

#### CHAPTER FIVE

All the privilege I claim for my own sex . . . is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone.

Jane Austen: *Persuasion*

The young woman has just read a novel by Rosamond Lehmann about the suffering of women in love - it makes her feel inferior as if she isn't capable of suffering so much.

Barbara Pym: *A Very Private Eye*

L'ironie est le fond du caractère de la Providence.

Honoré de Balzac: *Eugénie Grandet*



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5            A WORLD NOT WON BY VIRTUE

5.1          *A Start in Life*

Barbara Pym died in 1980; as if on cue, Anita Brookner produced her debut<sup>1</sup> *Bildungsroman*, the impeccably crafted, wryly astringent, tragi-comic *A Start in Life* in 1981.

The themes of the novel are themes common to the work of Barbara Pym. Ruth Weiss, the heroine of the novel, has been "ruined by literature", having taken as her role models the prissier Dickensian epitome of filial devotion, and Balzac's Eugénie Grandet. This theme is more stringently imposed upon the novel than Pym's random quotations and nomenclatural fervour, as is the theme of filial duty, which is central to *A Start in Life*. The novel is an acute study of loneliness and the need for love, and its denial through the selfishness of the lucky, the beautiful, and the manipulative. Expectations and illusions are countered by reality. Unlike Pym, however, Brookner intimates that a woman on her own is a pitiful creature: Brookner's women have little solace in the trivial round, and even the not so common task of considerable academic achievement is a poor substitute for romantic love. Brookner's view of academe is infinitely lonelier than the pettiness punctured by Pym's malicious jibes, and her continental setting and sombre European-Jewish household depict a world very different from Pym's, in which, even if the characters should venture abroad, their environment remains as comfortingly English as stewed tea.

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1    The pun is intentional, as *A Start in Life* was published in America as *The Debut*, a rather more literal translation of Balzac's *Un Début dans la Vie*.

In this densely packed and meticulously crafted novel, Brookner states her themes overtly at the outