do not represent how we should be.

In respect of trivia, Jane Austen, closer to the tradition, if not to the time, in which Pym was writing, provides a sharp contrast. Though in her personal letters Austen would write to her sister with enthusiasm and candor about such things as clothing and trimmings and the absorbing niceties of buying a spongecake, she did not transpose any of that enthusiasm and candor into her novels. In these her narrative voice remains at a distance from the trivia it describes, showing it to be the comic concerns of the "simple," not the serious, characters. Pym shares with

Austen, Cassandra's sister, that same unapologetic candor toward the trivial activities that continually capture our interest, but differs significantly from Austen the novelist in bringing the trivial incidents of life into her books, not as revelations of a character's limitations (as with Emma's Mr. Woodhouse), but as interesting and amusing details in themselves. The unwaveringly confident tone of the first paragraph of Some Tame Gazelle suggests that there are no explanations or apologies needed, implicit or explicit, for the modest emphases of Belinda or the text.

For example, moments in which Belinda's consciousness drifts from sober contexts to idiosyncratic concerns are rendered with a passing candor and an amused smile in which contempt or ridicule would be an absurdity. Thus during one church service,

Belinda was trying hard to concentrate on her sins, but the atmosphere was not very suitable this morning and she was at last forced to give it up. Staring at the Archdeacon's back, she reflected that he was still very handsome. . . .

(107)

Following the invitation to prayer at the opening of a parish garden party, Belinda is described as

look[ing] down at the grass and then at Agatha's neat suede shoes, so much more suited to the occasion than her own. (33)

Though her thoughts are hardly prayerful, Belinda is not thereby made to seem petty, hypocritical, or ridiculous. The passages are certainly comic in their exposure of the trivial thoughts underlying the devout demeanors often affected in sober contexts, but they are not mocking. The genial, matter-of-fact tone of narration suggests that the roving consciousness, however occupied, is not an "issue," moral or otherwise, but simply the way people are. A multiplicity of thoughts, trivial and deep, daily vie for attention within the human consciousness--a movement, Pym suggests, that it is more natural to allow than to resist. So the reader rests comfortably with Belinda's musings, on the Archdeacon's form and on Agatha's shoes, with a passing and playful, but by no means strenuous, sense of irony.

This is very different from modern writers who treat such emphases on the mind's trivial pursuits as psychological/philosophical "discoveries" requiring explanation. Margaret Drabble's The Middle Ground, for example, ends with the heroine deciding on a dress to wear and the narrator explains,

Let us leave her there, in an attitude of indecision, confronted by choice. Not, of course, a very serious choice, unless you wish to read it symbolically; but not, you will agree, an uncommon one. A lot of time is spent in such attitudes, by many of us who would not care to admit it. (276)

This self-conscious, presumptuously-preachy, superior tone stands diminished in contrast to the unselfconscious, thoughtful tone of Some Tame Gazelle. Unlike Drabble, Pym makes no effort to explain, preface or preempt interpretation of the trivial events and concerns which inform her characters' lives, and the risk of the charge of inconsequentiality is subverted imperceptibly by seduction into a story whose very simplicity of style and subject supports a running dialogue between reader and story, and within the story, about what matters, and what does not.

Within the story itself, the importance of being trivial is brought up (in the unemphatic, passing way that all questions are raised in Pym) in a conversation between Belinda and the Archdeacon during a tea break at a parish garden fête. The Archdeacon, feeling peevish because his wife had not sufficiently protected his clothes against moth, asks Belinda crossly why she is smiling at nothing:

'I wasn't smiling at nothing,' retorted Belinda.

'I was wondering if you'd still make such a fuss about unimportant trifles if you were a bishop.'

'Unimportant trifles! The only good suit I have ruined, and you call it an unimportant trifle.'

'We are supposed not to take heed of what we shall wear,' said Belinda unconvincingly.

'My dear Belinda, we are not in the Garden of Eden. That is no solution to the problem. We may

as well face facts. Agatha ought not to have let
the moth get into that suit. . . .' (38)

The Archdeacon, for all his demonstrated pique and childishness, appropriately dismisses Belinda's weak protest as irrelevant. With obvious literary kin in Trollope's worldly yet sympathetic Archdeacon Grantly, the Archdeacon Hoccleve¹⁰ has a less obvious literary antecedent in the Molly Gibson of Gaskell's Wives and Daughters, who responds, mutatis mutandis, to the condescending claim that she will feel the better for self-renunciation:

"No, I shan't!" said Molly, shaking her head. "It will be very dull when I shall have killed myself as it were, and live only in trying to do, and to be, as other people like. I don't see any end to it. . . . I daresay it seems foolish; perhaps all our earthly trials will appear foolish to us after a while; perhaps they seem so now to angels. But we are ourselves, you know, and this is now, not some time to come, a long, long way off. And we are not angels, to be comforted by seeing the ends

¹⁰ In the history of English literature, Hoccleve was a fifteenth-century follower and imitator of Chaucer known for a tedious homily written for Henry, Prince of Wales, and for serious religious verse and prose in which he recorded the ills of his times. Pym's Archdeacon shares with the historical Hoccleve a penchant for imitation and chastisement, reveling in discomforting his harmless parishoners with fire-and-brimstone-type sermons composed of lengthy quotations from poets and preachers from the seventeenth through the twentieth centuries.

for which everything is sent." (140)

In Belinda's tête-à-tête with the Archdeacon, the "unconvincingness" of her call to rise above vanity betrays her own awareness of the uselessness of abstracted virtue in arbitrating domestic quarrels. In a confused appeal to higher virtue, Belinda, like the Archdeacon, mirrors another character from Wives and Daughters, Mr. Gibson. In a Belinda-like resolve to rise above petty quarrels, Molly's father,

made up his mind before his marriage to yield in trifles, and be firm in greater things. But the differences of opinion about trifles arose every day, and were perhaps more annoying than if they had related to things of more consequence. (179-80)

Just as lived, as opposed to anticipated, marital life forces Mr. Gibson to rethink his resolve, Belinda rethinks her invocation of the ideal in the unconvincingness of its utterance. However, her mute concession of the Archdeacon's point is already implicit in her own responses to life, in which the trivial is not only a challenge to humility, but also a source of deep joy.

In one memorable scene, Belinda's heart is set dancing when her part-time domestic helper, Miss Prior, praises the lunch Belinda provides as much superior to that of Agatha Hoccleve, the Archdeacon's intimidating wife:

Belinda's eyes filled with tears and she experienced one of those sudden moments of joy that sometimes come to us in the middle of an ordinary day. Her heart like a singing bird, and all because Agatha didn't keep as good a table as she did and Miss Prior had forgiven her for the caterpillar [found in her garden-fresh lunch], and the afternoon sun streaming in through the window over it all. (52)

Trifles not only inspire petty complaints, but also impart joy as heady as that born of the romance implied by Christina Rossetti's verse. The power of the trivial is not to be diminished, then, by the effort to rise above it, for to undervalue such modestly-inspired joy would surely be an error. Belinda's suggestion that the Archdeacon rise above vanity is similarly misguided. What unites both responses to the trivial events, the joyful and the merely querulous, is the appreciation that the trivial is not trivial in lived life, however much it may seem so to contemplated life. The unchecked, feeling response to small provocations, whether peevish (the Archdeacon's complaint) or thrilling (Belinda's vibrant moment of joy), undermines the almost reflexive but presumptuous assumption that the small event is necessarily of small consequence. The shifting of value implied (e.g., the trivial is important, the important is trivial) subtly confuses the issue of just what is high and low in terms of

the virtue in innocent lives, so that the comparative itself is rendered useless, a scale pretentious as it is absurd.

The subtle rewriting of Rossetti's verse in the description of Belinda's sudden moment of joy in itself implies a similar dialectic, e.g., might not unexceptional daily life, available not only to lovers but to everyone, be as thrilling as dizzying romance? Yet the allusion to Rossetti's poem is blind, and so, uninsistent. The sentence, moving with the syntactic rapidity of three "ands" joining four simple sentences ("and all because . . . and Miss Prior . . . and the afternoon sun"), gives the poetic allusion only passing narrative space, privileging instead the evocation of joy such as of a child breathless to tell of it. It is likewise significant of the conversation between Belinda and the Archdeacon that the abstract potential of the question they raise does not distract either of them from the immediate issue. Belinda's "unconvincing" interjection about not heeding what we wear, and the Archdeacon's associating her idealism with the Garden of Eden, is followed by his dismissal of her virtuous nicety as "no solution to the problem" and insisting that they must "face the facts." But the "facts" do not turn out to revolve around the place of self-disregarding virtues in a fallen world, but around Agatha's very particular duty to keep moth from his suit. Belinda and the Archdeacon, through the vehicle of the narrative, very comfortably and

innocently move on.

The fast allusions to questions about what form virtue should take and what experiences (e.g., romance or modest compliments) inspire the deepest joys support an implicit, running dialogue concerning what is and is not appropriate subject matter for serious literature. One reviewer's casual allusion to the "pre-Freudian tone" of Pym's first six novels (as she and other critics classify them, "the comedies"), and particularly of Some Tame Gazelle, raises, although it does not engage, questions about the place of trivia in novels, and in Pym's novels in particular.¹¹ She writes:

There is nothing darkly latent in the comedies, which are pre-Freudian in tone if not in historical fact. In Gazelle a character [Belinda] is lulled by reading about debutantes, aristos, and "other comforting unrealities." Pym's early novels are prized for their similar effect; reading them, you want to drink cups of tea, eat buttered toast, and settle with a cat on your lap. The later ones are not about unrealities, and they are not comforting. (Shapiro 30-31)

¹¹ My comments will necessarily be disproportionate to the scope of a review that is closer to an appreciation than to criticism. But since my invocation of the Pymean real calls not arguments but assumptions into question, the reflections I bring to this review are relevant.

What is immediately startling in this observation is the unblinking conviction that such unremarkable, "real" domestic activities as eating buttered toast and drinking cups of tea are "unrealities." But since such things are manifestly not unreal, what the writer seems to perceive as unreal is the feeling of comfort they inspire. Her condescension to her own response implies, ironically, a feeling of discomfort with feeling comfortable, as if to be at ease were somehow an indication of personal sloth or inferior literary taste.¹² And so the earlier novels receive the implicit condescension of a reviewer who clearly finds the "uncomforting" realism of the later novels more artistically respectable.¹³

This greater respect for the later novels is made clear in a distinction drawn between the early and later novels on the basis of the difference in the eating habits of the characters:

Pym's shift toward realism can be traced in the way she writes about food, which enters into everything. Time in the first six books is like

¹² Trilling observes how "[t]he imagination of felicity is difficult to recognize. We feel it is a betrayal of our awareness in a world of pain, that it is politically inappropriate" (50).

¹³ Brookner similarly believes the later novels, dealing with "loss of love, loss of illusion, loss of occupation," as she describes (and reduces) them, exhibit greater maturity than the earlier, "sprightly" novels ("The Bitter Fruits" 31).

Winnie the Pooh's clock set perpetually at 11: when it isn't time for "elevenses" it is teatime; luncheons may be "a cutlet" or "a joint," with "a sweet" to follow. With breakfasts of eggs and meat, and suppers following cake at tea, one wonders why all these people aren't immensely fat. In the later books there is a realistic relationship between the food eaten and body shape. You could say that food actually is the subject of Quartet in Autumn. While Letty worries about her weight, Marcia squirrels away a stock of canned goods that could take her through World War II were it to happen again--and starves herself to death. But food is a metaphor. What Marcia is trying to hoard, and what she is starving for, is love. (31)

With the assured bias of the psycho-healthist, the reviewer considers it more normal (i.e., realistic) to depict characters who worry about their weight or who suffer from anorexia, and absurd ("unreal") to allude to people eating and drinking meals and teas without accounting for their "body shape" and attendant concern for it. The focus on calorie-counting reveals that the critical presumptions of the reviewer are confidently psychoanalytic, reflective of a time when food is finally and always a metaphor for various

psychological needs.¹⁴

But the Pymean real implies a comfortable, even fond relationship with food. That the unselfconscious performance of domestic meals/rituals seems to the reviewer unreal undoubtedly results from the rapid pace of life in the 1980s and '90s. To be made to "want to" drink cups of tea, eat buttered toast, and settle with a cat on your lap is to want to do these things in and for themselves. Since today these things are considered "purposeless," frequently done "on the run," or as accessory to other activities, e.g., reading, working, watching television, etc., it might seem that the eating and drinking and the cat catching (as it may) the stationary lap had not happened at all; they come to seem "unreal," idle moments of unearned, scarcely desired luxury. But of course such moments are real.

The reviewer's implication is that the post-Freudian mind has necessarily outgrown the need for rest and personal harmony, preferring a perverse romance with discontent in all its complex provenance, and a certainty that sadness is somehow more true ("honest" in the morally-charged language of therapy) than joy. What that certainty fails to consider

¹⁴ Though I employ the reviewer's vocabulary (i.e., "pre/post-Freudian") and intrude related terms such as psychological/psychoanalytic, I do so, following the reviewer's use, broadly--which is to say, inaccurately--to mime the assumption that "pre-Freudian" as a critical term implies an innocent and naive literature, "post-Freudian" oppositely implying a literature of sophistication and predominantly painful knowledge.

is that the experience of comfort and ease may not be a state modern man has grown beyond, but a state he has need, in an unrealized maturity, to grow up to.

In writing about trivialities in a literary age of often disproportionate anxiety and complexity, Pym is doing, as Orwell suggested of a different writer, all that a thinking, sensitive person can do in uncertain times--remaining human, if possible. Orwell, speaking of the more seriously menacing period of World War I, was defending the poetry of T.S. Eliot, which was criticized as being historically irrelevant and insensitive:

If I had been a soldier fighting in the Great War, I would sooner have got hold of Prufrock than Horatio Bottomley's Letters to the Boys in the Trenches. I should have felt . . . that by simply standing aloof and keeping in touch with pre-war emotions, Eliot was carrying on the human heritage. What a relief it would have been at such a time, to read about the hesitations of a middle-aged highbrow with a bald spot! . . . After the bombs and food-queues and the recruiting-posters, a human voice! What a relief! ("Inside" 253).

Of course, Pym is not being charged pejoratively with global insensitivity for writing, as is supposed, a type of pastoral that might be deemed implicitly insulting to a

troubled world. But since the modern habit of mind is to associate pastoral with escapism and a lack of seriousness, there is the failure to appreciate, as Orwell did, that literary gestures of frivolity and ease in stressful times may determine a writer's importance.

In admitting and welcoming the abiding and innocent pleasures trivial activities provide, Pym suggests that approach to a state of "harmony and peace with [one]self and the external world" that Schiller believed was the object of the idyll, and of such unique importance as a goal in life and literature generally (313). But poets have traditionally set their idylls in pastoral surroundings, falsely suggesting that innocence is the remote quality of an infant humanity, not a state independent of time or place. As Trilling comments:

[i]t is the poet's function . . . to represent the idea of innocence in a "sensuous" way, that is, to make it seem real. This he does by gathering up the elements of actual life that do partake of innocence, and that the predominant pain of life leads us to forget, and forming them into a coherent representation [or a "real" representation] of the ideal. (51)

Some Tame Gazelle offers "the elements of actual life that do partake of innocence" in a very sensuous way indeed. And in the cozy life of Belinda and her sister, the novel early

shows people living in harmony and peace with the external world without plan or exertion. They simply live. This is the quality that Bayley appreciated as a literary as well as a philosophical one (see p. 27, note 2).

Since awareness of self, both personal and artistic, is a major characteristic, perhaps affliction, of Freudian influence, broadly conceived, on the modern world and its art, Some Tame Gazelle evidently seems to some readers either perversely or simply simple in its depiction of characters without goals or ambitions or the anxieties enjoined to them. The conception of a society, such as the village life of the Bede sisters in Some Tame Gazelle, in which most persons naturally think that life consists not of doing but of being seems an alien one to the modern mind.

To consider the implications of the discomfiting comfort the reviewer experienced with Some Tame Gazelle helps to discover the implicit challenge it offers to modern literature. As one critic observed, "the most radical changes [in art] have come from personalities who were conservative and even conventional--a powerful recoil from the present threw them backwards, so to speak, into the future" (Rosenberg 65). Some Tame Gazelle, for all its air of pre-modern simplicity, is not a backward-looking (and, therefore, not a pastoral) book. If its tone is to be defined in relation to Freudianism, then it is more accurately post- than pre-Freudian.

The text is not ignorant of the claims of psychology. For example, when Belinda and Henry have their tête-à-tête at the garden party, he explains as he devours a large tea that he had been too busy with preparations to have any lunch. Later, when Belinda offers to relieve Agatha so that she might get her tea, Agatha justifies her reluctant acceptance by explaining that that she too had had no luncheon and was hungry:

'Oh, dear, I wish I'd known that, then you could have gone first,' said Belinda. Had there been no luncheon at the vicarage today? Surely a bad arrangement, or had the Archdeacon and his wife wished to outdo each other in self-denial? (40)

And earlier, reflecting generally on the relationship between Henry and Agatha, Belinda appreciates that "[t]he years had dealt kindly with him," but not so with Agatha, whose

pointed face had lost the elfin charm which had delighted many and now looked drawn and harassed. She had rheumatism too, but Belinda realized that she would have to have something out of self-defence and perhaps with the passing of the years it had become a reality. One never knew. (25)

Casually recognizing a relationship in which arguments assume the subtle form of competitive virtues and ailments, Belinda/Pym reveals a competent layman's awareness of

psychology's interpretive slant. But by smoothly yoking it with untextured interpretations that may claim equal authority, Pym's narrative effectively diminishes, though it does not deny, psychology's authority. Whether mere domestic incompetence ("a bad arrangement") or a competition in virtue ("outdoing each other in self-denial") or a degree of both, "one never knew." Pym's novels are certainly not unique in appreciating that psychological knowledge is not definitive, but they are unique in implicitly acknowledging that contribution and suggesting, through the heedless progress of the narrative, that such contribution is not particularly useful or compelling.

An early exchange between Belinda and Harriet on the superior claims of a different discipline comically reflects Pym's attitude toward the contribution of psychoanalytic knowledge. Belinda's wry reflection on the curate's poor oratory skills on the first page of the novel leads into an articulated sigh:

'If only we could get back some of the fervour and eloquence of the seventeenth century in the pulpit today,' she had said to her sister Harriet, a plump elegant spinster in the middle fifties.

'Oh, we don't want that kind of thing here,' Harriet had said in her downright way, for she had long ago given up all intellectual pursuits, while Belinda, who had never been considered the clever

one, still retained some smattering of the culture acquired in her college days. Even now a light would shine in her mild greenish eyes, so decorously hidden behind horn-rimmed spectacles, at the mention of Young's Night Thoughts or the dear Earl of Rochester's Poems on Several Occasions. (7)

For all the comic playfulness between the romantic Belinda and the practical Harriet, this exchange is on a remarkably high and direct level. By referring to "fervour and eloquence" as a kind of thing, Harriet belies her having raised and answered the question of what fervor and eloquence are (to her, something small), and not what they seem to be (something "big," or important), as has Belinda, who recognizes, though she is more willing to participate in, the often deceptive dressings of culture (for Belinda can comfortably suggest that the bawdy poems of the "dear" Earl of Rochester are sweet).

"Fervour and eloquence" apparently denote culture ("a smattering of culture"), decorative but, dissociated from place or relevance, a kind of self-important, intellectual accessory without substantive value, which Harriet may blithely and unqualifiedly dismiss. Her having "given up all intellectual pursuits" suggests a deliberate rejection, unregretful and sure, not a waning interest, and her proprietary sense of place (e.g., not here) comically

underscores her certainty of its irrelevance to their lives.

Harriet's casual dismissal of seventeenth-century preaching mimics the narrative's more subtle deflation of the facile pretenses of pop-psychology. The Pymean real privileges a different vocabulary. Where psychology might police a life for periods of depression, Pym will recognize moments of sadness. In Pym, however, such sadness does not carry the burden of negativity. Avoiding Manichean absolutes in feelings as well as in words, Pym does not moralize categories of feeling by making "positive" ones good and "negative" ones bad, or by making the former signs of psychological strength, the latter of psychological weakness.¹⁵ Feelings in Pym betray a vibrant engagement with life, unmediated by theories that only distance one from the same.

The lives of the Bede sisters are healthy, but for Belinda we know that they are not always happy, for such harmony and peace as she truly knows are not invulnerable to

¹⁵ I am influenced here by James Wood's review of Anita Brookner's A Private View, in which he asserts that Brookner debases the moral categories (where, by contrast, Henry James would enlarge them), so that "the good are not good but merely 'meek' or 'decent' or 'blameless,' and . . . the bad are not bad but merely 'strong' or 'healthy' or 'impudent'" (42). For the purposes of my discussion, the debasement of moral categories takes the spin given it by the therapy culture with its association of happiness with "positive" thinking/feeling and sadness with "negative," "self-defeating" behavior. These assumptions invoke ethical or moral issues insofar as they suggest one is, for example, "wrong" to feel sad.

disquiet and sadness. The unwavering poignancy of Some Tame Gazelle results from its rhythmical discovery of life's abiding pleasures as these are sometimes gently, helplessly usurped by disenchantment. One reminder that Belinda remains vulnerable to her life as she finds it, not to the idea of a life that she has contrived to make, is when she contemplates, when being recalled to a cooking task, the lines of a hymn that suggest the circumference of her own life:

The trivial round, the common task--did it furnish quite all we needed to ask? Had Keble really understood? Sometimes one almost doubted it. Belinda imagined him writing the lines in a Gothic study, panelled in pitch-pine and well dusted that morning by an efficient servant. Not at all the same thing as standing at the sink with aching back and hands plunged into the washing-up water. (227)

However genuine her pleasure in small events and tasks may be, Belinda does not pretend that they comfort when they do not, or that they satisfy inarticulate, ambiguous need. Seeing through, without anger or insistence, the questionable attempts to sanctify the quotidian (e.g., by Keble, religion), Belinda does not herself sentimentalize it.

A particularly understated reminder of Belinda's still poignant, unfulfilled longing occurs when she recalls a line of poetry about hands, prompted by a visiting bishop's discourteous neglect of shaking at least one of her sister's in thanks for monitoring the projector at a slide lecture he gives. The line she remembers aloud to her friends about a hand being "tender as 'twere a jelly gloved" prompts a bossy village spinster to comment on her more fragile roommate:

'Connie's always fussing about hers, rubbing them with lotion and all that sort of nonsense. I always tell her that nobody's likely to want to hold her hand now, so why bother.'

Belinda thought this rather unkind and sympathized with Connie. It wasn't exactly that one hoped to have one's hand held. . . . (176)

Belinda's musing is cut short by the arrival of the Archdeacon, and her tender, unvoiced, vague hope is left trailing, to know as little "completion" as the sentence expressing it. As ever, the busy-ness of daily life will save Belinda from ambiguous questions of need and longing, intruding the incongruous solace of "petty" social distractions. But though such distractions are trivial in themselves (e.g., the lecture), they gain depth and significance from the perspective that sees their power to afford Belinda the solace of involvement. The shifting demands for attention between the trivial and the deep in

the human consciousness and the indirect satisfactions they afford require a constant reappraisal of the distinction between the two.

The ebb and flow of feeling that informs the novel's poignant tone should discourage the assumption that one feeling or thought within a character necessarily undermines another. But critics often fail to heed the movement of the tonal modulations of the text. For example, one day Belinda enjoys a long afternoon of tea and supper at the vicarage in which the Archdeacon indirectly betrays having questioned his choice of Agatha as wife; Benet takes it as definitive when Belinda later reflects,

[j]ust one evening like that every thirty years or so. It might not seem much to other people, but it was really all one needed to be happy. (158)

By claiming for Belinda that "she has won mastery over happiness as a minimalist art" (26), Benet implies that Belinda has contrived a strategy for emotional survival and "settled" the issue of personal happiness. But Belinda's feeling is akin to the quiet flush of joy she enjoyed "like a singing bird" over the incident of Miss Prior's lunch; it is the untutored rhetoric, not the harnessing, of emotion.

Belinda's emotions follow a rhythm, much like the seasons that mark the passage of time in Pym's novels, as the movement from uncertain spring raptures to cosy winter evenings suggests. Pym, like Woolf, weaves the trivial with

the deep concerns of everyday consciousness and domestic life, but departs from Woolf in a tonal emphasis that is variously arch, tender, vulnerable, and ironic in contrast to Woolf's always intense lyricism. Pym's simpler, prosaic approach encourages the sense that the thoughts her characters reveal are more often the commonplace experience of the unexceptional human mind than the exclusive experience of the especially poetic nature.

A marvelous example of this seamless, unremarkable movement of everyday feeling and perspective occurs while Belinda is gardening one morning. Like the pattern of terza rima stanzas, her reflections pick up one thread from the thought preceding, moving through a series of reflections from the hardness of plants to the durability of human hearts which, contrary to the romantic paradigm of the "greater English poets," often survive heartbreak:

But there was always hope springing eternal in the human breast, which kept one alive, often unhappily . . . [sic] it would be an interesting subject on which to read a paper to the Literary Society, which the Archdeacon was always threatening to start in the village. (130)

Within this one sentence, the thought first tilts up into a perky cliché ("there was always hope springing"), then softens down into the subtle disappointment of hope's mere utility ("which kept one alive"), to drop finally into the

wistful, melancholic sadness of the trailing qualifier, "often unhappily." A "cheer-up" poetic reminder moves to a flirtation with despair in the space of seventeen words . . . and is rescued from that brink by Belinda's ironic trivializing of unhappiness into an "interesting" subject for a learned paper. There is a modulation in tone from the upbeat to the somber with an unwavering poignancy that the subsequent irony does not usurp. But the reminder of the silly, pretentious way we trivialize by attempting to elevate our despair in learned discourse is the wry, self-distancing humor that saves Belinda from an immobilizing despair, and rescues the narrative from an interlude of lengthy introspection which would shift the tone of the passage from the thoughtful to the ponderous. Pym, however, is serious without being solemn and her use of humor prevents the abstract potential of Belinda's reflections from dragging the story from its rootedness in daily life with its meetings and words and accidents.¹⁶

Belinda's tender expressions of inarticulate need at the slide lecture and while gardening are not belittled by their ironic displacement by the plodding intrusions of daily life. In the betrayal of the vagueness, the formlessness of her hope (earlier, "not exactly to have

¹⁶ My choice of phrase mimics a verse Pym had read in a publication and transcribed into her journal: "So I never lose a sense of the whimsical and perilous charm of daily life, with its meetings and words and accidents" (VPE 114).

one's hand held" and later, "there was always hope springing") there is the reminder that we do not always know, or know how to articulate, what we want. We can only vaguely suggest, sometimes in the qualified negative (e.g., "not exactly that"), and where the need is so unclear, what chance fulfillment?

Belinda reveals her appreciation that fulfillment inhabits the blank space of what might have been during her conversation with the Archdeacon at the garden fête. Henry concludes his complaint of his wife's neglect, saying,

'I am sure that you would have seen that it was put away with moth balls . . . [sic]'

'It would have smelt of camphor then and you would probably have disliked that,' she said, almost in a whisper.

The Archdeacon gave a shout of laughter at this.

(38)

In an unconscious failure to exploit the Archdeacon's compliment, Belinda responds with spontaneous insight into the unrealized reality of marriage to Henry which would see his anticipated gratitude for her domestic virtues turn to annoyance at the consequences of their action. Her knowledge does not imply, however, that she is therefore glad she did not marry him. Such a response would be the unworthy exploitation of a single instance to derive comfort from a wish denied. But Belinda has no need to perform

psychological sleight of hand on her own feelings.

For Belinda appreciates the illogic of her affection much like the poet when she implores, "Pity me that the heart is slow to learn / What the swift mind beholds at every turn" (Millay 29). A heart like Belinda's will never keep pace with her head since to do so would be to pretend to an emotional invulnerability that is of doubtful reward. It would be to do the impossible--to define herself. Appreciating Millay's thought as expressed by an earlier poet, Belinda follows the line of a hymn, In Reason's ear they all rejoice, to remembrance of her undergraduate essays on Rationalism:

Had not her favourite, Young, said something about his heart becoming the convert of his head? How useful that must have been! Belinda began to look back on her own life and came to the regretful conclusion that she admired the great eighteenth-century poet without really taking his advice. She comforted herself by reflecting that it was now too late to do anything about it[.] (129)

Dutifully regretting her failure to subject her heart to her head, Belinda is comforted by its being too late to do so now. Yet her comfort serves to betray her preference for having left, and for continuing to leave, her heart alone, for it could only be "too late" if she were what we know she is not--past feeling. To have followed Young's advice would

have been to discipline a heart already obedient to its own necessity. There is no evidence that any "idea" such as Young's has seriously provoked her into trying to "free" herself of an affection she has not deliberately nurtured. She has simply let it live, allowing her natural vulnerability to be her best guide.

Belinda has not made the choice to love and to continue to love the Archdeacon. She simply has and does continue to care ("having loved the Archdeacon when she was twenty"), and it is impossible to believe of her that she would pretend to what she did not simply feel, and feel as a warm and natural thing. This is not to say that Belinda has no free will in her affections. But it is to claim for her the ability to allow herself to respond without relentless second-guessing and self-harassment, as the narrative itself proceeds without the self-consciousness that Bayley recognized as the affliction of so many modern novels.

This "ability," which I call a strength, is not one the novel foregrounds or promotes as a "point." The sensibility of Pym's novel, however, becomes a point as soon as criticism mistakes the quality as a flaw, either of artistry (as the Saturday Reviewer implies Pym's literary immaturity) or of psychology (as Benet implies Belinda's neurosis), and fails to consider it as a unique achievement in a self-consciously ponderous literary climate.

Another comparison from The Middle Ground highlights the difference in outlook and tone between Pym and a late contemporary of hers whose reputation is less ambiguous. When Kate Armstrong, the heroine of Drabble's novel, ponders the state of her bohemian lifestyle she wonders, "[w]hat failure of imagination kept her within her narrow limits?" (114). In contrast, it might be said of Belinda (whose humility would not give it voice), "what strength of imagination kept her within her narrow limits?," that is, in enabling her to see through the promise of greater fulfillment other choices promise.¹⁷

Near the end of Drabble's novel, Kate Armstrong "realizes" the burden of living to demonstrate a popularly-conceived "meaningful" life and resolves:

Henceforth . . . to represent nothing but herself. And if she liked to sit here with three teenagers not even her own, and happy, yes, she could not deny it, happy to have been called in, to be of use, to be able to do something for Evelyn and for them, if only to make cups of tea, well, that

¹⁷ When a movie reviewer is disappointed because the heroine "trad[es] her stab at independence for the warm, ill-fated promise of true love" (Lane 96), he betrays, like the fictional Kate Armstrong, the assumption that independence may not be as equally ill-fated as love. But today's romance is with invulnerability, independence, and the "strength" these are taken to represent. (See p. 179, n. 6)

meant nothing at all but that she liked it. She
liked it. (229)

She could not deny a pleasure that she apparently had before, assuming in her discovery a superior tone of aggressive righteousness ("she liked it"). In contrast is the end of Some Tame Gazelle which finds Belinda "overjoyed" to hear the "authentic ring" of the voice of the new curate, who Harriet has invited to dinner and who succeeds the "nice young man" on whom the novel opened. The final chapter clusters about the first curate's marriage to a niece of Agatha's, the event which will effect his departure from the village. On their way to the wedding, Belinda calls Harriet's attention to an almond tree in full blossom:

'Look, the almond tree's out,' she said. 'I
always feel it looks lovelier every year, so
beautiful that one can hardly bear it.' (243)

Unlike the self-dramatizing realization of Kate Armstrong in which she focuses on herself, Belinda's sense of the slow deepening of beauty around her suggests the steady, natural progress of her own sensitive response to life.

It is in this sense that Belinda as an individual and Some Tame Gazelle as a novel begin in a place to which so many modern novels, with their emphases on themes of renewal and redemption, strive to end: in that "state of harmony and peace with . . . the outside world" that Schiller so eloquently appreciated. In the spirit of his essay, the

pastoral of Some Tame Gazelle does not tease with the dream of a place and a time out of reach, with the promise of self- or romantic fulfillment or of a life without limitations, but it does suggest the promise of a new perspective on life as it is in place. This perspective, the one Kate Armstrong has been challenged to regain, is also the one that, deepening in the course of the novel, Belinda has always enjoyed.

Chapter 2: Quartet in Autumn

Quartet in Autumn, Pym's most critically acclaimed work, was written some forty years after she began Some Tame Gazelle. The London world of the 1970s it depicts, however, seems even farther away from the world of the earlier novel, not so much in respect of time and place, but in terms of temperament and mood. The ease which informed the loving, polite responses of Belinda to her emotional and social life is unavailable to the cast of Quartet in Autumn. While in Some Tame Gazelle this naturalness is to be taken for granted, its absence is to be assumed in Quartet in Autumn. Gentle social impulses, when felt, are perversely suppressed, and where the tender instinct is altogether lacking, rehearsed rules of social behavior step in to inspire the contempt of the recipients of false (because forced) charity. The novel illustrates the London Pym saw when she considered a story to suggest her dark wonderment: "When did the joy begin to go from life . . . was it sudden or gradual[?]" (qtd. in Weld 189).

The quartet of the title is Letty, Marcia, Edwin, and Norman, four workers in the same office who are approaching retirement, sadly unable to make more than surface contact among themselves or with others. The first chapter of the novel describes a typical office lunch hour in which the four of them go to the library, "though at different times." Norman, whose surname is never revealed, is a bitter little

man, as coarse and bristly as his "difficult, iron-grey" hair. Given to glib, spiteful comments, he concludes "chirpily" or "with relish" that some things each of the four have in common are "[t]he chance of being found dead of hypothermia" (6), or of "falling through the net of the welfare state" (22), or of becoming so weak from malnourishment that "[they] might not have the strength to open [food tins]," these last being what Marcia suggests could insure them against the menacing prospect of starvation.

About midway through the novel the two women retire from their jobs. Marcia, the most obviously peculiar of the four (she huddles trash that she classifies as "unsuitable for the dustbin" into the book shelves of the library), will fall into a routine of obsessive/compulsive rituals and finally into a distracted anorexia which will lead to her collapse at her kitchen table, too weak to open a tin of food. Hers is the bleakly ironic fate which Norman had so flippantly, but unknowingly foreshadowed. She will die in hospital soon after, and so occasion the uneasy reunion of the remaining three. Letty, the most self-consciously disciplined of the four (she adheres to such personal habits as taking a walk of some kind every day and not drinking sherry before the evening), will, in the spirit of that discipline, cope with retirement. Letty's reflections (e.g., "on the strangeness of life, slipping away like this"

(27), on "the experience of 'not-having' . . . as something with its own validity" (25)), poignantly articulate the elegiac tone of the novel. Edwin, a long-time widower and the only one of the four ever married, is staid and even-tempered, though capable of revealing a rare peevishness as once when he returns home at night and remembers how his late wife would ask querulously, "Is that you, Edwin?" (16). "As if it could be anyone else!" he thinks with retroactive annoyance, seemingly unregretful of her absence and pleased with a solitude which affords him the freedom to indulge his unthreatening habit of church-crawling (for its social, not spiritual, opportunities) without constraint.

Beginning with the separately-passed lunch hour, the story continues to show the alienation of the four from one another against the background of a London in which hostility is free-floating and unprovoked. This hostility, which the narrative subtly but unmistakably registers, is something the quartet has grown accustomed to, as unremarkable and to-be-taken-for-granted as Belinda's love for the Archdeacon in Some Tame Gazelle. Still, a pervasive, disturbing sense of personal guilt for the inability to feel a natural kindliness provokes awkward gestures of strenuous concern whose falsity only adds to the general hostility.

This chapter will begin with a brief look at the signs of generalized aggression which are both suffered and

perpetuated by the four. Though the men are as much a part of this dynamic as the women, my focus will be on Marcia and Letty, reflecting the novel's greater, though not exclusive emphasis on them. Following this I will consider how the awkward attempts of a young social worker, Janice Brabner, to "keep an eye" on Marcia, fail not only to counter that hostility but, in the stiff manner they are offered, blindly provoke it. Janice's unconvinced and unconvincing overtures of concern betray the representative, uneasy forms of vague, social guilt that all suffer, but do not examine. Though Janice, Marcia, and Letty all participate in mutually alienating behavior, it is an early demonstration of Letty's that will be explored most closely in order to discover what is happening at the level of language as it both feelingly communicates suffering and also suggests, through the movement and modulations of the narrative itself, the way back to the natural response to which all in the novel have lost access.

The analysis of this particular passage, and the language of this chapter generally, will share the vocabulary of David Lodge's essay "Mimesis and Diegesis in Modern Fiction," in which he traces the characteristics and developments of the narrative patterns of fictional texts from the classic realism of the nineteenth-century novel to the experimentation characteristic of modernist and post-modernist texts. Lodge's practice of closely reading

passages from representative texts in order to explain the historical progress and assumptions of narrative is particularly suited to defining the unique achievement of Quartet in Autumn, which reflects in the language of its narration the natural response that is frustrated in the lives of the quartet. Although I find the connection between the story itself and the language that communicates it endlessly seductive, its importance to criticism depends on the helplessly compassionate, yet relentlessly unsentimental tone it registers, for this tone is unique among novels contemporary to Quartet which also deal with aging or aged people (e.g., Muriel Spark's Memento Mori), or soulful people making, as well as suffering, the soulless times of 1970s England (e.g., Margaret Drabble's The Ice Age). In the lonely lives of Letty, Norman, Marcia, and Edwin, Quartet in Autumn evokes "some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing," but without the poet's attendant, conflicted contempt for his yielding sympathy with that suffering.¹ Without even a backward glance to gladder times, or novels, e.g., Some Tame Gazelle, of old, and without implying a fatalistic surrender to the pervading gloom, Quartet in Autumn implies the need for something more

¹ The final and succeeding stanza of Eliot's fourth Prelude reads:

Wipe your hand across your mouth, and laugh;
The worlds revolve like ancient women
Gathering fuel in vacant lots.

modest than earnest, egoistic resolves for personal renewal or equally earnest, equally ineffective dedications to social reform. Rather, Quartet in Autumn imperceptibly invites what is at once possible, unselfish, non-exploitative, and uniquely ambitious--a new perspective on the possibilities and responsibilities for response in society, for nothing less than a softer expression on the human face.²

At the start of Quartet in Autumn that expression is generally aggressive. During the lunch hour on which the novel opens Letty seats herself at a restaurant table where a man already there hands her the menu "with a brief hostile glance" (4). Though here the narrative is describing the man's action as hostile, it will also employ words commonly associated with hostility to suggest subtly the casual violence of other routine gestures.

Marcia, the most obviously eccentric of the four, is also treated with brusque carelessness. In one incident she deposits a coin into the tin of a young woman collecting for cancer. The woman is described as a "smiling girl . . . ready, [with a] flag in the form of a little shield poised to stab into the lapel of Marcia's coat" (18, emphasis

² I am influenced here by a reflection of G.K. Chesterton on Dickens: "What he is out against is not this or that institution, but . . . 'an expression on the human face'" (qtd. in Orwell, "Dickens" 108).

mine). The "smiling" girl is made to feel almost sinister in her anonymous, mechanical posture of "stabbing."

Friends and acquaintances are just as likely as strangers to be needlessly harsh. After she retires, Letty plans to share a cottage in the country with an old school friend named Marjorie. When she goes to visit one weekend, Marjorie meets Letty at the train station; there, she "seized Letty's bag and stuffed it into the boot" (39, emphasis mine). Though the narrative does not comment or elaborate on its description of Marjorie's service, the effect of the alliterative verbs "seized" and "stuffed" is sufficient to attribute a casual, thoughtless aggression to a friend whose "help" suggests an unfriendly indifference. (It comes as no surprise to Letty or to the reader when Marjorie reneges on her house-sharing offer to Letty after managing to hook the indolent and younger local vicar into a marriage proposal from which he will later withdraw.)

Later, when Letty is invited with her two fellow tenants to visit the landlady in the house where she lives (a meeting during which they will be told that the house has been sold), the narrative describes Letty's first reaction to the woman's room:

How aggressively nice and good her 'things' were,
 . . . Letty thought, as she accepted a cup of
 coffee in Miss Embrey's Crown Derby. (56,
 emphasis mine)

The subtle movement of Pym's narrative, particularly in Quartet in Autumn, is neatly evidenced here. The report of Letty's thought is obviously intended to be mimetic (i.e., the imitation of Letty's thoughts in Letty's voice), but the ambiguous use of the word "aggressively" sounds the note of authorial diegesis (i.e., the representation of Letty's thoughts in the narrator's voice), even though Letty is said to think it; it is hard to imagine Letty describing the niceness of things so subtly in her thoughts. The word is too cynical for the benign Letty, too literary, more suggestive of a considered, written response rather than of the fast impression formed while in the process of accepting a cup of coffee. But the oxymoronic description is certainly consistent with the narrative's emphasis on the hostility of gestures that should be gently, or at least carefully, made. Yet, if "aggressively" seems the author's and not Letty's voice, the effect of this vocal commingling in the single sentence is not discordant, for the melding of mimesis and diegesis in the reporting voice of the narrator seamlessly suggests that Letty feels Miss Embrey's "things" in the manner interpreted by the narrator.

The girl whose smile and offices are indiscriminate and automatic, the friend whose service thoughtlessly demeans friendship, and the incongruous qualification of "nice" with "aggressively," all pass unremarked within a narrative that draws no attention to the easy hostility it registers. The

effect is not so much a description as an evocation of the subtly mean atmosphere to which the four are accustomed, one in which friendliness does not come naturally.

The most telling indication that a naturalness has been lost is the prevalence of internalized rules of social obligation, such as "one must" and "one mustn't," which, in the absence of natural inclination or feeling, determine the initiation of most social contact in the novel. In Quartet in Autumn, Forster's injunction, "only connect," becomes the "nice" imperative of a defensive philanthropy employed by an uneasily (i.e., guiltily) apathetic populace. This is most evident in the character of Janice Brabner, a young social worker who is assigned to Marcia.

About midway through the novel, Marcia and Letty (whose surnames, Ivory and Crowe, suggest the wide difference in their personalities) retire from their jobs. It is clear that Letty, accepted by the general office staff as "boringly straightforward," modest and polite, will cope, but that "aging, slightly mad" Marcia will deteriorate. However, since she has undergone a recent mastectomy, Marcia is not without a civic "guardian," having been assigned Janice Brabner to "keep an eye on her."

After Janice introduces herself on her first visit to Marcia, she relies on an internalized script to get through her introduction, one which plays as an ordeal:

'Some of us at the Centre have been worrying about the lonely ones.'

Could she really have prepared that sentence, for this was what came out. Marcia gave her no encouragement. (29)

Janice's stiff, rehearsed gambit is impersonal, patronizing and awkward, and it is no wonder that Marcia responds with the hostility of silence. Janice's discomfort with her performance ("Could she really have prepared that?") is ambiguously voiced to accommodate at once the mockery of the narrator and the contempt of Marcia in addition to Janice's own embarrassment. A superficially "nice" statement, then, is made to feel essentially absurd and dehumanizing to both women, as well as to the reader. But Janice continues in the same awkward manner:

'We just wondered,' Janice went on, realising the need for tact and caution, as she had been instructed, 'if you'd like to come along to a get-together at the Centre one evening. It's next to the town hall, you know.'

'I don't think so,' said Marcia firmly. 'I go out to work and my evenings are fully occupied.'

But there was no television aerial on the house, so what did she do in the evenings, Janice wondered. Still, she had done all she could, sown a seed, perhaps; that was the main thing.

No sooner was the door closed than Marcia went up to the front bedroom to watch Janice Brabner go. She saw her unlock her car and then sit in it with a list in her hand which she appeared to be consulting. Then she drove away. (30-1, emphasis mine)

Continuing in the impersonal, insincere, collective "we," Janice again resorts to internalized rules ("realising . . . as she had been instructed") to guide her stilted conversation with Marcia, reassuring herself with its pious clichés ("she had sown a seed, perhaps"), unjustified as they concern Marcia, who has clearly not been seeded. Still, Janice can dutifully cross Marcia off her list of things to do, and "[bask] . . . in the relief of an awkward duty done" (32).

Her pattern remains unchanged. Janice continues to depend on social-worker clichés whenever she speaks to Marcia, as her second visit reveals:

'How have things been with you?' Janice asked, stepping into the hall uninvited, but one must 'gain access', that was very important. 'Have you been managing your housework all right?' The dust on the hall table told its own story and the floor looked grey and gritty. Real nitty-gritty, Janice smiled at the fancy. But of course one mustn't smile-- . . . (62, emphasis mine)

It is hard to imagine how Janice would manage without consulting internalized rules for "making contact" she has admirably memorized but less admirably failed to question. She disciplines an unforced smile into oblivion on the basis of what one must or mustn't do; the rule checks the potential genuine response. When on her third visit she asks Marcia what she's "going to do" when she retires, Janice, unprepared for Marcia's blank reply, "what do you mean?," hesitates: "'Well . . . ' Janice faltered but, as she afterwards recounted [presumably to a senior social worker], pressed on regardless" (108, emphasis mine).

Janice is responding in a way that will get her approval at her Center, but, always anticipating the accounting she must give, she cannot meaningfully attend to Marcia. "Janice's thoughts," as the narrative later explains, "[clothe] themselves in the language of a report" (187).

Defensiveness is all the fashion in Quartet in Autumn with everyone (including the disharmonic "quartet") eager to justify themselves, to get the uncomfortable "duty" toward one another out of the way in order to earn the clear conscience that is transparently enjoyed by none. The aging such as Marcia are exploited for the personal/collective expiation of aggressive do-gooders who cannot recognize the falsity of their position.

All are complicit. Norman is said to feel "pleasantly virtuous" when paying a visit to his brother-in-law in the

hospital, though he brings no gift since it was "understood between them that the visit was all that was expected or required" (11). Unsurprisingly, a visit in which there is a tacit agreement to reduced sympathies is a relief to both of them when over. Of Norman, Edwin resolves once to "ask him round to a meal one evening . . . [to] give him the chance to talk about [Marcia] if he wants to." But Edwin "did not much look forward to the prospect," reassuring himself that "things like this had to be done and one couldn't expect always to enjoy doing one's Christian duty" (193). It is doubtful whether Norman would be unburdened by perceiving himself exploited for the sake of earning Edwin a good conscience (ironically, a kind of self-serving office in which Norman is also proficient). And when Letty says that she should like to go and visit Marcia in the hospital, she does so "uncertainly, for she did not really want to visit Marcia in hospital, only felt that she ought to want to" (177). Virtue in Quartet in Autumn seems to be nothing but a penance, and, in the person of Janice Brabner, an institutionally-sanctioned one. But what is the unacknowledged sin?

As provocative as the question is, it is one that Quartet in Autumn does not explicitly raise or attempt to answer. To do so would be, no doubt, to move in the self-defeating direction of feeling that things/people/oneself are not as they should be, knowledge that everyone's

unsettling defensiveness betrays anyway. It would also be to tempt earnest correctives to be better (as the reluctantly charitable behavior of Norman, Edwin and Letty suggests) which are manifestly unconvincing and unhelpful. Janice and the quartet believe they ought to feel what they do not and ought to do what they had rather not, but their disproportionate defensiveness leads them to overlook and misvalue what they do do for one another that is genuine and helpful. One particularly subtle instance occurs when Norman tries to persuade Marcia to stay a little longer for coffee when the four reunite for a lunch after the women have been retired for some months:

A curious expression, which only Letty appeared to notice, came over Marcia's face. It could almost have been said that she softened. . . . [b]ut it was only a momentary change, and while the others were drinking their coffee she was again impatient to go. (135)

Though only momentary change, a "softening" is quite a remarkable and tender response in Quartet in Autumn, a genuine, if fleeting, mutually-unrecognized repartee between Norman and Marcia. But Marcia's softening is short-lived. Does that therefore imply that Norman's coaxing was inadequate, in some way blamably insufficient?

Quartet in Autumn suggests not, for though modest and brief, "the longer-enduring item [or moment] is [no] whiter

than the transient one."³ The effect Letty spies betrays Marcia's poignant capacity to feel and respond with a touching vulnerability, informing a feeling of compassion for her as well as for Letty, whose sensitivity allows her to see it. There is no convincing sense that "if only" Norman, Edwin, Letty, or Janice had been somehow different or better, Marcia would have been any less abrasive or resistant to "softening." Though the others are often frustratingly quick to exonerate themselves from doing anything for Marcia, and there is an unmistakable sense that something is wrong, blame is withheld. There is a degree of self-servingness, but also a degree of truth in Edwin's confused reflection that

[t]he idea of being able to 'do' something for Marcia was so improbable that he had only said it [that he would check in on Marcia some evening] to ease his conscience a little. (158)

Though he feels guilty because he thinks he ought to be able to help, it seems quite true that he cannot. Some people cannot be helped, or perhaps they could be if we knew how, but life is "comic and sad and indefinite," as Pym noted in Less Than Angels (89), larger than our attempts to save all

³ Aristotle, quoted in, and translated by, Nussbaum 294. Nussbaum is examining Aristotle's response to the singleness of the Platonic good according to which, she explains, "what is truly and intrinsically valuable is so always . . ." (293).

who suffer it. That does not therefore mean that Marcia should be "written off"--no understanding in Pym ever implies such a radical, cruelly simplifying response--but what the incident of Norman's teasing does suggest is that the little (which may be the most) that may be done for Marcia is done when self-conscious feelings of dutiful (and reluctant) virtue are not involved in the effort.

Still, Janice Brabner, society's designated expiator, continues to make herself silly with behavior that discomforts both herself and Marcia. In the context of a story, however, where Marcia is more and more alienated (and self-alienating) until she collapses from weakness and hunger, unable to open a tin of food, the humor born of that irony, especially as exemplified by the awkward Janice, is necessarily subdued. Yet if the humor in Quartet is not as funny or gentle as in previous novels, it is, paradoxically, not as arch or knowing. There is finally no indictment of Janice Brabner as there will not be of Letty, Marcia, Norman or Edwin, however stupidly or perversely self-defeating they may behave, for, with the exception of Letty (discussed below), none admit to themselves complicity in a hurt they suffer as well as perpetuate.

Though I have focused on how Janice's ridiculous, counterproductive, rule-born behavior reveals her poverty of spirit, there is no judgment beyond its exposure. However self-serving Janice's awkward, rehearsed overtures to Marcia

may be, they are not mean-spirited; whatever her personal or professional reasons, Janice's goal is to help Marcia and she is genuinely perplexed by her discomfort and failure. Her one moment of potentially fruitful introspection is a passing doubt she feels about the worthiness or profit of her attempts when, confiding her discouragement about Marcia's unresponsiveness, a colleague cheers:

'Oh, you mustn't let that put you off . . . A lot of them seem like that at first, but the contact has been made, that's the chief thing. And that's what we have to do--make contact, by force, if necessary. Believe me, it can be most rewarding.'

Janice wondered about this, but said nothing.

(32)

Though her visits to Marcia total five, Janice's unarticulated doubt is revealed only this one time. Her experience of Marcia has shaken the clichés with which she has been armed by "more experienced" colleagues, but she says nothing to challenge her superior, probably not even to herself, for she continues to think more insistently in social worker jargon and even less for herself. During her fourth visit she inwardly laments how "so many of them don't know what they're entitled to, how people are falling over backwards to help them . . ." (120), when she fails to inspire Marcia to avail herself of reduced hairdressing

rates for the elderly. Again, the voice is at once believably that of Janice (who, like a Dickens character, has amply demonstrated her tendency to think and speak in clichés) and the narrator, inhabiting and mocking the self-dramatizing language of the social worker. Janice, after one silent doubt, can only sigh at her failures with Marcia. She does not know what is wrong.

But the failure is not only hers, for it is doubtful whether even the gentlest response would move the peculiar, abrasive Marcia. Marcia is shown to be as self-alienating as she is alienated, in one characteristic instance, deciding to ignore a postcard of Letty's some months after their retirement, in which Letty suggests they get together for lunch. Still, even Marcia experiences unrecognized guilt for her unkindness in not responding.

One of Marcia's obsessions is to clean scrupulously and order all her milk bottles in a shed. When she finds one from a different dairy she is annoyed to remember it was a gift from the country that Letty had shared with her at the office. Janice's talk of the hairdresser reminds Marcia of Letty, a regular beauty-parlor customer, and the postcard she had sent:

. . . Marcia stood in the hall, a feeling of dissatisfaction creeping over her at the idea of Letty. It was that business of the milk bottle, chiefly, but there was something else too. Letty

had sent her a postcard, suggesting that they might meet sometime--as if she would want to do that! There was no knowing what Letty might foist on her, given the chance. She was certainly going to ignore the card. (121-22)

As in the discussion of Letty's thoughts on her landlady's "aggressively nice things," reported thought is again interpretive. The "feeling of dissatisfaction creeping over her" is the descriptive voice of the narrator, but the sentence following ("It was that business of the milk bottle, chiefly. . . .") is less distinctly voiced, since as knowing interpretation of the "dissatisfaction," it is confused. Marcia was never "dissatisfied" about the milk bottle, but unambiguously annoyed. The narrative, in allowing Marcia's voice to dominate and to misinterpret her felt dissatisfaction over Letty, helps the reader to feel her reactive guilt in a way a direct interpretive report (e.g., "she felt guilty about having ignored Letty's card") could not communicate, and to convey it with a combination of humor and pathos. Marcia does not know why she avoids Letty any more than Janice understands why she fails with Marcia. But Marcia is unkind and she suffers for it, as the definitive closure of the final line suggests. This line, the most somber, portentous one of the passage, in directly following the funniest line ("There was no knowing what Letty might foist on her, given the chance") abruptly halts

the laughter the first inspires, creating an echo of suddenly amplified quiet. "She was certainly going to ignore the card" closes the passage with the sense of a door shutting out the laughter in an adjoining room.

Not for the first or last time Marcia has alienated herself within a mind unhinged, but the narrative's subtle betrayal of her discomfort (her "creeping dissatisfaction") with her decision checks the laughter at her expense and forestalls any judgment of her. But this narrative leniency is not a necessary consequence of Marcia's eccentricity, which might in itself excuse responsibility and preclude judgment. It is also extended to Letty, the most self-aware of the four, who is as perversely unresponsive to gentle invitations as Marcia. An early example which anticipates the pattern Marcia and the others perpetuate occurs during the lunch when Letty receives her menu from the man with a "brief hostile glance." As the passage continues,

[h]is place was taken by a woman who began to study the menu carefully. She looked up, perhaps about to venture a comment on price increases, pale, bluish eyes troubled about VAT. Then, discouraged by Letty's lack of response, she lowered her glance, decided on macaroni au gratin with chips and a glass of water. The moment had passed.

Letty picked up her bill and got up from the table. For all her apparent indifference she was not unaware of the situation. Somebody had reached out towards her. They could have spoken and a link might have been forged between two solitary people. But the other woman, satisfying her first pangs of hunger, was now bent low over her macaroni au gratin. It was too late for any kind of gesture. Once again Letty had failed to make contact. (4)

This passage is a strong, subtle example of the type of narrative characteristic of the nineteenth-century classic-realist text (e.g., Middlemarch) in which "the individuality of the reported speech or thought is retained even as the author's speech 'permeates the reported speech with its own intentions'" (Lodge 31). In Pym these "intentions," as have been shown, are to convey the feelings and impressions of the characters more accurately than they could conceivably articulate themselves, e.g., Letty's "assisted" description of the "aggressively nice things."

In this passage of Letty's "failure to make contact," that interpretive authority is exercised with great confidence. However, in the first descriptive clause about the woman, "perhaps about to venture a comment on price increases," the word "perhaps" seems to immediately qualify the confidence of that authority with the speculative note

it introduces. Why should the narrator seem initially ignorant, or pretend to ignorance, of the woman's intention, only to quietly affirm confidence with the more specific, synecdochic description of the woman ("pale, bluish eyes troubled about VAT")?

The use of "perhaps," with its suggestion of uncertainty and vagueness, softens the supposed intention of the woman. It also modulates the pace, for without the tempering effect of "perhaps," the sentence would move more quickly, with the crisp pace of purely temporal narration. Each of these effects--the sense of vagueness and of slowing down--is not arbitrary, but serves a narrative purpose. Paradoxically, the vagueness of "perhaps" clarifies the woman's unborn appeal by reducing her supposed topic to insignificance. The effect of demoting the topic implicitly locates and foregrounds the desire of the woman for polite conversation in itself--her impulse is not to talk about something, but simply to talk about anything. Conveniently, any matter at hand (literally, in this instance, a menu and its prices) will serve, however insignificant, showing how the trivial is once again in Pym the way to something deeper.

The success of this indirect communication, of achieving clarity by suggesting vagueness, does not feel like a deliberately artful, narrative trick, but rather like an artistic surrender to the ways of poetry. In this

passage, the movement into poetic expression occurs within the single sentence, for the "perhaps" note of idle speculation is followed by the tender phrase, "pale, bluish eyes troubled about VAT." This phrase functions as a figure for "she," the subject of the sentence, an alternative to "[she had] pale bluish eyes." The hazy description of her conveys the sense that she is being seen from a distance, with the soft, thoughtful, quiet gaze that does not necessarily focus and define, but ponders and relaxes into impression. The indistinctness of "pale" and "bluish," the sense of imaginatively "going with" the "perhaps" speculation to a plausible, if irrelevant conclusion (the woman's topic, now more specifically the VAT, seems certain) mimics the brief romantic surrender to empathy and imagination. The description slows down the passage as poetry will, distills its truth as poetry can, and relies on the reader's intimate understanding as poetry does. All of this occurs in a heartbeat, however, as in daily life it does, when there is seldom time for immediate reflection.

For "then," the practical, abrupt time signal of story, forces a return to simple reporting, informing us that the woman is "discouraged by Letty's lack of response." In this manner the narrative betrays Letty's awareness of the woman's intended invitation (confirmed in the next paragraph) without having mentioned it. Appropriately and unmistakably, this knowledge is communicated through Letty's

narrative "absence" as a participant in the silent exchange, since failure of response implies awareness of address. The woman knows she has been understood, not simply unnoticed. Yet her recognition is only obliquely glimpsed, subordinated as it is within a sentence that moves speedily on, past her lightly touched experience of rejection, with the temporal action of a lowered glance and a menu choice that shows the woman meeting Letty's apparent indifference with the same, attempting to hide her momentary exposure of need and the shame of her rejection. The exchange plays as a fleeting contest to evidence untroubled possession of a hollow dignity, a pantomime which would have been obviated had Letty merely given modest, nonverbal encouragement. But the moment had passed, as the final line intones, a moment that contained within it many more moments than one, as the use of the past perfect suggests.

The passage, however, is not over:

Letty picked up her bill and got up from the table. For all her apparent indifference she was not unaware of the situation. Somebody had reached out towards her. They could have spoken and a link might have been forged between two solitary people. But the other woman, satisfying her first pangs of hunger, was now bent low over her macaroni au gratin. It was too late for any kind of gesture. Once again Letty had failed to

make contact.

After the first purely informational line ("Letty . . . got up from the table"), this paragraph continues its seamless combination of mimesis and diegesis in reporting Letty's thoughts with the author's interpretive aid. Immediately in the second sentence, use of the double negative, "not unaware," evokes Letty's further distance from the "situation" more effectively than the direct, "she was aware of [it]," could convey, making her seem only marginally aware, or aware with difficulty. It also sounds the note of dispassionate formality to support the work of Letty's "apparent" indifference. The professional, objective tone of Janice Brabner is shadowed here in a non-business context, reinforcing the book's theme of isolation and distance in all areas of life. The next two sentences ("somebody had reached out . . . a link might have been forged. . . .") reflect Letty's felt understanding of the situation in the author's words (e.g., it seems unlikely that Letty would be thinking in images such as "forging a link" at this point); still, if the narrative voice controls here the switch is not jarring or obvious for it accords feelingly with Letty's sensitivity and potential for reflection. Thus, the narrative draws no attention to itself (in the manner this analysis requires), with the effect that the focus remains on Letty.

"They could have spoken, a link might have been forged," subtly suggests Letty's growing tension and regret of her inaction, confirmed by the defeated concession, "it was too late for any kind of gesture." This sentence--which sounds like the report of the narrator as well as the fatal realization of Letty--indirectly articulates Letty's "absent," because self-frustrated, desire to respond belatedly. To appreciate the poignant effect of this indirection, it is helpful to imagine a more conventional rendering. If the passage had intruded even a single sentence such as, "Letty regretted her failure to respond when she had the chance and wished to try at last," the power of the scene would be lost. Letty's situation would be felt less by the reader; intimacy would be compromised, sympathy undermined.⁴ Simple mimetic reporting risks provoking the "and so?," i.e., indifferent or dismissive response. A comparison with a passage from Muriel Spark's Memento Mori (1959), a novel to which Quartet is sometimes compared, may clarify this distinction.

In Memento Mori, Godfrey, one of the aging cast of

⁴ I am reminded again of Wayne Booth's essay on how it is the artful control of distance that engages both sympathy with, and judgment of, Austen's *Emma*. Pym, too, aims for sympathy, but in place of Austen's judgment solicits recognition, a perspective that is tolerant and empathetic, and that can recognize the sad, ironic foolishness of absurd, mutually hurtful behavior in order to engender happier responses, e.g., according to the healthy inclination Letty mysteriously denies.

characters, is eighty-seven, still "in charge of all his faculties," and characteristically thinks of himself not as "I" but as "one" whenever he considers his own behavior (3). At a funeral breakfast he pockets several cellophane-wrapped cakes which he later throws out of his car window:

Why did one pocket those damned things? he thought. One doesn't need them, one could buy up every cake-shop in London and never miss the money. Why did one do it? It doesn't make sense.

(32)

It is clear that the tense change from the past to the present ("why did," "one doesn't") does not here reflect any involved, diegetic participation on the part of the narrative; the voice is still Godfrey's. He does something that he reasonably wouldn't, as Letty fails to do something that she reasonably, and feelingly, would. But Spark's passage provokes (as it may intend) the "and so?" response of indifference, in contrast to the tender participation called for by Quartet's. Letty is hurt and the reader cares; Godfrey is peevish and the reader is indifferent. Letty suffers feelings of responsibility for her failure; Godfrey betrays feelings of contempt and victimization. His gesture of throwing out the cakes suggests bitterness and disgust, and the emphatic repetition of "why" suggests, not a movement toward self-examination or psychological or existential inquiry, but merely the dead sound of blind

complaint.

Of course the two novels are "doing" different things, but it is revealing to look at the source and effect of these differences at the level of narration. Spark's method invokes the contemptuous, definitive response of Eliot, i.e., "[w]ipe your hand across your mouth and laugh." Pym's evokes the enduring, textured, uncertain sense of "some infinitely gentle / Infinitely suffering thing."

For such an evocation the simple reporting voice employed by Spark in Memento Mori could not serve. A restructuring of the passage along the lines of Memento Mori's would require that the substance of the two paragraphs on Letty's lunch, which go backward and forward in time (the second reaching back to "fill in" Letty's awareness of "the moment [that] had passed"), be integrated to maintain the linear time sequence of mimesis. An inartful, but basic sketch of this integration would require something like, "when the woman looked up, Letty was aware but tried to look as if she weren't, then the woman looked down," and so on. Judgment of Letty would threaten sympathy with her, since, without the reader's participation in the moment encouraged by the shifting of narrative modes, Letty might seem merely stupid instead of palpably suffering. As Letty's episode is rendered, however, the reader is not encouraged to psychoanalyze Letty, to accuse her of foolishness or hurl the cruel challenge of "why" she is

painfully unresponsive, because her suffering, so sparsely, even absently described, is painful enough. The reader is not encouraged to add imaginatively to it. Still, the "why" that would sound to her and to the reader as a whisper and an appeal, not as accusation, would resound with the force of retrospective reflection to prompt, not judgment, but a better understanding of self-frustrating behavior.

Considered historically, Pym's narrative reflects what Lodge describes as the smooth dovetailing of diegesis and mimesis characteristic of the classic-realist text of the nineteenth-century novel. Lodge considers Middlemarch as representative of this type of narrative in which "the character's voice and the author's voice are so tightly interwoven that it is impossible at times to disentangle them . . ." (33). This conflation of voices has also been shown to occur in Quartet. Though in his analysis of a passage from Middlemarch Lodge does not engage the issue of authorial intention, his use of the passive construction (the voices "are interwoven," not "the author interweaves") suggests at the very least uncertainty as to the agent of the flux. The implication is that the conflation of voices does not result from the author's self-conscious intention, but from her unselfconscious surrender to the needs of her story, a naturalness of response on the authorial level that suggests the naturalness of response frustrated at the story

level.⁵

Like most novels, Quartet in Autumn overlaps Lodge's categories of classic-realism, modernism, and post-modernism. Though I have emphasized Quartet's classic-realism, modernist and post-modernist elements are also evident. For example, when Janice Brabner drifts into the language of social worker clichés ("so many of them don't know what they're entitled to, how people are falling over backwards to help them"), the narrative is both representing her speech mimetically, a method of the modernist text, and also mimicking the speech of social worker jargon in which Janice traffics. This parodic quality suggests the post-modernist method of pseudodiegesis, or mimesis of a discourse. Still, despite the presence of modernist/post-modernist qualities, what dominates in the novel is the easy integration of the diegetic and the mimetic voices. Lodge implies the greater freedom of this method when he turns from his discussion of Middlemarch and the classic-realist text to the next stage of the novel's development, the modern text, in which, paraphrasing Volosinov, he says that "reported speech is not merely allowed to retain a certain measure of autonomous life within the authorial context, but

⁵ Noting this quality in Pym's novels, Bayley calls it "remarkable, for in general such a surrender on the part of the author would be a sign of weakness, of an inferior type and genre of fiction. That it is so triumphantly not in the case of Barbara Pym is itself a sign of something inexplicable in the way her fiction works . . ." (54).

actually itself comes to dominate authorial speech in the discourse as a whole" (33, emphasis mine). It is the phrase, "not merely allowed," that interests me here, for it confirms the sense Lodge implies earlier in his discussion that the intermingling of mimesis and diegesis in Middlemarch suggests the author's yielding response to the felt requirements and needs of her story, a type of surrender which, paradoxically, determines the nature of its unique artistic control. This is what the prose of Quartet in Autumn demonstrates in its smooth commingling of authorial and reported speech, often within the same sentence.

The question of naturalness of response, then, exists at the level of story, where for the characters it is frustrated, and at the level of narrative, where for the author it is operative. The force of the reflection, like the unarticulated dialogue between the plot and subplot of a play, is to create the force one critic feels when he speaks of Pym's ability to "both [educe] and [direct] our native insight" (Burkhart 73).

The story of Janice Brabner with her lack of native insight, of the almost incoherent logic of Marcia as she perceives in a modest lunch invitation the ludicrous threat of unwanted milk bottles, of the painful failure of Letty to meet and return a shy glance, is narrated in a manner which involves the author and so the reader in the foibles, pains

and eccentricities of the characters. Pym is the kind of narrator to which Nietzsche refers when he reflects:

It is easy to tell whether a narrator is narrating because the subject matter interests him or because he wants to evoke interest through his narrative. If the latter is the case, he will exaggerate, use superlatives, etc. Then he usually narrates the worse, because he is not thinking so much about the story as about himself.

(Human 343)

Superlatives are alien to Pym's prose which, as has been noted, relies characteristically on qualifiers and comparatives.⁶ Pym is interested in her subject and interests her reader in the same through the influence of her own involvement, confirmed at the level of language. What she discovers is a tragicomic sadness and absurdity in behavior that is unnatural, uneasy, and tentative, but recognizably typical of a modern, troubled world in which duodenal ulcers are brought about "by the worrying nature of life in general" (11).

Implicitly it is an atmosphere to which one would not want to contribute. This is why the description of Pym's

⁶ Weld considers "perhaps" the qualifier that may be (is perhaps?) "[t]he chief identifying characteristic of Pym's prose" (102). Joan Gordon notices the absence of superlatives and a greater use of the subjunctive than the declarative (224-5).

ability to "educe and direct our native insight" is so apt. She does not portray or effect any dramatic confrontation with the truth, especially of the type that issues in earnest Janice Brabner-like resolves. Pym's prose suggests an invitation to relax our responses both in the process of life, as this need is made evident through the story of the quartet, and in the act of reading, as the easy narrative drifting between the mimetic, diegetic, and dialogic/parodic modes suggests.

The achievement of the Pym text, with its pliant response to narration, is to "[make] us think without knowing we are thinking" (Updike, "Novel Thoughts" 114). It inspires thought that is not self-consciously arduous, but embedded in the process of life. When Nietzsche quotes Flaubert claiming, "[o]ne cannot think and write, except sitting," he counters, "[o]nly thoughts reached by walking have value" (Portable 43). To exploit Nietzsche's comment metaphorically, the thoughts and feelings stirred by a Pym novel are reached by walking, that is, during the natural movement of consciousness as it goes about the business of daily life. Serious thoughts may be, and often are, the whispering accompaniment to making tea or walking anywhere, or reading Barbara Pym.

This is why Weld strikes the wrong note when she writes, discussing Some Tame Gazelle, of Pym's use of clothing "to introduce and define character" (66),

explaining that "[c]lose attention to the actualities and attitudes about dress is essential for the Pym reader" (68).⁷ This is wrong. "Close attention" is never a requirement for the Pym reader; it is relaxed attention that is enjoined, the type that blurs as with distance in order, paradoxically, to distill and receive the clarity of impression, as in the feeling recognition of the soft appeal in pale, bluish eyes. Clothes in Pym are a trivial trivial detail, illustrative of characters whose personality markers are never as interesting for what they reveal as for what they confirm. Weld herself elsewhere quotes Pym saying:

. . . when we are reading, we do want details. Denton Welch, again, writes in his Journal--'I wish that people would mention the tiny things of their lives that give them pleasure of [sic] fear or wonder. I would like to hear the details of their houses, their meals, and their possessions.' And I think we do enjoy hearing about such things, not necessarily for social history but because they are pleasing in themselves. One wishes that Jane Austen had given us more detail about her heroines' clothes--what, for example, did Emma

⁷ Although Weld's observations are made within a discussion of Some Tame Gazelle (in which context I would also argue them), her key conclusion comments more widely on Pym (e.g., the Pym reader, not the Some Tame Gazelle reader), and is thus relevant to a discussion of Quartet in Autumn.

wear, when she went to dinner at the Coles? (Pym
qtd. in Weld 116-17, emphasis mine)

Tellingly, it is clothes that Pym cites as a detail of the type that is interesting, not for the especial signification of character, but for the pleasure in the detail itself. The Pym reader enjoys such details in her novels as Pym enjoyed reading of them in others; the burden of "close attention" would only spoil the pleasures of reading Pym.⁸

Weld elsewhere charges the reader with a vigilance unnatural to the Pym text when she claims that

Since the characteristic irony that identifies a Pym novel resides not usually in situation, but in her characters' dialogues or internal observations, the astute reader must observe in addition to total scenes, the impact of single sentences, even single words. (101, emphasis mine)

Surely an impact is better felt than observed. Again, the Pym reader need never "note" this or "observe" that; she needn't be "astute." She need only respond.

An example from Aldous Huxley's Crome Yellow, the book which Pym claimed inspired her to become a writer, further comments on the menace that rules and resolves present to a natural and healthy vulnerability to new impressions. The

⁸ I am thinking here of the title of Robert Smith's essay "How Pleasant to Know Miss Pym."

protagonist, Denis, contrives one evening his departure from a country house where he is staying with others in order to remove himself from the company of a woman for whom he suffers unrequited passion. When the morning arrives, however, the sun is bright, the newspapers genial, his lady love kind, and the evening of his resolve remote. But unable to alter his now ironically-detested departure, he despairs:

This was what came of action, of doing something decisive. If only he'd just let things drift!
 Never again, he said to himself, never again would he do anything decisive. (306-7)

Of course his resolve--never to do anything decisive again--is decisive, but the irony in this respect is light and does not undermine the fine distinction made, that "rather than making oneself uniform, we may find greater value for the enrichment of knowledge by listening to the soft voice of different life situations; each brings its own views with it" (Human 618). Thus Nietzsche articulates thoughtfully what Crome Yellow suggests ironically, humorously: that the fluid, unresistant approach to literature and life fostered by the narrative of the Pym novel would be ironically undercut if the reader, like Janice Brabner, were to establish earnest rules for reading it.

Quartet in Autumn, along with The Sweet Dove Died (which deals with the efforts of a middle-aged woman to maintain the affection and attention of a young homosexual man), are the two novels that most deviate from Pym's traditional focus on women in community life (whether parish or academic). Quartet's distinction then, often raises the question of genre. Is it a tragicomic tale of social disintegration, a variation on the novel of manners, or perhaps a novel of old (or autumnal) age (e.g., old-age crisis novels, as opposed to the middle-age crisis novels, such as Martin Amis's The Information (1995) or Michael Ignatieff's Scar Tissue (1994), now popular)? Not surprisingly, Pym had not thought in terms of genre when conceiving Quartet in Autumn, writing in a 20 March 1972 journal entry:

Have thought of an idea for a novel based on our office move--all old, crabby characters, petty and obsessive, bad tempered--how easily one of them could have a false breast! But I'd better not write it till I have more time to concentrate on it. . . . (VPE 267)

Here she is thinking in terms of story and incident, working with the raw material of her office experience. Still, Pym's novels, as Michael Cotsell observes, are often rooted in poetic images and impressions, and the poetic feeling for Quartet begins, I think, in an abandoned idea for a story in

which Pym imagines a woman from the country who, looking at the faces of the people on the Underground, wonders, "when did the joy begin to go from life . . . was it sudden or gradual[?]." ⁹ The sense of a present time somehow diminished from one past suggests Quartet in Autumn's thematic similarity to Drabble's "State of England" novel, The Ice Age, published in 1977, the same year as Quartet in Autumn. Pym's perspective, however, is so different from Drabble's that she would not have considered the likeness. She writes in a 21 August 1977 letter to Philip Larkin:

I see Miss Drabble is out soon [with The Ice Age]-
-glad she doesn't clash with me--I wonder who
will?! (VPE 305)

Pym was right, of course--she and Drabble do not clash, and each novel declares, the one loudly, the other softly, its different intentions.

The title of Drabble's novel announces her focus on an historical age, a time of coldness and, as epigraphs from Areopagitica and "London, 1802" suggest, a time in need of redemption. The "intention" of Quartet in Autumn is not as clear. Though its title is vague, it is not impossibly cryptic, for the linking of "quartet," a foursome, and "autumn" implies people of a certain age. The Ice Age seems

⁹ Qtd. in Weld 189. Though she does not give the date for Pym's reflection, Weld alludes to it during a discussion of Quartet in Autumn.

to be reaching for a large, portentous understanding,
Quartet in Autumn for a small, personal one.

The Ice Age, which deals with a man and woman, sympathetically-drawn unmarried lovers, career-driven and facing middle-age, ends with the man improbably imprisoned in a communist country realizing he is "high on suffering," uniquely poised, presumably, to realize and appreciate life's essential truths. The woman is elevated from the ordinary to the symbolic by the narrator's description of her life (one which is condescending to the reader), as one that "cannot be imagined" (because she is left to care singly for her retarded child):

Alison there is no leaving. Alison can neither
 live nor die. Alison has Molly. Her life is
 beyond imagining. It will not be imagined.
 Britain will recover, but not Alison Murray.
 (295)

The sense of unalleviated suffering, of high drama in a sad, but not unique situation, is very far from Quartet in Autumn's general assumption of the commonality of silent crises and suffering, and of its concluding sense of the alleviation of that suffering in a general relaxation of unnecessary tensions.

Quartet ends with the anticipation of Edwin and Norman joining Letty and Marjorie for a day in the country:

Any new interest that might take Marjorie's mind off her disappointment was to be encouraged, Letty felt, though . . . two less country-loving people could hardly be imagined. But at least it made one realise that life still held infinite possibilities for change. (218)

Where Drabble brushes "Britain" aside, which "will recover," and effectively turns Alison into a sainted abstraction, Quartet in Autumn (to exploit the antithesis of Britain and Alison) suggests that Letty (and maybe Norman and Edwin) will modestly "recover," though Britain may not. "Britain," in fact, does not have a part at the close of Quartet. The focus is on the remaining three who may be a little softer than they were. Pym's reach and presumption are not on a scale with Drabble's, but perhaps in her vagueness and endless qualifications, she is, paradoxically, more exact, for like Dickens,

[s]he may not have a clear grasp of the nature of the society [s]he is attacking, only an emotional perception that something is wrong. All [s]he can finally say is, "Behave decently," which . . . is not so shallow as it sounds. (Orwell, "Dickens" 108)

Unseen rules for determining and judging one's responses to life and to one another are destructive to all

in Quartet in Autumn. In betraying their shared, individual oppression by a sense of what they ought to feel, Letty, Norman, Edwin and Janice betray their sense of rules or standards from which they somehow fall short. Perhaps the self-consciousness fostered by post-Freudian knowledge with its effort to explore/expose the interior life inspires the haunting, shifting sense of inadequacy for all we do not feel, and guilt for all we do. If so, then Quartet in Autumn suggests that new knowledge has been acquired at the cost of old instincts, that is, of a fundamental comfort with "what is dictated by one's nature, which brings us out safe at last" (Emerson 44). Though for those in Quartet in Autumn this nature will never be as easy as that enjoyed by Belinda and Harriet in Some Tame Gazelle, it will no doubt be a little more yielding than it was. In the hopeful ending of Quartet in Autumn there is the sense that "pale, bluish eyes troubled about VAT" will no longer have to gaze down into an unappetizing dish, but will meet the tentative eyes of Letty (and maybe of Norman or Edwin), who will, at last, not fail to make contact. One moment and its opportunities may have passed, but others, even still, will be sure to follow.

Chapter 3: Excellent Women

In a 1986 review of Pym's posthumously published novel, An Academic Question, and Robert Emmet Long's Barbara Pym, A.S. Byatt drifts into a broader reflection on what she sees as "the more unworthy undercurrents" of Pym's fiction. She writes that, though "[e]arly reviewers of Pym's work praised her 'sparkling feminine malice,'"¹

[a] harsh view of her work would add that its central characteristics are indeed malice and a kind of narcissistic self-pity, since the reader's generous sympathy for the unperceived virtue or agony is usually required for the excellent woman, the sharp observer whose need for love goes unrequited and unremarked.

Though in this instance Byatt is commenting on Pym's work generally, it seems that she was thinking of Excellent Women, Pym's second published novel, in particular. Her use of the book's title (e.g., sympathy required for the "excellent woman") and her reference to the "sharp observer" (the story's "excellent woman" is told she is "an observer of life," and to have "a talent for observation") as defining the Pym heroine betray, as do all such references in Pym criticism and reviews, the writer's knowledge of

¹ Byatt takes as representative of "early reviewers" the phrase from an anonymous review of A Glass of Blessings that appeared in British Book News in 1988.

Mildred Lathbury, the protagonist of Excellent Women. More significantly, the "malice" to which Byatt refers, the narcissistic self-pity of the excellent woman and the sympathy called for despite such unwinning qualities, suggest the legitimate, demonstrable problems Pym manifests, not in her work generally, but uniquely in Excellent Women.

Excellent Women, written from 1949 to 1951 and published in 1952, is the first of two Pym novels written in the first person,² and the narrative problems Byatt apprehends seem tied to the subjective involvement of the author that the choice of first-person narration facilitates. Though A Glass of Blessings, her second first-person novel, written and published six years later, shows Pym confident and successful with the technique, this was not the case in Excellent Women.

Byatt usefully points to evidence of the novel's artistic failure when she recognizes its requirement of sympathy for a heroine who is essentially unsympathetic (e.g., narcissistic, egoistic, unkind). The problem seems to be that, uniquely in Excellent Women, Pym is at odds with

² An Academic Question, begun and abandoned by Pym in the early 1970s, was incomplete at her death in 1980. She left two drafts, an earlier one written in the first person and a later one in the third. Holt, a novelist herself, completed Pym's manuscript in the first person, and it was published posthumously in 1986. Since Pym had abandoned the unfinished manuscript years before her death, I do not consider it representative of her work, or a fair basis for Byatt's comments on Pym's work generally.

the consequences of her own material--she shows her characters to be less or more sympathetic than she intends them to be. The result is that the novel claims too much for Mildred, with whom Pym identifies, and too little for other characters (particularly the male characters) who exceed, in their obvious regard for Mildred, the facility with which they are judged.

But for Byatt's general apprehension of this narrative tension, there is only one other reviewer of note who has recognized that Pym's personal bias diminishes the quality of Excellent Women in particular.³ Though other critics have recognized contradictions in the narration of Mildred Lathbury, they have considered them thematically, as subtle evidence of the novel's gender-political concerns and not as indications of the author's narrative confusion.⁴ Of course, inconsistency of first-person narration is no less representative of character than the opposite; in fact, it may specifically be intended to ironize and enrich a first-person characterization. But this is not the case in

³ I refer to Peter Ackroyd's review of A Very Private Eye: The Diary and Notebooks of Barbara Pym, to be discussed below.

⁴ In "Private Space and Self-Definition in Barbara Pym's Excellent Women," Barbara Griffin considers Mildred's inconsistencies as a collision of voices, of Mildred's "layered and multi-voiced account of herself which reveals more resistance than submission to the forces that press upon her" (133). Doan and Bowman explore similar feminist issues (see p. 13, n. 5).

Excellent Women. The force of the text is to assert the essential reliability of Mildred's narration--as Byatt notes, sympathy is expected--that is not earned. Undermined by subtle but revealing violations of narrative possibility, Excellent Women is burdened by a general heavy-handedness that betrays the emotional/artistic confusion of the author, who is not in control of her material.

Pym was laboring under a sense of personal injury. As her diaries and letters reveal, Pym based the male characters in Excellent Women on a composite of men with whom she been involved, and by whom she had been hurt. Though use of personal feelings and experiences is common to most novelists and does not in itself determine a book's success or failure, Pym's use of Excellent Women to "[write] something painful out of her system" (Holt 153) resulted in the artistic tension between what the book says and what it shows.

The title ironically mimics the condescending epithet with which men commonly refer to helpful and self-disregarding spinsters, but it also inverts that irony to suggest Mildred's true, unperceived excellence. The critics' general advocacy of Mildred as a laudable narrating heroine seems the consequence of both cultural and moral influences. Culturally, it is easy to claim Mildred as a popular representative of the single woman struggling for definition and recognition against the force of oppressive

stereotypes; this remains a trendy theme for contemporary literature and criticism. Morally, it is difficult to criticize a narrator who, as a perceived victim of egregious, unfeeling neglect, makes such strong, moral claims (i.e., because she is not treated "right") on the reader's sympathy. As one critic with unintended condescension explains, "if [Pym] attempted to right a score by satirising men in her novels, no one would blame her . . ." (Rossen 43-3). Though no one might blame Pym personally, one might certainly fault her artistically; for it shows a doubtful confidence in Pym's comprehensive achievement to lessen the standards by which it is judged.

I do not believe Pym's work deserves or requires critical dispensation because she was hurt in love. Pym's prose was often brilliantly moving and effective, as I hope the previous two chapters have shown, and she could put her personal experiences to good use in her novels, as she did, for example, in Quartet in Autumn and Some Tame Gazelle.⁵ But the success of these two novels rests in Pym's ability to temper her personal feelings with the distance of reflection. And it is the quality of reflection, yielding and sure, that informs the deceptive strength of her best

⁵ As noted in the last chapter, Pym's own experience of office life contributed to her conception of Quartet in Autumn, and Belinda and her love for the Archdeacon in Some Tame Gazelle was patterned on Pym's own affection for Henry Harvey (discussed below).

writing.

After a brief summary of the story, this chapter will proceed to show how the force of Mildred's narration is to solicit the reader's sympathy for her in opposition to the evidence of the text, and to encourage the reader's ridicule of and antipathy for the men in her life, also in opposition to the text. The correspondence between the book's narrative tensions and Pym's personal life will then be traced. Lastly, I will consider why, despite the novel's problems with artistic control, Excellent Women is highly rated by the novel's reviewers and critics, and Mildred is seen without irony as Pym's prototypical "excellent woman."

Excellent Women is the story of Mildred Lathbury, a thirty-year-old spinster (the term "spinster" was still used in England in the 1950s), living in London after the second World War. Passing references to rationed goods and bomb-scarred churches seamlessly woven into the story register the reduced post-war atmosphere in sidewise fashion. Left by her parents with a small income, she works part-time for an organization that aids impoverished gentlewomen, "a cause," she explains, "very near to my own heart, as I felt that I was just the kind of person who might one day become one" (12). A regular churchgoer, she is friendly with Julian and Winifred Malory, the vicar of the "high" Anglican church she attends and his sister. Mildred's story will

revolve around the arrival of disturbing newcomers into her life: a young widow who will take a vacant room at the rectory and set her sights on Julian, and new tenants in her building, a returning naval officer and his wife, Rockingham (Rocky) and Helena Napier, who will rent the flat below hers. (The designs of the widow on Julian Malory, less important to Mildred's story than the arrival of the Napiers, will not be discussed here.)

Rocky's wartime service, as Flag Lieutenant to an Admiral stationed in a villa in Italy overlooking the Mediterranean, was to entertain the Admiral's officers and guests, among these, "dreary Wren officers in ill-fitting uniforms," as his wife describes them. Mildred will find herself uncomfortably attracted to him. His wife, Helena, is an anthropologist returning from field work in Africa, apparently seeking the full life her marriage does not afford her in a career and an unrequited passion for a serious and unromantic, but attractive colleague, Everard Bone. It is he who, at the conclusion of the novel, will become Mildred's unlikely marriageable interest.

Mildred introduces herself in the novel's opening paragraphs, annoyed by the teasing of a local church worker as she watches the arrival of the Napiers' furniture:

'Ah, you ladies! Always on the spot when there's something happening!' The voice belonged to Mr. Mallett, one of our churchwardens, and its

roguish tone made me start guiltily, almost as if I had no right to be discovered outside my own front door.

'New people moving in? The presence of a furniture van would seem to suggest it,' he went on pompously. 'I expect you know about it.'

'Well, yes, one usually does,' I said, feeling rather annoyed at his presumption. 'It is rather difficult not to know such things.'

I suppose an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone and has no apparent ties, must expect to find herself involved or interested in other people's business, and if she is also a clergyman's daughter then one might really say that there is no hope for her. (5)

Mildred's first introduction to the reader is not in terms of her individual self but in terms of a group. She immediately categorizes herself as an unmarried woman and speaks as a representative, subsuming herself into a category (and so reducing herself to a type), a habit that will form the pattern of dozens of her reflections. This recurring emphasis on personal insignificance has the effect of making her seem "nobly self-effacing" (Wade 45), essentially a victim "[constrained by the] burdens imposed upon her as an excellent woman" (Griffin 134).

With some few exceptions, most critics and reviewers agree.⁶ Yet the textual bases they use to confirm this view are grounded on quotations carelessly and misleadingly pulled out of context. Griffin presents the dominant view that Mildred is badly used when she notes:

Mildred's difficulty throughout Excellent Women in maintaining her right to inviolate space is a function of the way she is viewed by the other characters in the novel. Much of this difficulty arises because she is seen in terms of things that she is not: an "unmarried woman" who "has no apparent ties[,]" . . . whose life is "thought to be" empty. (132, first two emphases mine, last two Griffin's)

Mildred as twice the object of the passive tense underscores Griffin's conviction of her victimization by "others," and confirms Mildred's implied call for the sympathetic advocate she wins.⁷ But Griffin's subsequent misuse of text from the

⁶ Cotsell sees her more subtly than most critics, believing that Mildred reveals herself to be "self-aware and self-deceiving" in her response to the churchwarden's teasing (52).

⁷ Other readers respond similarly. One reviewer believes that "Mildred qualifies for the compassion which we extend to poor things, orphans of the storm" (Miller 24). In a letter to Pym, Larkin reflects that "[Excellent Women] is a study of the pain of being single, the unconscious hurt the world regards as this state's natural clothing . . . one senses not only that Mildred is suffering, but that nobody can see why she shouldn't suffer, like a Victorian cabhorse" (qtd. in Holt 161).

passage quoted above suggests something else:

. . . Mildred is . . . a blankness onto which the people around her continually project their own ideas of her. The novel opens with an instance of this when Mr. Mallett remarks in a "roguish tone" on what he presumes to be her interest in "other people's business," since as "an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone and has no apparent ties" she has no business of her own.

(132)

Confusing the voices of Mildred and Mallett, Griffin makes it seem that it is Mr. Mallett who speaks, thinks or meanly suggests that Mildred, as an unmarried woman, has no business of her own. Of course, this is Mildred's parodic interpretation (or, what Griffin does not consider, Mildred's misinterpretation) of Mallett. Mildred's unspoken words are made to seem the harmless churchwarden's and his light teasing to seem a meanly condescending abuse. Yet Griffin's misleading quotation is fostered by the bias of Mildred's narration. Following Mildred's lead, Griffin implicitly sees Mallett as carelessly insensitive, and the consequence of this presumptuous interpretation is to sidestep the consideration of Mildred's inner response as exceeding the provocation. Although the churchwarden is provokingly condescending, his teasing is not mean-spirited, but light and in passing; moreover, his presumption is

correct, for Mildred will soon after concede introspectively, and without sense of contradiction, not only her curiosity, but an unapologetic desire to conceal it behind diverting tasks that conveniently provide a better view of the Napiers' incoming furniture (8). By suggesting her curiosity is a passive and demeaning consequence of her being unmarried ("an unmarried woman . . . must expect to find herself"), Mildred betrays her feeling of abuse (not her actual abuse) simply by virtue of being unmarried and unattached.

In this case, Mildred is constrained not by how she is seen but by how she sees herself, which is as victim. Griffin assumes Mildred's felt interpretation of her situation to be accurate. If the text fosters this view, it is, at least artistically, an unstable one, since it depends on the text contradicting its own evidence. To the teasing Mr. Mallett, after all, Mildred betrays only the stereotypically comic nosiness of women in general, not the pathetic curiosity of unmarried women in particular. Still, more of Mildred's story needs to be known before concluding that her judgment of others is unreliable, since it might be that her sense of self as victim, as "empty space" (Griffin 132), is a preemptive interpretation that has indeed been provoked by others' view of her, if not by Mr. Mallett's.

Of the three men of significance to Mildred's story--Rocky Napier, Julian Malory and Everard Bone--it is Everard

Bone who, as strongly implied at the novel's end, will become Mildred's husband. Everard is an anthropologist and colleague of Helena's, as austere in demeanor and dry in personality as his name suggests, but, in physical appearance, according to Mildred, tall, fair and good-looking. Yet having seen him in passing on the stairs with Helena Napier, she decides that she does not like him. She explains that "[h]is name, his pointed nose, and the air of priggishness which fair men sometimes have . . . set me against him" (26). Subsequently meeting the "dark and elegant" Rocky seems to reinforce, by contrast, her dislike. Before she is first introduced to Everard, Mildred watches him as he is standing by a window in the Napiers' flat and concludes: "I was able to study his profile with its sharp-pointed nose and decide that I disliked it . . . " (34-5). Her expression, however, suggests not that she has decided to dislike his profile or his nose, but that she has confirmed her decision, based on arbitrary, surface details, not to like him. A subsequent Lenten resolution "to try to like him" leaves little doubt of her admitted general antipathy (56). But her prejudicial dislike, apparently because he does not signal the romantic potential of Rocky Napier, implicates the generosity of her character and the impartiality of her judgment.

Left alone with Everard after Helena introduces them to each other, Mildred, with tentative politeness, inquires

after his profession:

'I believe you're an anthropologist,' I said, making what I felt was a brave attempt at conversation. 'But I'm afraid I don't know anything about anthropology.'

'Why should you?' he asked, half smiling.

'It must be fun,' I floundered, 'I mean, going round Africa and doing all that.'

'"Fun" is hardly the word,' he said. 'It's very hard work, learning an impossibly difficult language, then endless questionings and statistics, writing up notes and all the rest of it.'

'No, I suppose it isn't,' I said soberly, for he had certainly not made it sound fun. 'But there must be something satisfying in having done it, a sort of feeling of achievement?'

'Achievement?' He shrugged his shoulders. 'But what has one done really? I sometimes wonder if it isn't all a waste of time.'

'It depends on what you set out to do,' I said rather crossly, feeling like Alice in Wonderland. I was doing very badly here and was grateful when Rockingham came to the rescue. (35)

With his "Why should you know anything about anthropology?," Everard is the first to assure Mildred that

she is not inadequate and the first to gently (half-smiling) upend her polite excellent-womanish, self-effacing platitudes as unnecessary. But Mildred, seemingly flustered by an easy candor which she does not recognize and cannot meet, flounders with the recklessly inadequate, "it must be fun." Everard's subsequent and deeper candor on the questionable value of his work ("but what has one done really?") perversely makes Mildred cross. While his discourse implies an engagement in conversation, hers implies a performance ("I was doing very badly here"). It cannot be said that Everard has provoked, either intentionally or unintentionally, Mildred's sense of general ill treatment. He has not been unkind or condescending, and has uniquely flattered her by speaking to her with honesty and intelligence. Yet her description of Rocky as "coming to the/her rescue" suggests that she has felt Everard to have been somehow a menace.

This episode of Mildred's introduction to Everard ends with the prospect of Mildred and Rocky attending the anthropological lecture at which Everard and Helena will deliver the paper they are preparing. Mildred characteristically tries a polite goodbye:

'I shall look forward to hearing your paper,' I said, feeling that some effort was required and that it was up to me to make it.

'Oh, you will find it deadly dull.' he said.

'You mustn't expect too much.'

I forebore to remark that women like me really expected very little--nothing, almost. (37)

"Women like me" again types Mildred as spinster, and, as with Mr. Mallett, the response eliciting hers does not equal it in tone or substance. Everard is remarkably candid about the dullness of his academic work, just as he was earlier when he questioned its utility. Telling Mildred not to expect too much of the lecture was merely a straightforward response to her polite, but less honest, "I shall look forward to hearing your paper," which she says, she admits, with self-conscious, self-sacrificing effort, in order to distract him from his impatience with Helena. But Mildred takes Everard's answer as an allusion to her larger, personal expectations, with the effect that it makes his response seem to the reader to have been an unfeeling one, even a put-down. This is unfair but, as emotional rhetoric, very effective.⁸

⁸ In an untypical misreading, John Updike takes Mildred's introspective response as boasting the self-sufficiency of the single woman. He transcribes and comments:

When warned not to expect too much, Mildred thinks, "I forebore to remark that women like me really expected very little--nothing, almost." "Excellent Women," arriving on these shores in a heyday of sexual hype, is a startling reminder that solitude may be chosen, and that a lively, full novel can be constructed entirely within the precincts of that regressive virtue,

Another passage often cited to confirm Mildred's ill-treatment by Everard occurs when he intercepts her one day as she leaves her job to ask her for a drink, an occasion he will use to ask her to help him convince Helena that he does not love her. Though he has explicitly told Helena so himself, his denial has had little effect. While they are having drinks, Mildred claims to have realized what Cooley calls his "hidden agenda":

. . . I wondered why I had been so stupid as not to realize that he wanted to say something about Helena Napier. It was not for the pleasure of my company that Everard Bone had asked me out this evening--or rather not even asked me and given me the chance of appearing better dressed . . . but had waylaid me in the street. (142)

But it is not simply that "[t]he hint of romantic interest was . . . illusory" (Cooley, Comic 91); whatever his initial motivation, Everard begins to discover his interest in

feminine patience. ("Lem and Pym" 119)

In reporting the disembodied voice of Everard without reference to the qualifying lecture, Updike might make Everard's caution sound very cruel indeed. But his reading--that Mildred's response is almost boastful ("solitude may be chosen")--is simply careless. It hardly seems necessary to invoke textual evidence to prove that feelings of self-pity and resignation, not self-congratulation, inform Mildred's thought. Apparently eager to heroinize Mildred as triumphantly independent woman, Updike applauds the novel with a strangely misleading review; but one which became significantly (specifically, the last quoted sentence) a promotional tag for most paperback reprints of the book.

Mildred in this encounter. By reducing Everard's motive to an ulterior one, Mildred/Pym sounds a Brookner-like note (see, e.g., Latecomers, p. 40, above) in its self-congratulatory exposure of final, ignoble motive. The deterioration from Some Tame Gazelle to Excellent Women in terms of tone and perspective is apparent here in the unconvincingness of Mildred's interpretive authority, which is undermined by her feelings of victimization. Moreover, in objecting to Everard's request, Mildred fails to recognize (as do her advocates) her own careless insensitivity:

'I say something? But she wouldn't listen to me.'

'I'm sorry,' said Everard. 'Why should you be brought into it, really? I just thought you might be able to drop a hint.'

'But men ought to be able to manage their own affairs,' I said. 'After all most of them don't seem to mind speaking frankly and making other people unhappy. I don't see why you should.'

We walked on in silence.

'I should be very distressed if I thought I had purposely made anybody unhappy,' said Everard at last.

There seemed to be nothing more to say. I was to tell Helena that Everard Bone did not love her

. . . . (145-6)

A reasonable option would have been to say, "I'd prefer not to interfere." More importantly, and with unrecognized irony, it is Mildred who "doesn't mind speaking frankly and making another person unhappy."

Mildred reduces Everard and his request to a cliché about "men being able to handle their own affairs," unnecessarily and without sense of unkindness wounding him in her facile generalization. His prolonged reflection on her charge is obvious in his delayed response. Her failure to recognize this and her heedless non-response ("There seemed to be nothing more to say") at such a moment seems a further unrecognized irony, since his regret that he should be guilty of her charge provides a unique opportunity for her to return his regret, and so soften their encounter. But she and her supporters race over this moment to emphasize Everard's supposed exploitation and Mildred's continued ill-usage.

Mildred shores her support with one self-effacing remark after another, sincerely voiced, we feel, yet too frequent not to inspire the sense that she is asking to be contradicted. So the reader cannot read her pattern of self-diminishment, or her affirmations of self-sufficiency, at face value, as one is asked to. Most of Mildred's assumptions of personal insignificance are introspectively narrated, but when she finally voices one she gets the

expected reassuring response. When she mentions to Helena and Rocky that she had seen Everard Bone at a lunchtime church service, Helena asks if she spoke to him:

'Oh, no, I don't think he saw me, or if he did he didn't recognise me. People don't, you know. I suppose there's really nothing outstanding about me.'

'Dear Miss Lathbury,' Rocky smiled, 'how completely untrue!'

Once more I was transported to the terrace of the Admiral's villa and took my place among the little group of Wren officers. Naturally, I did not know what to say. (55)

Helena had struck a sensitive chord in Mildred with her casual reference to the "dreary Wren officers in ill-fitting white uniforms" who Rocky entertained in Italy. Mildred's reference to them becomes the mental image she has trained herself to recall to remind herself that Rocky's charm is impersonal and automatic.⁹ Certainly "I don't think he saw me" would have been the straightforward answer to Helena's question, but her qualification, her personalizing the encounter, effectively exploits it and draws attention to herself. This is evidence of the narcissistic self-pity to which Byatt alludes. Any reasonably polite person would

⁹ I count seven such instances in the course of the novel (19, 44, 38, 58, 75, 106, 172).

have responded as Rocky did, so it almost feels as if he had been set up to be charged with social insincerity (the emphatic "Dear" reads as exaggerated affectation), as Everard and Mr. Mallett are set up to seem meanly insensitive. This in turn evidences the malice to which Byatt alludes, since such a pattern of indirect belittlement (here, of Rocky) as Mildred practices effectively implicates her as the insensitive, egoistic personality who reduces others, not they her.

The reader, aware of the potential for gentle hypocrisy in Rocky's assurance (just as in Mildred's "I shall look forward to hearing your paper" to Everard) would still appreciate that Rocky must like Mildred. Helena will tell her later that, unlike the Wren officers, Mildred has "seen him much more as he really is." And she adds, "I know he likes you very much. He has said so several times" (182). Helena says this with apparent generosity, when she and Rocky are estranged (they will later reconcile). But Mildred finds "very little consolation" in hearing it.

It seems surprising and a little perverse that she finds no pleasure in hearing of Rocky's regard and knowing it not to be a reflex of his freer charm. Presumably she is disappointed because the nature of his regard is friendly, not romantic. Her emotional bias clouds her recognition and appreciation of the sincerity of a feeling he expresses, not for the opportunity of emphasizing his own gallantry and

charm, but indirectly and generously.

Of all the men in Mildred's story, Rocky is the most important to her. She first meets him on his return from Italy when he arrives home in Helena's absence. Greeting him at the door, Mildred is almost speechless:

It was a good thing he began talking, for I am not used to meeting handsome men and I am afraid that I must have been staring at him rather rudely. And yet it was his manner that charmed me rather than his looks, though he was dark and elegant and had all those attributes that are usually considered to make a man handsome.

'How very nice of you to come down,' he said, and I could see, though it is impossible to put it into words, exactly what Helena had meant when she talked about him putting the awkward Wren officers at their ease. . . . (30)

While they chat, Helena returns with Everard on the occasion when he and Mildred are introduced. That night Mildred is troubled, not about Everard, but about Rocky:

. . . I remembered the Wren officers and I knew what it was that was worrying me. It was part of his charm that he could make people like that feel at ease. He must be rather a shallow sort of person really. (38)

Rocky does not seem to do much to warrant the judgment of shallow. In fact, the repetition of the word by Mildred at different points in the narrative, along with her self-conscious remembering of the Wren officers, suggests his "shallowness" is so difficult to confirm by what he does that it must be enacted in the repeated articulation of the word itself. When on holiday with her old roommate, Mildred meets a former Wren who knew Rocky. Conveniently, she confirms Mildred's judgment:

'People used to fall in love with him but it only lasted about a month or two, usually. After that one saw what a shallow kind of person he really was.' (114)

This affirmation of a judgment Mildred has formed before she has even met him serves to refresh her resolution to say to herself "'rather shallow sort of person'" whenever she sees Rocky, "so that [she] might stop [her]self from thinking too well of him" (116)--a resolution that might check the reader from automatically thinking too well of her. But the reader's criticism of the put-upon Mildred has been made to feel like a strained option in a novel that wants the reader to like her, and disapprove of Rocky.

In criticism of the novel, this alignment of sympathies predominates. For example, echoing Mildred's judgment, Weld agrees that, "[g]ood looks notwithstanding, [Rocky] proves himself glib and shallow" (88). She takes Mildred's

judgment at face value, as Griffin takes Mildred's interpretation of Mr. Mallett. But there is much evidence to contradict it.

Mildred mentions to Rocky her encounter with the former Wren officer. Though Mildred's physical description of the woman is helplessly vague, she hopes that her delicate suggestion that "[s]he may have been a little in love with you" might help Rocky remember her. When he gently admits, "[b]ut Mildred . . . there were so many," Mildred, seemingly for the vicarious reference to herself, probes his feelings (or non-feelings) toward the women he does not individually remember:

'Poor things,' I said lightly. 'Did you throw them any scraps of comfort? They may have been unhappy.'

'Oh, I'm sure they were,' he said earnestly, 'but that was hardly my fault. I was nice to them at the Admiral's cocktail parties, naturally, that was part of my duty. I'm afraid women take their pleasures very sadly. Few of them know how to run light-hearted flirtations--the nice ones, that is. They cling on to these little bits of romance that may have happened years ago. . . .' (137)

Rocky's dismissive recognition that the women were unhappy ("Oh, I'm sure they were") reveals, at the very least, an insightful awareness of their feelings, and the candor and

ease of his entire response suggests he has, in the past, reflected on, and come to an understanding of, his impact on women. Even though he does not seem to suffer that understanding (which might be to his credit), it is nonetheless finely seen. The collective sadness of the women, including Mildred, who presumably fall in love, not with Rocky after all, but with the romantic ideal he represents, is clearly not his fault. Surely his having been nice to them, whether his motive was grounded in virtue or duty, was both the least and the most he could do. And his insight about the sad way women take their pleasures is quite a touching and poignant one.¹⁰ Yet Mildred will not reflect generously on the truth of his reflection or how it might apply to her; nor will her advocates.

For the force of her narration, from beginning to end, is to insist that as a spinster, a representative of the unmarried woman, she is blindly and insensitively interpreted and exploited by others, who she in turn sees stereotypically, without a sense of her own injustice or contradiction. She also implies that, however vulnerable her feelings of neglect might make her, she herself is unillusioned. Early in her self-presentation, Mildred

¹⁰ Benet, introducing this passage, writes: "Rocky complains that women take their pleasures very sadly . . ." (38, emphasis mine). However, the context for his reflection does not, I think, imply a tone of complaint, either mocking or serious.

contrasts herself disadvantageously to Helena:

We were, superficially at any rate, a very unlikely pair to become friendly. She was fair-haired and pretty, gaily dressed in corduroy trousers and a bright jersey, while I, mousy and rather plain anyway, drew attention to these qualities with my shapeless overall and old fawn skirt. Let me hasten to add that I am not at all like Jane Eyre, who must have given hope to so many plain women who tell their stories in the first person, nor have I ever thought of myself as being like her. (7)

Though readers do not necessarily take her disclaimer at face value, the allusion to Jane Eyre not only establishes her literary credentials, but also suggests a wry, engaging skill in anticipating and preempting romantic interpretation. Her other recurring proof of clear-sightedness--her frequent imaging of the Wrens whenever she feels vulnerable to Rocky's charm--is a defensive way of insisting she hasn't lost touch.

So Rocky, like Mallett and Everard, but to a greater degree, seems set up. The narrative coercion is at its most insistent and compressed in a chapter near the end of the novel which describes Rocky and Mildred's last tête-à-tête after he returns from the country to rejoin Helena. They refer obliquely to the power of his charm when Rocky asks

Mildred, alluding to Helena's disillusioned passion for Everard Bone, if she "knows how that happens." Mildred, consciously erratic under the pressure of her own feelings for Rocky, responds:

'Yes, I think I can see how it could. Perhaps you meet a person and he quotes Matthew Arnold or some favourite poet to you in a churchyard, but naturally life can't be at all like that,' I said rather wildly. 'And he only did it because he felt it was expected of him. I mean, he isn't really like that at all.'

'It would certainly be difficult to live up to that, to quoting Matthew Arnold in churchyards,' said Rocky. 'But perhaps he was kind to you at a moment when you needed kindness--surely that's worth something?' (225)

In what seems a veiled reference to himself and Mildred, Rocky hints at his awareness of her unrealized, undeclared passion. Significantly, his concluding remark does not sound defensive (i.e., "surely that's worth something"); rather, it is a question laden with gentle intimacy, appealing uniquely to Mildred to understand his behavior generously. His charm seems not to be, then, or to have been, as unreflectively careless as Mildred has supposed--not oppositely vigilant, of course, but more honest than false.

But this is not a consideration the narrative will either endorse or encourage. Weld's conviction of Rocky's "shallowness" is made in a discussion of the passage that follows Rocky's gentle appeal. Mildred replies that "[c]ertainly" such kindness is worth something and thinks:

Once more, perhaps for the last time, I saw the Wren officers huddled together in an awkward little group on the terrace of the Admiral's villa. Rocky's kindness must surely have meant a great deal to them at that moment and perhaps some of them would never forget it as long as they lived. (Weld 89, EW 225)

Pointing to this passage as Mildred's "last poignant vision of the power and evanescence of his charm," Weld fails to recognize the essential contradiction she makes. Surely kindness that is remembered for a lifetime is hardly evanescent, but something uniquely fine. Rocky's ease with himself does not suggest he is necessarily shallow, nor oppositely deep; but personal ease in itself is a shallow basis on which to judge the character of a man who has betrayed his measure of sensitivity and awareness. Still, Mildred's narration has so energetically insisted on Rocky's shallowness that any evidence to the contrary goes unrecognized.

As noted, critics often uncritically repeat Mildred's judgments, taking her questionable authority for granted.

But when her unspoken narration is mimicked by other characters within the story (as, for example, by the Wren officer), the novel betrays the heavy-handedness that is responsible for such strained critical readings. In finally giving to Rocky words which echo Mildred's internal narration, to which he would not have access, it is clear that Pym has manipulated her text to accord with Mildred's (and Pym's) view of his and her respective characters.

Early in the novel, Mildred describes her first meeting with Helena, which occurs in the basement while they are throwing out trash. Chatting about the trying business of moving, Mildred explains:

Platitudes flowed easily from me, perhaps because, with my parochial experience, I know myself to be capable of dealing with most of the stock situations or even the great moments of life-- birth, marriage, death, the successful jumble sale, the garden fête spoilt by bad weather. . . .

(6)

Mildred's comic/ironic conflation of jumble sales and garden fêtes with births, deaths and marriages draws attention to her arch, comic wit, but as "information" about her life, it is not meant to be, nor is it, accurate. Throughout the course of the novel Mildred demonstrates no such varied proficiency. Though she does assist her friend Winifred and other parish women with a successful jumble sale, it is not

in the sense that, in the collective effort, she uniquely has had to "deal" with anything as overseer. There are no births in Excellent Women (indeed, as is typical of Pym novels, there are no infants or children at all). One death (of the president of Everard and Helena's anthropological society) is mentioned, but it is of no emotional or practical significance to Mildred or anyone else in the novel. There are no garden fêtes spoiled by bad weather; indeed, gardens seem decidedly remote from the postwar atmosphere of Excellent Women. And finally, contrary to the implied, easy confidence in her ability to deal with marriage, it is only reluctantly and at Helena's request (and with introspective complaint about being "exhausted with bearing other people's burdens" (207)) that she writes to Rocky telling him of Helena's regret and her desire to end their quarrel.

When Rocky returns, Mildred asks politely if he thought her writing interfering of her:

'Of course not. I know how you love contriving things,' he smiled. 'Births, deaths, marriages and all the rest of it.' (222)

Rocky's list of Mildred's "contrivances"--births, deaths, marriages--is too close to Mildred's early internal narration to be coincidental, particularly since, in the context of the novel, there is no basis for him to draw such a conclusion. To allude to her as authoritatively and

artfully "contriving" such events is ridiculous. Yet the congruence of his words to hers serves to confirm Mildred's judgment of his condescending (smiling) perception of her.

Though Mildred herself affects to the reader to resent others' intrusion on her in circumstances such as the Napiers' quarrel, she does not contradict Rocky's presumption, either to him or to the reader, resigning herself to an image she insists, by implication, has been thrust upon her by thoughtless others (e.g., Mallett, Everard, Rocky):

Perhaps I did love it [contriving things] as I always seemed to get involved in them, I thought with resignation; perhaps I really enjoyed other people's lives more than my own. (222)

The passage, which occurs near the end of the novel, continues in its heavy-handed way to validate Mildred's interpretation of Rocky and his disparaging view of her. When Rocky earlier departs alone for his country house after he and Helena quarrel, Mildred thinks:

I wondered if he would suggest that we had tea together before he went, but he did not say anything and somehow I did not feel inclined to offer to make any. I suppose I did not want him to remember me as the kind of person who was always making tea at moments of crisis. (166)

Similar to Rocky's reprisal of "births, deaths, and marriages," this reflection is resurrected in the same conversation to confirm yet again the infallibility of Mildred's judgment. After dimly conceding that she perhaps really enjoyed other people's lives more than her own, she "[can] feel Rocky looking at [her] intently." Raising her eyes to meet his, he asks:

'Mildred?'

'Yes?'

'I was hoping . . .'

'What were you hoping?'

'That you might suggest making a cup of tea.

You know how you always make a cup of tea on "occasions". That's one of the things I remember most about you, and surely this is an "occasion"?'

So he did remember me like that after all--a woman who was always making cups of tea. Well, there was nothing to be done about it now but to make one. (222)

The correspondence between his memory (which, in its "what I always remember most about you," implies an acquaintance much longer than the novel suggests) and her apprehension that he viewed her so serves once again to validate the reliability of her narration but, in so doing, undermines confidence in Pym's. Mildred wins the contest for sympathy in Excellent Women, unfairly.

Bruce Stovel indirectly suggests the basis for Pym's problems in Excellent Women in an essay entitled, "Subjective to Objective: A Career Pattern in Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Contemporary Women Novelists"--namely, the subjective involvement of the author.¹¹ Though I disagree with the division he makes in Pym's oeuvre (he too conveniently draws the subjective/objective line between those novels published before and after the 1977 "rediscovery"), I believe the distinction itself does locate Pym's problems in Excellent Women. In it, Pym betrays her struggle with personal feelings precipitated by her first, formative, romantic attachment.

During her term at Oxford (1931-1939), Pym fell in love with Henry Harvey, an undergraduate some years older than herself. Although they managed to salvage and maintain a lifelong friendship, her diaries reveal that Pym suffered deeply from a long-lived passion Harvey did not reciprocate. In her biography of Pym, Holt explains how in the summer of 1936 Pym returned to Oxford to help Harvey with his thesis. She quotes an entry from Pym's journal which shows the confluence of her feelings of affection and longing with feelings of complaint and subdued accusation:

¹¹ Besides Pym, the other contemporary novelists Stovel considers are Margaret Drabble and Doris Lessing.

I remember . . . [sic] typing Chapter III, all that complicated stuff about the 1680 Catalogue, which I didn't very well understand. . . . [sic] The last day of all I worked all through the night. . . . [sic] And at about six o'clock in the morning, I tucked him up in an armchair with a rug, while I went through one of the copies marking in notes. Without me he couldn't have done the thing at all. I can say this knowing it is true. Between seven and nine . . . [sic] he dictated the last pages of the chapter on the Account. I have been given a taste of how lovely things could be with Henry.

He will be back in Oxford today and I shan't be at the flat to make tea for him. I can't help hoping that he will realise this, but naturally he will only look upon it as a fact, it will have no sentimental significance. (60)

This last reflection, in which Pym seems to struggle to understand Harvey's imagined (non)response as simply different (in the current men-are-from-Mars-women-are-from-Venus view), not unfeeling, is mirrored in Excellent Women.¹² Mildred, feeling the desolation of Rocky's absence

¹² Pym similarly (and patronizingly) reflects in a 1964 journal entry on the insensitivity of men who subject women, who are presumably themselves overlooked, to their praise of other women: "And yet men don't do it maliciously, just in

after his departure for the country, picks up a volume of Christina Rossetti's poems and reads the verse:

Better by far you should forget and smile,
Than that you should remember and be sad....

and reflects:

It was easy enough to read those lines and to be glad at his smiling but harder to tell myself that there would never be any question of anything else. It would simply not occur to him to be sad.

(171)

"It would simply not occur to him to be sad" mimics the reflection from Pym's diary that for Harvey her own absence would be only a fact in which feelings would not be involved; it would simply not occur to him to miss her.

There is a felt attempt in both suppositions to appreciate that the men being considered, real and fictional, do not intend unkindness. Still, the struggle against believing that such neglect is cruelly insensitive and blamable is one that is never finally won. With its "he couldn't have done it without me," Pym's diary entry suggests the undercurrent of blame and accusation that informs her portrait of Rocky and supports Byatt's apprehension of narcissistic malice and self-pity in Pym's work. It also solicits "the generous sympathy for the

their simplicity" (VPE 225).

unperceived virtue or agony for the excellent woman whose need for love goes unrequited and unremarked," sympathy that Pym earned in her personal life.

Holt's commentary on Pym's lingering sense of injury describes the sympathy of a mutual friend:

A letter from Jock [Robert Liddell] deplored Henry's lack of appreciation and wished for ["]an occasional careless admission that no one else could or would have done what you did and praise of your silence. . . .["]
(60)

It is clear that the position of the exploited and adoring lover is one that enjoys the solace and indignant support of understandably sympathetic friends.

Holt herself makes the connection between Pym's position and Mildred's (though in this instance Harvey is not Rocky but Everard Bone). She writes:

The theme of the woman--the girlfriend or the wife --typing the thesis, reading the proofs, making the index, doing all those thankless tasks and being taken for granted, is a recurring one in Barbara's novels.

Holt follows with this passage from the novel in which Everard solicits Mildred's help with typing his manuscript for a book he is writing:

'Perhaps you could help me with the index too? Reading proofs for a long stretch gets a little boring. The index would make a nice change for you.'

'Yes, it would certainly make a nice change,' I agreed. And before long I should be certain to find myself at his sink peeling potatoes and washing up; that would be a nice change when both proof-reading and indexing began to pall. Was any man worth this burden? (Holt 60, EW 255)

The answer to such a question could only be "no."

Pym clearly intended that Rocky be read as the shallow, comic, and ridiculous character critics often take him to be. She writes to Harvey in 1952 after the book is released supposing "every man I have ever known will see himself as Rocky (the rather shallow character)" (VPE 188, emphasis mine). And looking back years later she reflects that,

[w]hen that novel was published, it amused me to find that several men I knew identified themselves with Rocky! Of course, he was really a composite figure of at least three people. I wonder if one's friends are as eager to claim identity with a comic or ridiculous character?! (qtd. in Weld 89, emphasis mine)

Pym's surprise and amusement that men she knew identified themselves with Rocky seems disingenuous in light of her

earlier prediction to Harvey that she anticipated this response.

Pym's personal feelings were clearly not put to good use in Excellent Women. In a thoughtful appreciation of Pym's work generally within his review of A Very Private Eye, Peter Ackroyd rightly excepts Excellent Women from unqualified praise for this reason:

. . . if a novel such as Excellent Women has a flaw, it is . . . this insistent thin and grey note . . . The characters (one thinks) are being destroyed by their circumstances, and yet surely they enjoy being so destroyed? The cards are always stacked against women like . . . Mildred, but sometimes one tires of seeing those cards laid out like a more than usually protracted game of patience . . . it is almost as if [Pym's] deliberate invention of herself spills over into the novels and so on occasion renders them heavy-handed.

Though the pain of unsuccessful relationships led Pym to ridicule in her novel the careless qualities of the men who had hurt her, she could not fail to register the attractive ones that may, after all, have initially endeared them to her. Had she achieved sufficient distance from her feelings to recognize this at the time she wrote Excellent

Women, it might have been a work as rich and complex in tone and achievement as Some Tame Gazelle and Quartet in Autumn, the former begun over twenty years before Excellent Women, the latter written over twenty years later.

Looking for a sense of progression, Stovel sees Excellent Women as part of the group of subjective Pym novels. Cotsell oppositely believes:

It is a sign of Pym's development as a writer that the novels of this period [which begins with Excellent Women] are significantly less autobiographical than the novels prior to them, or, rather, since autobiographical elements can be discovered in them all, they are less constrained by their author's needs. . . . (45)¹³

Though Stovel and Cotsell consider Pym's career from the same, if not identical, perspectives (that is, according to the degree of the author's subjective involvement), they classify many of the novels, and Excellent Women in particular, oppositely.

The contradiction results, I think, from the assumption that the work of a good writer necessarily shows signs of linear maturation from one novel to the next. But such a pattern of progress does not apply to Pym who seemed to

¹³ The novels prior to Excellent Women to which Cotsell refers are Some Tame Gazelle, Crampton Hodnet, and her juvenilia.

think not in terms of how she might improve on what she had done, but in terms of what she would do next. Her particular art was born in her response to the needs of each story she set out to tell. This was discovered in the analyses of Some Tame Gazelle and Quartet in Autumn, in which her response to those needs is reflected at the level of language. But in Excellent Women, Pym responds less to the needs of her story than to the needs of her personal self, "writing something painful out of her system." And this results in a novel whose prose lacks the subtle richness of Some Tame Gazelle, Quartet in Autumn and Jane and Prudence (to be discussed in the next chapter), as well as of her other novels.

My critical response to Excellent Women stands in ironic contrast to its reputation as "the most generally popular of all her novels. . . . the novel that one recommends new Pym readers to begin with" (Holt 160). Cooley agrees with Holt saying, "[i]f one were going to read only a single Pym novel, Excellent Women would be a good choice" ("Barbara Pym" 367). My analysis also contradicts the appreciation of Lord David Cecil in the 1977 Times Literary Supplement survey, in which he specifically names it (along with A Glass of Blessings) as "[one of the] finest examples of high comedy to have appeared in England during the past seventy-five years" (67). Still, I think the

discrepancy between the book's popular/critical reputation and my analysis--though real enough--is not as perplexing as it seems.

The ambiguity of Pym's reputation rests on her appeal to a popular audience as well as to a critical/academic one; and casual and critical readers alike (however permeable this distinction) have enjoyed Excellent Women. Some cite its comedy (e.g., Cecil), others its wit, others its poignancy, etc. Cooley explains his choice of Excellent Women as a representative Pym novel by referring to its use of "[a]ll the elements in the Pym mixture, including moments of real farce," a "balance of comedy and realism," and "a masterful picture of the London of Anglican parishes and gentlefolk in reduced circumstances" (367). According to Cooley's thematic/literary criteria, Excellent Women is a representative Pym novel. For its sharp characterizations, for the "high comedy" Cecil enjoyed, it is a funny novel. And for the unwavering sadness of Mildred, it is a poignant one. But for a "bitterness that refuses to show its hand," it is a strained one.¹⁴

¹⁴ The phrase is Anita Brookner's. In a review of Robert Emmet Long's Barbara Pym (a review that drifts into a negative reflection on Pym very much like Byatt's), Brookner wrote that the "vociferous" and "partisan" response to Pym could not "provide the reflection" necessary to recognize the preoccupations, including bitterness toward the men to whom she devoted himself, that Pym transferred to her novels. I believe that that bitterness was often recognized, but just as often "forgiven" (see Rossen's comments, p. 116, above).

When in her review Byatt poses the condescending question, "Why, therefore this sudden blossoming of critical attention to Pym's oeuvre?", she hints that her own opinion may be as much a reaction against the indiscriminating applause of the post-1977 rediscovery as it is itself an unprovoked and unemotional critical appraisal. Perhaps Byatt's antipathy would not have been so harsh and itself emotional (e.g., she refers to Pym's "unlikely allies," presumably Larkin and Cecil, as "fogies") if Pym had earlier received measured critical attention. That is what this study has tried to give her. Reading Barbara Pym most often provides opportunities for lasting pleasures and satisfactions, but it could also uncharacteristically disappoint.

In the case of Excellent Women, the din of popular appeal made it difficult to apprehend the strained quality of its artistry. But in the case of Jane and Prudence, the force of popular opinion deafened critics to that novel's unique achievement--that is, to its ironic and subtle interrogation of the very standards, popular and critical, according to which the novel was promoted. As always, yielding to the tone and movement of each novel is the key to reading Barbara Pym.

Chapter 4: Jane and Prudence

In Jane and Prudence, more than in any of her other novels, Pym signals her ironic awareness that the "full" life is a dangerous concept bringing unnecessary, but significant, pressure to bear on modern women. She shows this through a story that demonstrates characters finding contentment in lives that would commonly be considered as failed and/or without focus. Yet Pym's ironic, questioning slant on what constitutes a full life is missed by the book's enthusiastic promoters and reviewers because the issue of the full life as an issue that the book interrogates is not recognized; thus, the back cover of Harper & Row's Perennial paperback edition of Jane and Prudence (1982) features an excerpt from an anonymous New Yorker review describing Prudence as one who, "at twenty-nine, has achieved nothing in life but a dull research job in London and a string of dud affairs," and Jane as "cheerfully conceded[ing] that she is an incompetent housewife, but hop[ing] that the move to a rural parish may transform her into a Trollopean vicar's wife, as well as a crafty matchmaker." The emphasis on achievement, on what someone has to "show" for herself, reveals that the full, successful life is an unquestioned value for the critic who writes the review and for the popular book-buying public her comment is meant to interest.

But these descriptions are not accurate or appropriate. Rather, they are misleading interpretations of each character which project trendy, modern preoccupations. Though Pym does show that Jane and Prudence are separately aware of the socially-imposed task to demonstrate a successful life, and though she shows them responding, with the appropriate anxiety (secular guilt) to this pressure, each woman reveals a solid core of contentment with her "underachieved" life. Any feelings of free-floating despair and loss they also betray are presented as the inevitable portion of any woman who, remaining open to life's possibilities, is vulnerable to its privations, and to its unfulfilled, indefinable longings.

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the New Yorker review sported by the cover of Harper & Row's paperback edition, since, in its summary of the novel, it ironically assumes as valuable those criteria for the full life that Pym's novel contradicts. The publisher's decision to use the excerpt as a promotional tag for the book's jacket neatly attests to the strength of a cultural understanding that is shared by the reviewer and the book-buying public. After a discussion of the factual, interpretive inaccuracies of this New Yorker review and how these serve to misrepresent the novel, I will trace the pressure to achieve an ideal called the full life as it acts upon Jane and Prudence in the novel's opening chapter. It

will then be seen that what Pym actually shows in the context of the novel, in the romantic un-romance of Prudence and an attractive widower, and in the unambitious, but largely joyful life of Jane, are people finding the quiet side of joy in unexciting lives, rewarded by the curious comfort of "the daily round, the common task," as these subsist in both country and city. Having demonstrated Pym's startlingly complacent slant on the modest satisfactions informing the "full" lives of Jane and Prudence, this chapter will conclude with an example of critical misreading of Pym's text that seems to result from measuring its story according to unexamined assumptions on what constitutes the full life.

The New Yorker review, a necessarily short contribution to the "Books Briefly Noted" column of that magazine, is not a studied analysis but a quick recommendation based on a dominant feature of the novel reviewed. All but one sentence and three minor parenthetical qualifiers of the review appear on the paperback, as follows:

The setting of this very funny novel, one of Barbara Pym's earliest, is an English village, where Jane's husband is the newly appointed vicar, and where Prudence will pay Jane a visit and find herself courted by a fatuous young widower. Prudence, at twenty-nine, has achieved nothing in

life but a dull research job in London and a string of dud affairs; Jane, now in her forties, was Prudence's tutor at Oxford. Jane cheerfully concedes that she is an incompetent housewife, but she hopes that the move to a rural parish may transform her into a Trollopean vicar's wife, as well as a crafty matchmaker. There are many comic complications here, as Jane learns that matchmaking has as many pitfalls as does housewifery.

The review basically recommends the book for its comedy. But the comedy appreciated by the reviewer seems to be found in absurdities of character (a story about a loser and a cheerful misfit) and plot ("there are many comic complications here"). Character misappraisals inform the failure to apprehend the more subtle source of the book's comedy which is more like the humor of "The Emperor's New Clothes": in the novel, what we take for evidence of the fashionably full, romantic life is exposed, like the emperor's "clothes," to be an absurd and insubstantial fiction. All of the novels have the "how-silly-we-are" humor of Andersen's fairy tale, an element which determines Pym's failure to intrude or imply moral or psychoanalytic judgment with her sharp depiction of human foibles. When her tolerant, humorous tone is missed, criticism, as will be shown, becomes inappropriately strident.

Jane is described "as cheerfully conceded[ing] that she is an incompetent housewife," and this is certainly true. But she does not "[hope] that the move to a rural parish may transform her into a Trollopean vicar's wife, as well as a crafty matchmaker." One passage in the novel on which the reviewer apparently bases her claim is this one:

When she and Nicholas were engaged Jane had taken great pleasure in imagining herself as a clergyman's wife, starting with Trollope and working through the Victorian novelists to the present-day gallant, cheerful wives, who ran large houses and families on far too little money and sometimes wrote articles about it in the Church Times. But she had been quickly disillusioned.

(8)

She had been quickly disillusioned, presumably at least nineteen years prior to the time of the novel, since her only daughter is eighteen-years old. Nor does Jane evince any desire to embrace matchmaking as an avocation; she merely wants to fix up a friend who tacitly cooperates with her efforts. Why, then, does the reviewer ascribe a hope to Jane which she had abandoned long ago, and an avocation which is not hers?

On the literary level, the bestowal of some aspiration to a major character suggests the presence of plot--a traditional, popular feature of novels, conspicuously weak

in Pym. There is very little plot to Jane and Prudence. The little there is may be attributed to divining the outcome of the romance between Prudence and Fabian Driver, the handsome, narcissistic widower in Jane's new village. Pym, however, dissipates any suspense in that intrigue almost at its inception. During their first informal date having drinks at a bar,

[the] conversation [of Prudence and Fabian] did not improve very much even with strong drink, though they gradually became more relaxed and their eyes met so often in penetrating looks that it did not seem to matter that they had little to say to each other, or that Prudence found herself doing most of the talking. She had spent many such evenings in her life and had always enjoyed them; the time passed pleasantly until it was time to go home. (94)

In an amusingly arch glance at what seems an advertiser's view of romance (complete with penetrating looks by beautiful people), Pym herself casts a cold, "penetrating" eye on the meaningful looks she (and Prudence) know are meaningless. With the flimsy material of such looks, the prospect of romance of any emotional interest is not expected. It would not be fair to suggest a traditional romantic plot, then, in order to entice fairly prospective readers, and hint as the reviewer does at courtship

("Prudence . . . will find herself courted") and an attendant intimacy that is neither missed nor evidently desired by Prudence or Fabian. The passage, as suggested, flirts with but does not succumb to satire because Prudence, accustomed to the inadequate with men, seems genuinely to enjoy herself. The brief, comfortably stagy encounter suggests that much less often lies behind the ritual of romance than is generally pretended to or believed, and that this "less," though not oppositely intense or meaningfully penetrating, affords its own innocent pleasure.

There is no plot, then, attached to Prudence and her relationship with Fabian. But what about Jane and her presumed matchmaking and Trollopean aspirations? The attribution of a goal to the unambitious Jane becomes an effort to make her interesting on those terms in which it is assumed people are interesting--when they aspire to somehow change or better themselves and their lives. But though Jane does concede with a cheerful, though never cavalier, candor that she is an incompetent housewife, she and her husband Nicholas are largely complacent and accepting of her domestic shortcomings. Neither husband nor wife exaggerates the significance of them, and Jane is never shown embarking on any personal program to become a better housewife or to contrive substitute goals. Unprovoked by measuring eyes or standards, she is not personally insecure.

Prudence, too, described as a loser ("dull" job, "dud" affairs), is, like Jane, unconcerned, if not entirely oblivious, to matters of achievement. She takes her job as a matter of the routine of her days, a routine which, while not a particularly stimulating one, is not a stifling one either. Rather than looking forward to career changes or advancement, Prudence looks forward to the little pleasures, such as "[going] home in the evening to her pretty little flat," where she enjoys a gin and French followed by an elegant meal "not to be ashamed of" although she lives alone (47).

In sum, the reviewer's inaccurate comments on Jane and Prudence attribute to the novel the popular attractions of plot and motivation it does not in fact possess. No hint is made of the deeper concerns which the novel, like the best comedy, engages. But Jane and Prudence is as serious as well as a funny book, for it shows that people can be, and often are, happy with less than our culture encourages us to want in terms of romance, friendship, family, and career and the personal fulfillment that these are expected to provide. The particular comedy of Jane and Prudence adheres to the incidental exposure of the standards for the full life as they act carelessly upon the women, standards that comically, seriously, yet sometimes meanly, may work to subvert their contentment found in the recognition of the ready pleasures and satisfactions of life in place.

This is the discovery of Jane and Prudence. The novel opens with a scene of almost poetic contentment narrated in unpoetic prose:

Jane and Prudence were walking in the college garden before dinner. Their conversation came in excited little bursts, for Oxford is very lovely in midsummer, and the glimpses of grey towers through the trees and the river at their side moved them to reminiscences of earlier days. (7)

A gentle pace of aimless walking in a garden of soft impressions provokes the inner excitement the women reveal by the "excited little bursts" of their speech. A nostalgic mood may not seem consonant with the excitement and agitation betrayed by Jane and Prudence, but in Pym, it is the gentle pleasures and insights that both comfort and thrill. Thrilled, then, by soft impressions to fond reminiscence, each woman articulates her own memory in an unremarkable exchange that is nonetheless remarkable for the easy nature of the friendship it reveals. They converse idly:

'Ah, those delphiniums,' sighed Jane. 'I always used to think Nicholas's eyes were just that colour. But I suppose a middle-aged man--and he is that now, poor darling--can't have delphinium-blue eyes.'

'Those white roses always remind me of Laurence,' said Prudence, continuing on her own line. 'Once I remember him coming to call for me and picking me a white rose--and Miss Birkinshaw saw him from her window! It was like Beauty and the Beast,' she added. 'Not that Laurence was ugly. I always thought him rather attractive.'

'But you were certainly Beauty, Prue,' said Jane warmly. 'Oh, those days of wine and roses! They are not long.'

'And to think that we didn't really appreciate wine,' said Prudence. 'How innocent we were then and how happy!' (7)

The exchange suggests a friendship which seems blissfully uncomplicated, apparently based on nothing more than warm, fond feeling and shared memories, independent of any particular qualities, deeds, status, or personality traits of the other.

In its evocation of gentle, recollective mood, hushed excitement, and warm, unanxious friendship, the opening of Jane and Prudence is effectively, though not obviously, seductive. One reviewer registers this force as emerging from what is, for him, a startling opening dialogue:

As for me, I'm practically powerless against fiction where the first voice you hear says, "Ah, those delphiniums . . . I always used to think

Nicholas's eyes were just that colour. But I suppose a middle-aged man--and he is that now, poor darling--can't have delphinium-blue eyes." I mean, you don't hear palaver like that on the uptown express. (Harvey 56)

Though there is nothing particularly unreal or outdated about Jane's reflections, the pace of life on the New York City subway (or on the London Underground) makes it seem so. But it is this seeming that exposes the tyranny of modern culture, which implies, in its insistence on the hard business of personal and professional life, that even occasional musings such as Jane's are of another time or place--just as the reviewer of Some Tame Gazelle believed that novel's complacent depiction of toasts and teas unrealistic, though, in the case of Jane and Prudence, the reviewer is not skeptical or patronizing, but charmed. To him, "powerless" against a type of wistful reflection that is absent from his daily experience, Pym's novel is rare and seductive, and he is more than willing to yield. He may also be charmed by the irony of Jane's softly expressed, yet sharp recognition of the incongruity between a middle-aged man and the eyes she can no longer describe as delphinium-blue. That a tenderly-romantic woman may also comfortably retain the clear sight of the disillusioned is undoubtedly a rarity on any subway, in any city, or even in any country garden. This, too, is part of the Pymean real--there is a

romance that survives disillusion.

The reviewer's regret at what is missing from his purview is not, as it might be, a necessary constraint of place (the subway being generally scarce of delphiniums and gardens), but of mood, temperament and pace. Had his point been that location is critical, he would have fallen into the empty and obvious observation that you can't hear such musings on the subway. But "you don't hear palaver like that," idle chatter that is thoughtful, warm, intelligent, and bemused, prompts the reflective "why not?," surely not to invite recognition of the obvious restrictions of place, but of the sadder absence of mood and predilection. It is undoubtedly rare to hear life casually pondered with an irony free of trendy despair,¹ with a tender poignancy that escapes being maudlin and with a genial tempo that is curiously more startling than the accustomed speed of a

¹ Twentieth-century criticism sometimes recognizes despair and cynicism as an attitude self-consciously affected rather than an emotional or existential experience genuinely suffered. Orwell, for example, noted how the keynote of postwar writers was "tragic sense of life," an outlook, he noted, which characteristically flourishes in exceptionally comfortable times ("Inside" 232, 235). In a review of an exhibition of American Realist paintings, Updike attempts to preempt condescending criticism of its optimism when he defensively claims, "[t]o reproach the American Realists with optimism and euphemism [which he quotes no one as doing] is to denigrate the affirmative message art brings us all" ("Beyond" 22). In another review, Bayley contrasts the humor of Marquez to humor that is "self-consciously black, in the modern manner" ("Singing" 20). Stevens recognized the attitude when he patronized it as willfully dark in his poem, "Gubbinal": "Have it your way. / The world is ugly, / And the people are sad."

midtown express.

The fast world that impinges on the life of the reviewer also presses Pym's characters, but this imposition is delayed by the formal introduction of Jane and Prudence:

Prudence Bates was twenty-nine, an age that is often rather desperate for a woman who has not yet married. Jane Cleveland was forty-one, an age that may bring with it compensations unsuspected by the anxious woman of twenty-nine. If they seemed an unlikely pair to be walking together at a Reunion of Old Students . . . it was because their relationship had been that of tutor and pupil. For two years, when her husband had had a living just outside Oxford, Jane had gone back to her old college to help Miss Birkinshaw with the English students, and it was then that Prudence had become her pupil and remained her friend. (7-8)

In a startling contrast to the exhaustive character retrospectives that inform a typical Drabble or Brookner novel (e.g., Drabble's The Waterfall and The Middle Ground, Brookner's A Closed Eye and The Misalliance), Pym devotes one sentence each to the introduction of Jane and Prudence; two additional sentences will explain their "unlikely" connection and the one paragraph following (above beginning, "when she and Nicholas were engaged") describing Jane's

early hopes of heroic housewifery upon her marriage to Nicholas, basically completes all that will be known of the women's pasts. The effect of a narrative retrospective of such brevity is to announce a story that will focus on people as their days and feelings unfold; there will be no psychosocial analyzing from a present behavior to its source in earlier life, a practice so characteristic and expected of twentieth-century novels. The absence of such probing in Pym's novels does not so much betray the virtues of a literary or even a moral restraint, as a relaxation of psycho-literary constraints. Pym seems to find little interest in the endeavor to explore the problems of the "self," which distract one's gaze from the unending interests of daily life, abundant resources available to all who look about, rather than inside, themselves.² In Pym, as in Austen, "a mind lively and at ease can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer."³

The little the reader is told of Jane and Prudence by way of character introduction provides a literary case in point, for a close look may discover much and, according to

² Cotsell eloquently observes of this outward gaze as it relates to Pym's author-reader relationship: "It is one in which privacy is still maintained as it is between people who share an unspoken preference for expressing themselves by referring outwards with wit and sympathy to the life around, rather than directly inwards to the hungry heart" (92).

³ This quotation from Emma is the source for the title of Robert Liddell's book on Pym, A Mind at Ease.

one's taste, much of interest. The detail of age is certainly a basic and useful, if prosaic and uninspiring, way to begin describing a character. But as always in Pym the trivial detail is potentially the one to provoke deeper reflection, and this the narrative affords in its attendant (and characteristically brief) reflections on the ages of Jane and Prudence. Prudence is at an age "that is often rather desperate for a woman who has not yet married"; Jane at an age "that may bring with it compensations unsuspected by the anxious woman of twenty-nine."

The tone of the descriptive clauses is humorous, yet sober and knowing. The humor rests in the clichéd image of an unmarried woman desperate from a want that, because not literally life-threatening, makes her seem silly. But this image of misplaced desperation is so qualified as to soften considerably the potential for dismissive mockery, and the description retains a sense of amusement tempered by generous thought. Without the qualifier, "often rather," the description would be more directly mocking of Prudence in particular and of the unmarried woman in general. But the narrative pause that is the felt effect of the qualifier informs the novel's general tone of reflection, a reflection that seems always to be moving comfortably with, and never impeding, the narrative pace and the easy tenor of life it depicts.

This tone of reflection provokes a gentle dialogue with the reader, inviting consideration not just of the characters' lives, but of life in general. Paradoxically, this effect of invitation, of coming closer to the characters by means of concerns that bind us with them (e.g., age), is the result of the narrative distancing from them. This effect is achieved by describing them in terms of something impersonal, age, rather than more closely in terms of their unique personality traits and eccentricities. If Pym had written more directly, "Prudence was desperate because she was twenty-nine, aging and unmarried, and Jane had compensations (for unfulfilled expectations/desires?) which Prudence could not know," the reader's unexamined response would likely be something like "and so?"--the essential response, as Forster described in Aspects of the Novel, to plot and story (130). It would also imply a tension or competition between the two women, a plot development the novel lacks. As has been noted, the Pym novel is conspicuously negligent of plot and its attendant prop, mystery or surprise (Forster 132). Instead, Pym's is a story that becomes more than a story in a searching dialogue and polite conversation with the reader. Consider again the effect of Pym's narrative choices. Her use of the doubly qualified indicative, "is often rather," sounds the faint tentative note of conversation that invites silent acquiescence; the conditional, "may bring with it

compensations," again, invites assent even as it allows dissent. The note of modesty communicated by the qualifier and the conditional is what makes persuasive descriptions that have become interpretations, i.e., dialogues.

The narrator of Henry James' The Wings of the Dove concedes of a lengthy description that "[s]uch impressions as we thus note . . . come and go, it must be granted, in very much less time than notation demands" (38; vol 2). Similarly, the reader of Jane and Prudence would not likely notice what this focused analysis does. But he would feel the effect of Pym's stylistic/narrative choices which delicately sound "things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out loud" (Woolf, "Sketch" 150).

Yet Pym is aware of the obstacles of convention, as insubstantial as the Emperor's new clothes yet as stupidly powerful as the collective opinion of his subjects, that threaten one's direct engagement with life. Consider the pressures which received ideas about the full, successful life bring to bear on Jane and Prudence. On the second page of a novel depicting tender reflections, absurd and then clichéd anxieties intrude. Jane, remembering her early failure to become the wife-heroine of a clergyman according to the prototypical standards of novels and newspapers, was again "conscious of failure" when "she realised that Flora was to be her only child,"

for her picture of herself as a clergyman's wife had included a large Victorian family like those in the novels of Miss Charlotte M. Yonge.

'At least I have had Flora, even though everybody else here has at least two children,' she said, speaking her thoughts aloud to anybody who happened to be within earshot.

'I haven't,' said Prudence a little coldly, for she was conscious on these occasions of being still unmarried. . . . (8)

The reader can appreciate the absurdity in Jane's unironic, referential use of her daughter as a kind of trophy to modestly successful fertility, but Prudence tellingly does not. For her part, she expresses an unamused defensiveness, "conscious on these occasions of being still unmarried." Emphasizing that Prudence's uneasiness is generated by the larger occasion rather than by Jane's more immediate, if unintended provocation, the narrative subtly locates the source of Prudence and Jane's uneasy self-measurement in the collective social experience of the reunion (for Jane, too, is prompted to 'count' her child against the evidently greater fertility of "everybody else here").

As of yet the provocation to which the women respond is internalized. Jane is the first to articulate her anxiety about having only one child to show for herself. Prudence follows with her feeling of "disconcertion" because her

beauty has not gained her the spouse that her unattractive classmates might boast. Jane, too, finds it odd that the elegant and beautiful Prudence is the one who has not married. Both women are confused because the romantic clichés of the culture in which they continue in part to think, measure and respond, fail to explain Prudence's bad luck in love. Still, in the drift of her reflection on Prudence, Jane lightly yet seriously questions both the truth of the cliché and the challenge it has in the example of Prudence, wondering if:

it [is] really better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all, when poor Prudence seemed to have lost so many times. For although she had been, and still was, very much admired, she had got into the way of preferring unsatisfactory love affairs to any others, so that it was becoming almost a bad habit. (9)

In the attempt to make sense of the oddity of Prudence's unmarried state, Jane falls into the easy lines of Tennyson's poem that have become a popularly-known reflection on love. Incorporating the poem's lines into the simple prose of her unarticulated thought, Jane calls the high romantic assertion to heel, and to heed the experience of the Prudences in a prosaically (not poetically) romantic world. The narrative here imparts a tone that is innocently irreverent. Inattentive to her easy dismissal of a clichéd

romantic truth, Jane/Pym pulls the reader along on a path of painless disillusion, without forcing the punishing embarrassment suffered by the Emperor's foolish subjects. Judgment for having been "taken in" by the romantic consolation that "it is better to have loved and lost" is withheld, especially since it is not romance itself that is deemed pretentious, but only the poetic or stagy forms by which it is characteristically recognized and enacted.

Despite the attention this analysis brings to bear on Jane's thought, her "wondering" is not a portentous one, but moves with the easy speed of the rhyme's alliteration. In a brief, unlyric, streamlet of consciousness, her reflection smoothly shifts from the consideration of Prudence as one who loses, to one of Prudence as "winner," who chooses her romantically-ambiguous state ("she had got into the way of preferring unsatisfactory love affairs"). Which is it, then? Is Prudence hurt in love and so to be pitied for her pain, or peculiar in love and so to be pitied (or dismissed) for her perversion? Is she victim or agent of her predicament? And is it a predicament?

The lines suggest further confusion at the narrative level as the narrative voice, sometimes distinct, also blends with Jane's. "It was odd, really, that she should not yet have married" is Jane's thought, as is the following line with its sympathetic, Jane-like epithet, "poor Prudence." But the voice that sees Prudence's romantic

history as a "bad habit" rings with the greater authority of the narrator, and the sentence beginning, "For although she had been, and still was, very much admired," sounds with the formal knowing of the reporting narrative voice. Yet this voice remains in tone consistent with Jane's, and the blending/shifting of voices creates the passing dialogue about losing and winning in love through which the reader has also moved. But the question is passed, not resolved, yielding to Jane's continuing reflections on Prudence and the reunion; the question itself (is it better, is it worse?), forgotten, becomes irrelevant.

As demonstrated in Jane (and in Belinda while gardening), internal musing in Pym is never so heavy, lofty, or self-conscious that it usurps the place, or impedes the flow, of daily life and its relentless, sometimes saving, intrusions. The intrusion to stem Jane's reflections on Prudence is their Oxford tutor, Miss Birkinshaw:

'So you have all married clergyman,' said Miss Birkinshaw in a clear voice from her end of the table. 'You, Maisie, and Jane and Elspeth and Sybil and Prudence . . .'

'No, Miss Birkinshaw,' said Prudence hastily. 'I haven't married at all.'

'Of course, I remember now--you and Eleanor Hitchens and Mollie Holmes are the only three in your year who didn't marry.'

'You make it sound dreadfully final,' said Jane.

'I'm sure there is hope for them all yet.'

'Well, Eleanor has her work at the Ministry, and Mollie the Settlement and her dogs, and Prudence, her work too . . . ' Miss Birkinshaw's tone seemed to lose a little of its incisiveness, for she could never remember what it was that Prudence was doing at any given moment. She liked her Old Students to be clearly labelled--the clergymen's wives, the other wives, and those who had 'fulfilled' themselves in less obvious ways, with novels or social work or a brilliant career in the Civil Service. Perhaps this last could be applied to Prudence? thought Miss Birkinshaw hopefully.

(9-10)

What is most telling in terms of this passage is Pym's use of quotation marks for the word "fulfilled" in the last paragraph, which, particularly within the context of the dialogue, highlights the issue of fulfillment as an issue that is being questioned. Miss Birkinshaw's mistaken belief that all her returning students had married (and had married clergyman), immediately explains the previously betrayed insecurities of Prudence. More tellingly, Jane, who has not failed of Miss Birkinshaw's happy definition, also feels insecure, anticipating, it seems, an endless refinement of the standard for fulfillment (e.g., once married, how many

children have you?). Jane, with her teasing consciousness of failure, suggests that notions of fulfillment are fictions disproved by the reality of her experience: being married, and married to a clergyman, presumably the type of husband who offers the safest and most predictable life (e.g., Edward Ferrars in Sense and Sensibility and Edmund Bertram in Mansfield Park) does not fulfillment make. (Predictability is, of course, a definitive attribute and advantage of clichéd expectations.)

The narrative's grammatical use of marriage as a verb in Miss Birkinshaw's observation ("so you have all married clergyman") suggests that marriage is an act to be achieved or done, rather than a state that may occur over time, which the adjectival usage would imply (e.g., "so, you are all married women now"). The difference determines that the question, "What have you done with your life?" will be the implicit theme of a reunion that is more stressful than convivial, for measuring achievement and, by implication, failure is a joyless affair.

Occupation and marital status are seen as defining forces that can earn the coveted label of the full life. Of course, such evidence is about as reliable as pointing to a smile on someone's face and assuming she is happy. But such signs as smiles, marriage and career carry the weight of established social usage to become the currency with which to advertise, like Prudence, or judge, like Miss Birkinshaw,

a life's value or fullness. In this manner, the authenticity of a full life as something that is both legitimately possible and valuable is undermined. This impoverishment of meaning for the full life is what Barthes describes in Mythologies when he writes of myth as a value (as the "full life" is for Miss Birkinshaw and her alumnae, and the New Yorker reviewer) for which truth is no guarantee. Barthes explains:

The signifier of myth presents itself in an ambiguous way: it is at the same time meaning [with a history] and form [without a history], full on one side and empty on the other. . . . in passing from the meaning to the form, the image loses some knowledge: the better to receive the knowledge in the concept. In actual fact, the knowledge contained in a mythical concept is confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations. (117, 119)

Jane may be seen as a signifier of the myth of a full life in terms of her marital status (marriage equals fulfillment), but one emptied of the personal history of her married life, a life that is full, as Barthes says, of meaning, but of meaning that may or may not guarantee the value of the myth. Still, the point on which Barthes insists is the power of myth to impress itself: "it does not matter," he says, "if one is later allowed to see

through the myth, its action is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations that may later belie it" (130). Thus, though Jane and Prudence can feel that the myth is inadequate to their experience, which is to say their history, they still remain vulnerable to its force.

Pym, of course, is a novelist, not a philosopher, and for her, humor is the best means to question the status quo. The silliness of Jane's absurdly patronizing, "I'm sure there is hope for them all yet" is determined by the silliness of Miss Birkinshaw's evocation, as Jane perceives it, of something "dreadfully final" about the lives of the unmarried women. Confusedly yielding to the standards of the full-life myth (which her own history problematizes), Jane must add to Prudence's discomfort, generally provoking the not-so-silly desperation of the twenty-nine-year-old unmarried woman. Still, the innocently-held myths of Jane and Miss Birkinshaw strike the comic, not the judgmental, note of how-not-to-be, so that the reader is led to think fulfillment not so much a wrong assumption as an absurd one. The power of Pym's humor to highlight human foibles through sympathetic characters who are not themselves fools informs the importance of her comedy.⁴

So Prudence, under the silly/serious pressure to

⁴ As one reviewer observes, Pym is like one of her characters in the ability to "[see] through people without feeling superior to them" (Broyard 10).

evidence fulfillment, adopts a pretense of invulnerable self-possession, projecting an ease about being single she does not entirely feel. Consider the way she responds to the patronizing comments of two (married) women about her work as personal assistant to the vague, middle-aged academic, Arthur Grampian, who serves as her latest "crush":

'It must be wonderful to feel that you have some part, however small, in his work,' said one of the clergymen's wives.

'I dare say you write quite a lot of his books for him,' said another. 'I often think work like that must be ample compensation for not being married,' she added in a patronising tone.

'I don't need compensation,' said Prudence lightly. 'I often think being married would be rather a nuisance. I've got a nice flat and am so used to living on my own I should hardly know what to do with a husband.' (10)

Feminist critics who would take Prudence's response at face value to suggest it depicts the self-possession of the happily unmarried woman miss the pretension in her cavalier tone.⁵ To doubt her sincerity in this instance is not to

⁵ Eager to claim too much for Prudence as a feminist heroine, Doan simplifies her and reduces Pym's text to the predictable argument between the married or single life, and so fails to consider how Pym problematizes the question altogether. Failing to recognize any measure of Prudence's posturing or ambivalence about being single, Doan asserts

suggest that Prudence is unhappy or neurotic about being single, but to recognize the significance of the affectation implied in her "light" tone. Provoked into a defensive posture by the pitying tone of the married women, Prudence must pretend to a satisfaction the experience of the reunion has already successfully shaken. But it is not simply a question of her lying or telling the truth about her satisfaction or dissatisfaction with her life, but of her being vulnerable to the possibilities and privations in the life she inhabits, just as Jane is. But to confidantes who come armed with condescension, Prudence has no choice but to evince invulnerability. So her light tone meets their superior one to become the stuff of posing, pretense, and style, about suggesting one is invulnerable to any needs that one cannot independently meet--qualities of the modern woman.⁶

unconvincingly that Pym "argues" through the character of Prudence for the rewarding lifestyle of the spinster (149).

⁶ I am reminded here of a passage from Adrienne Rich's essay "Claiming an Education," originally a talk at a woman's college, in which she exhorts her female audience to self-reliance, to "being able to say, with Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre: 'I have an inward treasure born with me, which can keep me alive if all the extraneous delights should be withheld or offered only at a price I cannot afford to give'" (Rich 233). Rich, in her eagerness to heroize the self-reliant woman who does not need "extraneous delights" (men/marriage is implicit), misrepresents the speaker of these words. In fact, they are not Jane's, but Rochester's, as he gives voice to the attitude which he rightly fears Jane would assume to resist their love (see Brontë 216-7). This posture of emotional self-sufficiency, which Rich regards as exemplary, becomes

The pairing of Jane and Prudence in this novel effects a playful observation of the differences between the modern (post-World War II) woman in Prudence and the traditional, community-bred woman in Jane. The character comparisons and contrasts Pym evokes, however, are not insistent in the thematically obvious way that much Pym criticism implies (as, for example, exemplifying the old-fashioned versus the modern woman, the married versus the single life, or the predictable "war between the sexes.")⁷ In the case of Jane and Prudence, they fail to recognize how the playful tone of the narrative resists the heavy hand of thematic explanations eager to account for the pairing.

Pym fails to set up any meaningful tension or pointed opposition between the two women that might call for the reader to compare and contrast them as, for example, Austen does with Elinor and Marianne in Sense and Sensibility. With a title to signal its concern with different, competing, qualities of behavior, Austen's text encourages the reader to feel Elinor's "sense" the superior and exemplary quality, despite the competing charm of Marianne's

just another role that a woman may feel pressured to realize in default of marriage. Prudence's "light" (i.e., disingenuous) claim (to an audience of women) that she "should hardly know what to do with a husband" suggests her response to this new pressure to exhibit, in lieu of a husband, the independently fulfilled life, now expected of the unmarried woman. (See p. 68, n. 17.)

⁷ I allude to the title of John Halperin's essay, "Barbara Pym and the War of the Sexes."

energy and enthusiasm; that Marianne should be more like Elinor is the lesson the novel enacts. In Pym's text, there is no suggestion that Prudence ought to be more like Jane. The inference may be drawn as some critics do, but Pym's text makes no such inference. The two women seem to find their differences, e.g., in the way they dress, baffling, but never with moral, social, or personally competitive undertones. Neither does the novel demonstrate anything so dramatic as a "war" or an "abyss" between the sexes, as some critics do. Weld, for example, believes that the novel uses such elements as food, "its preparation, consumption, and clean-up--to underscore the abyss separating the sexes" (99). Such a conclusion, however, is feelingly at odds with such chapter-ending (and so tone-setting) scenes as Jane and Nicholas, after a parish meeting,

[sitting] down on either side of the fire, two essentially good people, eating thick slices of bread spread with a paste made of 'prawns (and other fish)', Nicholas reading a book about tobacco-growing, and Jane wondering how she could make up for her tactlessness this evening. (138)

Such a scene might suggest Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay without the abyss of unspoken tensions characterizing Woolf's conjugal pair. Pym's couple is at ease being separate, together; just as in friendship are Jane and Prudence.

If Pym has a "point," thematic or otherwise, to make by the grouping of Jane and Prudence, it emerges from the tensions that are brought to bear upon them, not by the one on the other or by men on both, but by hurtful expectations for the full life invoked by Miss Birkinshaws, romantic fictions and book reviewers, and confusedly internalized by themselves. Each woman finds her equilibrium when she comfortably enjoys the life she inhabits.

The novel does not highlight oppositions (e.g., married versus single, men versus women) in the manner emphasized by some critics, but reveals instead the impact of personality and opportunity on the life one receives as much as one makes. Just as Belinda has not chosen to love the Archdeacon, Jane and Prudence have not chosen to be married or single at all; each has simply responded to her life and the options it offered, Jane through marriage to a man who had courted her in college, Prudence through noncommittal relationships to perhaps equally noncommittal men. Prudence's want of "better material" (which the narrator reports is the reason she focuses on the uninspiring Arthur Grampian) may suggest the impact of history on personal lives, personalities and loves, for there were many more women than men in post-World War II London.⁸ The chances,

⁸ Carol Whitney discusses this demographic imbalance and how it influenced the personalities and options of Pym's characters in her essay, "'Women Are So Terrifying These Days': Fear Between the Sexes in the World of Barbara Pym."

then, for a woman to meet any man certainly complicated her chances for meeting the "right" man. Significantly, the novel provides no evidence that, for all her real and exaggerated romantic history, Prudence has ever received a marriage proposal, or that she has ever been especially loved. Neither is there evidence that she would have refused an offer of marriage on a principle of remaining single, for Fabian and Jane believe that Prudence does expect to receive and to accept an offer from him.

Cotsell believes that "Prudence has made the wrong choices, and her self is held in an essentially defensive and brittle way, though it is not without its satisfactions" (61). In the book that I think generally the finest on Pym, Cotsell does not recognize here that, based on the evidence of the novel, Prudence has not made any choices at all. She simply agrees (or not) with the suggestions or invitations of others, a response some degrees less than choosing, in the abstract and decided way Cotsell implies when he refers to Prudence's unqualified (but for being wrong) choices.

For Prudence lacks, as the narrative rather candidly points out, better material. She has not been shown to be in a position to choose, but to take what life has to offer her and, in terms of men, this has been very little.⁹

⁹ As Jan Fergus notes, "[Pym's] heroines, despite jobs and higher education, often seem to have fewer options than Austen's heroines do" (122).

Still, her story makes it unclear if this lack disconcerts her less because she has no man than because she has no man to show. It may be that the pressures to demonstrate the romantic vitality of her life may subvert her experience of romantic vitality, keeping her on the surface of relationships. Still, the novel does not encourage the probing of a question it nonetheless subtly raises (just as Quartet in Autumn fails to probe the source of free-floating guilt) to privilege her unapologetic enjoyment of dinners out where the pattern of her thoughts rewrites the romantic moment:

The chicken will have that wonderful sauce with it, thought Prudence, looking into Fabian's eyes. She had ordered smoked salmon to begin with, and afterwards perhaps she would have some Brie, all creamy and delicious. (102)

Again, failing to appreciate the humor in this scene, Cotsell sees it as an example of "a sign of her [wrong] choice," attendance on herself in a sort of "fleshy narcissism" (61). He next observes that, "Pym allows Prudence a happy and hopeful ending, but what is most telling, after her disappointment with the clearly unsatisfactory Driver, is that she is obviously again going to make only a passing affair out of the relationship she has struck up with the young man at the office, Mr Manifold" (62). But to reflect the spirit of Pym's text, the sentence

should read, "Pym allows Prudence a happy and hopeful ending," without any attendant diminishment. There is no cause to detract from an ending for Prudence that is unambiguously happy, hopeful, and strong. At the novel's conclusion, Prudence turns down an invitation to dinner with Dr. Grampian, the nondescript, middle-aged employer she has absurdly idolized, for a date with a more suitable, younger co-worker (Mr. Manifold), suggesting to Grampian,

'You had better go and have dinner at your club.
Perhaps we could go out some other time?'

She stooped to turn out the gas-fire and then began tidying his desk. Let him go among the bishops to-night, she thought, suddenly overwhelmed by the richness of her life. We have many more evenings before us if we want them.

(222)

To end the book thus is to privilege Prudence's flush of joy and satisfaction with her life over what Cotsell neatly describes as her "self-defeating and facile modernism" (62). This last description is not without merit and I will return to it. But other judgments on Prudence are without merit, and are useful for distinguishing the novel's non-judgmental posture.

Cotsell believes that Prudence does not appreciate the ways in which "her friendship with Jane has blessed her" (62). Though it is hard to know from the text to which

failures in Prudence Cotsell alludes, there are minor, significantly tender examples to the contrary. Prudence thinks, "Darling Jane," as she notices an arrangement of winter flowers ("a solitary rose, a few Michaelmas daisies and a dahlia") with which Jane has dressed her bedside table when she comes to stay one weekend (80); she smiles warmly, thinking "Dear Jane," when she receives Jane's letter anxiously breaking the news of Fabian's surprising engagement to another (194). It seems Prudence does appreciate Jane, and we catch her showing that appreciation at those times when it means most: in her thoughts when she is alone and not acting under pressure to demonstrate her affection in self-aggrandizing words or gestures. Cotsell considers Jane "one of Pym's most lovable and amusing characters, a delightful centre of warmth and idiosyncrasy," candid, generous, comically unselfconscious, curious and romantic (62-3). But he does not like Prudence.¹⁰

It is this dislike that may account for the subtle misreadings to which I have alluded. Cotsell's apparent disapproval of Prudence as an insensitive friend mismanaging her life may stem partly from his invoking the contrast between the young, modern, self-concerned woman in Prudence

¹⁰ Though it has no bearing on purely textual misreadings, it is telling to note that Prudence, along with Wilmet Forsythe of A Glass of Blessings, was Pym's favorite character, more "real" to her than her displaced favorite, Catherine Oliphant of Less Than Angels (Holt 26).

with the middle-aged, traditional, other-concerned woman in Jane. This strategy is implicit in Cotsell's partly apt, but clearly negative description of Prudence in terms of her modernity, e.g., "her self-defeating and facile modernism" (emphasis mine). Ironically, however, he is still forced to challenge that modernity with modernity's own vocabulary and attendant assumptions about the inner, "self-defeating," "defensive" and "brittle" life of the self. It seems that widespread and casual use of the language of therapy makes it easier (more "facile") for Cotsell to reduce and patronizingly dismiss Prudence as a type, the impoverished product of soulless times.

Prudence surely does affect the breezy, superior, surface intellectual style of the "new," independent woman.¹¹ But the scenes in which she behaves in this manner are funny (a quality Cotsell surprisingly fails to notice), especially in the how-silly-she-is-(we-are) way that informs the novel's humor. One passage which provokes Cotsell to diminish Prudence's happy ending is when she explains to Jane why she likes Geoffrey Manifold:

'We get on quite well together. . . . I suppose it's the attraction of opposites really. But of course it wouldn't do at all.'

¹¹ Such women appear in almost every Pym novel: there is Helena Napier in Excellent Women, Agatha Hoccleve in Some Tame Gazelle, Prudence's friend, Eleanor Hitchens, in Jane and Prudence, and Beatrix Howick in A Few Green Leaves.

'Why wouldn't it?' asked Jane bluntly.

'Everything would be spoilt if anything came of it,' said Prudence seriously. 'Don't you see what I mean? That's almost the best thing about it.'

Jane felt very humble and inexperienced before such subtleties.

'Do you mean it's a kind of negative relationship like you once had with Arthur Grampian?' she asked, trying hard to appear intelligent and understanding.

'Oh, there's nothing negative about it. Quite the reverse! We shall probably hurt each other very much before it's finished, but we're doomed really.' There was a smile on Prudence's face as she said these words. . . . (216-17)

This conversation mirrors one that closes the novel's opening chapter when Prudence is describing for Jane her "relationship" with Arthur Grampian:

'It isn't so much what there is between us as what there isn't,' Prudence was saying; 'it's the negative relationship that's so hurtful, the complete lack of rapport, if you see what I mean.' 'You see underneath all this, I feel that there really is something, something positive....'
[sic]

Jane swallowed a yawn, but she was fond of Prudence and was determined to do what she could for her. (14-15)

The condescending, romantic psychobabble in which Prudence traffics aptly demonstrates the "facile modernism" that distresses Cotsell. But his judgment of Prudence as self-defeating is one the text does not endorse. Prudence is often silly (as is Jane), and she certainly does lack Jane's depth and maturity, but as the novel reveals, Prudence can feel and she can cry, and she can inspire the loyal fondness of the Jane Cotsell so admires.¹² Jane swallows a yawn, not contempt, at Prudence's unrelentingly abstract (and meaningless) analysis, and her unshaken fondness is the final note of the exchange, as if to forestall (unsuccessfully in this case) the dismissive response of a too-hasty Cotsell. As noted, Pym does not pit the traditional country wife against the urban single woman, either through the story of Jane and Prudence or the rhetoric of her narrative. She shows a friendship between such women, and, if modernity in Prudence is gently satirized (and I believe it is), the narrative continually emphasizes as exemplary the fond, amused, accepting response

¹² In this respect, Prudence is someone like Mr. Woodhouse and Miss Bates of Austen's Emma, characters, Trilling notes, whose claim "does not depend only upon what they do, but also . . . upon the way they are regarded and responded to" (48).

of Jane.

Though I have emphasized how Pym's humor guides the critical response away from heavy judgments, there are dark moments for each woman rendered without any humor or irony. In Prudence's dark moment of ambiguous need, she is alone preparing dinner in Jane's house, feeling sad and cross and provoked to tears by a trifle:

Jane hadn't even any long spaghetti, she thought, the tears coming into her eyes, only horrid little broken-up bits. Oh, my Love, she said to herself, sitting down at the scrubbed kitchen table, thoughts of Fabian and Arthur Grampian and others, Philip, Henry and Laurence from the distant past, coming into her mind. Then she thought of Geoffrey Manifold and how good he was to his aunt, and a sense of the sadness of life in general came over her, so that she almost forgot about Fabian refusing to walk with her in the twilight in case it should prejudice his chances of being elected to the Parochial Church Council. When Jane and Nicholas came back from Evensong they found her crouching on the floor in the dining-room, delving in the dark sideboard cupboard among the empty biscuit barrels and tarnished cruets for the sherry decanter. (174-75)

Prudence's surrender to sad and tender thoughts at a scrubbed kitchen table might be the material, but is significantly not the occasion here, for irony. The pace of the passage does not allow it. Distilling the passage into the action of its gerunds (e.g., the tears coming into her eyes, sitting down at the scrubbed kitchen table, thoughts . . . coming into her mind), discovers in the grammatical movement the emotional movement of Prudence's feelings. The corresponding subordination of the details, e.g., the spaghetti bits, the scrubbed kitchen table, and the parade of remembered or imagined suitors, minimizes the significance of those details (for in this instance the trivial is merely trivial), and shifts the emphasis to the poignant movement of Prudence's emotion. "Oh, my Love" sounds not as an appeal to any one man, but to the tenderness of an emotion she would communicate were there words or gestures or relationships in which to do so. Prudence's despair is found not to be rooted in romantic disappointment any more than it emerges from a peevish disappointment with a shabbily-stocked cupboard. Her feeling of "panic and emptiness" (to use Forster's expression from Howards End) expands with an accompanying tenderness to encompass the "general sadness of life," betraying a deeper longing that even the fondest marriage, ardent relationship, or challenging career, could not fulfill.

For Jane, too, academically talented (she had once published a book of essays), married to a man she loves, has her dark moment of despair and it is similarly vague. After a particularly mundane and unappetizing supper with her husband, she seems to succumb to her own generalized feelings of panic and emptiness. Under the pressure of these feelings, she begins to rummage through old notes on a minor poet she had once intended to "write-up," in an emotionally reckless attempt to suffocate her unsettling feelings in "creative work," in which, she silently intones, "nothing else mattered":

A line came into her head. Not one of those ravenous hours, but thee devours . . . [sic] If only she were one of these busy, useful women, who were always knitting or sewing. Then perhaps it wouldn't matter about the ravenous hours. She sat for a long time among the faded ink of her notebooks, brooding, until Nicholas came in with their Ovaltine on a tray and it was time to go to bed. (131)

Just as the passage with Prudence searching for the sherry decanter concludes a chapter, this passage concludes and creates the soft hush of another, but the chapters which follow them begin with such matter-of-fact scenes as, "[t]he next meeting of the Parochial Church Council . . ." (131). The rhythm of life and its daily routine will not efface

such moments of ambiguous distress, but will effortlessly deny such moments a dominance they do not naturally possess.

One morning soon after Jane's panic, she wanders in her garden feeling it "good to be alive, in the spring." Her easy pleasure prompts her to recall and to question the validity of her prior mood:

Not one of those ravenous hours, but thee devours?

Well, yes, that was still true, but it mattered less on a spring morning. She would cut some buds and bring them back into the house. (145)

In showing Jane's previous melancholy not to have continuing emotional consequence, Pym diminishes, at the level of narrative, the importance of plot, which also diminishes, at the level of story, the greater significance of unhappy feelings over joyful ones. Jane, as alive to the flowers of spring as to the delphiniums at Oxford, demonstrates that what matters most in the full life is fidelity to the gentle impulses of one's nature, whether they provoke reminiscence as at Oxford, vague regrets among scattered notes, or modest joy in a country garden. Jane recognizes but is not distressed by an inconsistency of feeling that is only apparent; for whatever the variety of her feelings and responses, there is the consistency that "each [is] honest and natural in [its] hour" (Emerson 35).¹³ The dark moments

¹³ Barbara Brothers recognizes that "[t]he happy endings of Pym's novels result from her characters'

in life are as true as the bright moments (or even the many colorless moments), but a responsiveness to the seasons of life, be they of nature or mood, informs the uneven texture of the fulfilled life, impossible to define (since something "full" will have its portion of "empty" moments), but uniquely possible to live.

accepting the rightness of their feelings over the correctness of social expectations" (161).

Conclusion

The first edition of Merriam Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature (1995), which is described as "a comprehensive and authoritative guide to the world of literature . . . from all eras and all parts of the world," includes an entry on Pym, describing her as "an English novelist, a recorder of post-World War II upper-middle-class life, whose elegant and satiric comedies of manners are marked by poignant observation and psychological insight" (917). It seems that Pym's place in the unfinished history of the twentieth-century novel is secure.

Despite this recognition, however, I do not believe, like Allen, that Pym's novels warrant further study of the type she suggests, e.g., a more rigorous analysis of the use of literary allusions or of "theme and technique" in individual novels (182). What I have tried to show is that Pym's novels resist this type of academic study, calling for criticism that responds to the unique claims of the text it addresses. Like most literature, Pym's novels may always support scholarship, but what they warrant is a wider and continuing readership, one that does not approach them with a view toward "doing" something with them, but with a view toward understanding what they do to/for/with the reader.

But Pym readers need never elect to "study" the novels for her impact to remain undiminished within the immeasurable, but enviable circumference of the reader's

personal response to Pym and her text. Yet even there the accidental discovery is possible.

At the Strand Bookstore in New York City, I purchased a hardcover Dutton edition of The Sweet Dove Died. In it, there is a personal dedication and a verse, neatly inscribed in an informal, but neat, calligraphic hand:

For freshest wits I know will soon be weary
Of any book, how grave so e'er it be,
Except it have odd matter, strange and merrie,
Well sauc'd with lies and glared all with glee.¹

Pym would no doubt have discovered in this glimpsed, anonymous exchange the rich material for a novel.

With obviously genuine appreciation and perception, this unknown reader has done Pym honor of the kind that could only delight her. It is my hope that this study, in different form, has done the same, for like the giver of her book, I too would share the pleasures of reading Barbara Pym.

¹ The inscription reads: "For Sharry[,] Christmas '81[,] JTS."

Works by Barbara Pym*
(in order of publication)

Some Tame Gazelle. London: Jonathan Cape, 1950; New York: Dutton, 1983.

Excellent Women. London: Jonathan Cape, 1952; New York: Dutton, 1978.

Jane and Prudence. London: Jonathan Cape, 1953; New York: Dutton, 1981.

Less Than Angels. London: Jonathan Cape, 1955; New York: Dutton, 1980.

A Glass of Blessings. London: Jonathan Cape, 1958; New York: Dutton, 1980.

No Fond Return of Love. London: Jonathan Cape, 1961; New York: Dutton, 1982.

Quartet in Autumn. London: Macmillan, 1977; New York: Dutton, 1978.

The Sweet Dove Died. London: Macmillan, 1978; New York: Dutton, 1979.

A Few Green Leaves. London: Macmillan, 1980; New York: Dutton, 1980.

An Unsuitable Attachment. London: Macmillan, 1982; New York: Dutton, 1982.

A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters. Edited by Hazel Holt and Hilary Pym. New York: Dutton, 1984.

Crampton Hodnet. London: Macmillan, 1985; New York: Dutton, 1985.

An Academic Question. London: Macmillan, 1986; New York: Dutton, 1986.

Civil to Strangers and Other Writings. New York: Dutton, 1987.

*All references to the novels are from the Dutton editions.

Works Cited

- Ackroyd, Peter. "Manufacturing Miss Pym." Rev. of A Very Private Eye: The Diaries, Letters and Notebooks of Barbara Pym, edited by Hazel Holt and Hilary Pym. Times Literary Supplement 3 Aug. 1984: 861.
- Allen, Orphia Jane. Barbara Pym: Writing a Life. Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1994.
- Barthes, Roland. Mythologies. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.
- Bayley, John. "Singing in the Rain." Rev. of Strange Pilgrims: Twelve Stories, by Gabriel García Marquez, translated by Edith Grossman, and Gabriel García Márquez: Solitude and Solidarity, by Michael Bell. New York Review of Books 17 Feb. 1994: 19-21.
- . "Where, Exactly, is the Pym World?" Salwak 50-7.
- Benet, Diana. Something to Love: Barbara Pym's Novels. Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1986.
- Bernstein, Michael André. "The Book of Unmonastic Life." Rev. of Uncollected Poems, by Rainer Maria Rilke, and Life of a Poet: Rainer Maria Rilke, by Ralph Freedman. New Republic 1 July 1996: 32-8.
- Booth, Wayne. The Rhetoric of Fiction. 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983.
- Bowman, Barbara. "Pym's Subversive Subtext: Private Irony and Shared Detachment." Rossen 82-94.
- Brontë, Charlotte. Jane Eyre. Modern Library. 1950.
- Brookner, Anita. "The Bitter Fruits of Rejection." Rev. of Barbara Pym, by Robert Emmet Long. Spectator 19 July 1986: 30-1.
- . Latecomers. New York: Pantheon Books, 1988.
- Broyard, Anatole. "A Funnier Jane Austen." Rev. of No Fond Return of Love, by Barbara Pym. New York Times 1 Jan. 1983: 10.
- Burkhart, Charles. The Pleasure of Miss Pym. Austin: U of Texas P, 1987.

- Byatt, A.S. "Marginal Lives." Rev. of An Academic Question, by Barbara Pym and Barbara Pym, by Robert Emmet Long. Times Literary Supplement 8 Aug. 1986: 862.
- Cecil, Lord David. "Reputations Revisited." Times Literary Supplement 21 Jan. 1977: 66-7.
- Cooley, Mason. "Barbara Pym." In British Writer, edited by George Stade. New York: Scribners, 1992. 363-85.
- . The Comic Art of Barbara Pym. New York: AMS Press, 1990.
- CotSELL, Michael. Barbara Pym. Macmillan Modern Novelists. London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's, 1989.
- Doan, Laura L. "Pym's Singular Interest: The Self as Spinster." In Old Maids to Radical Spinsters: Unmarried Women in the Twentieth-Century Novel, edited by Laura L. Doan. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1991. 139-154.
- . "Text and the Single Man: The Bachelor in Pym's Dual-Voiced Narrative." Rosson 63-81.
- Drabble, Margaret. The Ice Age. New York: Knopf, 1977.
- . The Middle Ground. New York: Knopf, 1980.
- Eliot, T.S. The Complete Poems and Plays: 1909-1950. New York: Harcourt, 1971.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Self-Reliance." In The Essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Modern Library. 1944. 27-54.
- Fergus, Jan. "A Glass of Blessings, Jane Austen's Emma, and Barbara Pym's Art of Allusion." Rosson 109-36.
- Forster, E.M. Aspects of the Novel. New York: Harcourt, 1927.
- Gaskell, Elizabeth. Wives and Daughters. Everyman's Library. 1966.
- Rev. of A Glass of Blessings, by Barbara Pym. British Book News 215 (1958): 491.
- Godwin, Gail. "Years of Neglect." Salwak 193.
- Gordon, Joan. "Cozy Heroines: Quotidian Bravery in Barbara

- Pym's Novels." Essays in Literature 16 (1989): 224-33.
- Griffin, Barbara. "Private Space and Self-Definition in Barbara Pym's Excellent Women." Essays in Literature 19 (1992): 132-43.
- Halperin, John. "Barbara Pym and the War of the Sexes." Salwak 88-100.
- Harvey, Stephen. Rev. of Jane and Prudence, by Barbara Pym. Village Voice 2 Dec. 1981: 56.
- Hazzard, Shirley. "Excellent Woman." Salwak 3.
- Holt, Hazel. A Lot to Ask: A Life of Barbara Pym. New York: Dutton, 1991.
- Hugh-Jones, Siriol. "Consolations for the Guilty." Rev. of No Fond Return of Love, by Barbara Pym. Tatler 15 Feb. 1961: 13.
- Huxley, Aldous. Crome Yellow. New York: Doran, 1922.
- Jacobs, Bruce Richard. "Elements of Satire in the Novels of Barbara Pym." DAI 49 (1988): 827A. Fordham U.
- James, Henry. The Wings of the Dove. New York: Schribner's, 1902.
- Rev. of Jane and Prudence, by Barbara Pym. New Yorker 2 Nov. 1981: 188.
- Jenkins, Elizabeth. "New Novels." Rev. of Some Tame Gazelle, by Barbara Pym. Guardian (Manchester) 26 May 1950: 19.
- Lane, Anthony. "Déjà Vu." Rev. of Blink, directed by Michael Apted. With Madeleine Stowe. 1994. New Yorker 14 Feb. 1994: 95-6.
- Larkin, Philip. "Reputations Revisited." Times Literary Supplement 21 Jan. 1977: 66-7.
- Lee, Sun-hee. "Love, Marriage, and Irony in Barbara Pym's Novels." DAI 52 (1991): 1340A. U of North Texas.
- Leighton, Betty. "Stead and Pym's Revival is a Cause for Rejoicing." Rev. of The Sweet Dove Died, et al., by Barbara Pym. Winston-Salem Journal 13 May 1979: C4.
- Liddell, Robert. A Mind at Ease: Barbara Pym and Her

- Novels. London: Owen, 1989.
- Little, Judy. "Humoring the Sentence: Women's Dialogic Comedy." In Women's Comic Visions, edited by June Sochen. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1991. 19-32.
- Lively, Penelope. "The World of Barbara Pym." Salwak 45-9.
- Lodge, David. "Mimesis and Diegesis in Modern Fiction." In After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism, by Lodge. London and New York: Routledge, 1990. 25-44.
- Long, Robert Emmet. Barbara Pym. New York: Ungar, 1987.
- Merriam-Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1995.
- Millay, Edna St. Vincent. Collected Sonnets. New York: Harper, 1988.
- Miller, Karl. "Ladies in Distress." Rev. of Excellent Women and Quartet in Autumn, by Barbara Pym, et al. New York Review of Books 9 Nov. 1979: 24-5.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. Human, All Too Human. Translated by Marion Faber, with Stephen Lehmann. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1986.
- . The Portable Nietzsche. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Viking, 1968.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy. Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 1986.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "Barbara Pym's Novelistic Genius." Salwak 43-4.
- Orwell, George. A Collection of Essays. Garden City: Doubleday, 1954.
- . "Dickens." Collection. 55-111.
- . "Inside the Whale." Collection. 215-56.
- Rich, Adrienne. "Claiming an Education." In On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, by Rich. New York: Norton, 1979. 231-5.
- Rosenberg, Harold. "Revolution and the Idea of Beauty." Encounter 1.3 (1953): 65-8.

- Rossen, Janice, ed. Independent Women: The Function of Gender in the Novels of Barbara Pym. Sussex: Harvester; New York: St. Martin's, 1988.
- . The World of Barbara Pym. London: Macmillan; New York: Dutton, 1988.
- Salwak, Dale, ed. The Life and Work of Barbara Pym. London: Macmillan; Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1987.
- Schiller, Friedrich. "On Simple and Sentimental Poetry." In Essays, Aesthetical and Philosophical, by Schiller. London, 1875. 262-332.
- Schulz, Muriel. "The Novelist as Anthropologist." Salwak 101-19.
- Shapiro, Anna. "The Resurrection of Barbara Pym." Saturday Review July/Aug. 1983: 29-31.
- Smith, Robert. "How Pleasant to Know Miss Pym." Ariel: A Review of International English Literature 2.4 (1971): 63-8.
- Snow, Lotus. "Literary Allusions in the Novels." Salwak 120-41.
- Spark, Muriel. Memento Mori. Philadelphia and New York: Lippincott, 1959.
- Stanley, Isabel Ashe Bonnyman. "The Anglican Clergy in the Novels of Barbara Pym." DAI 52 (1991): 929-30A. U of Tennessee.
- Stevens, Wallace. The Palm at the End of the Mind. Edited by Holly Stevens. New York: Vintage, 1972.
- Strauss-Noll, Mary. "Love and Marriage in the Novels." Salwak 72-87.
- Stovel, Bruce. "Subjective to Objective: A Career Pattern in Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Contemporary Women Novelists." Ariel: A Review of International English Literature 18.1 (1987): 55-61.
- Trilling, Lionel. "Emma and the Legend of Jane Austen." In Beyond Culture: Essays on Literature and Learning, by Trilling. New York: Viking Press, 1965. 31-55.
- Tyler, Anne. Rev. of No Fond Return of Love, by Barbara

- Pym. New York Times Book Review 13 Feb. 1983: 1,22.
- Updike, John. "Beyond the Picturesque." Rev. of American Impressionism and Realism: The Painting of Modern Life, 1885-1915, an exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, May 10-July 24, 1994. New York Review of Books June 23, 1994: 21-23.
- . "Lem and Pym." Rev. of Excellent Women and Quartet in Autumn, by Barbara Pym. New Yorker 26 Feb. 1979: 116-121.
- . "Novel Thoughts: Four Fiction Writers With Metaphysics on Their Minds," Rev. of Sophie's World: A Novel About the History of Philosophy, by Jostein Gaardner; The Thought Gang, by Tibor Fischer; The Romantic Movement: Sex, Shopping and the Novel, by Alain de Botton, and Galatea 2.2, by Richard Powers. New Yorker 21 & 28 Aug. 1995: 105-114.
- Wade, Rosalind. "Quarterly Fiction Review." Contemporary Review 232 (1978): 45-7.
- Weld, Annette. Barbara Pym and the Novel of Manners. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1992.
- White, Antonia. "New Novels." Rev. of Some Tame Gazelle, by Barbara Pym. New Statesman and Nation 1 July 1950: 21-2.
- Whitney, Carol Wilkinson. "'Women Are So Terrifying These Days': Fear Between the Sexes in the World of Barbara Pym." Essays in Literature 16 (1989): 71-84.
- Wood, James. "Aspic of the Novel." Rev. of A Private View, by Anita Brookner. New Republic 24 April 1995: 41-2.
- . "The Fact-checker." Rev. of Cross Channel, by Julian Barnes. New Republic 24 June 1996: 40-3.
- Woolf, Virginia. Collected Essays. 4 vols. London: Hogarth, 1966-7.
- . "Modern Fiction." Collected Essays. 2: 103-10.
- . "A Sketch of the Past." In Moments of Being, by Woolf, edited by Jeanne Schulkind. 2nd ed. New York: Harcourt, 1985. 66-159.
- . "Women and Fiction." Collected Essays. 2: 141-8.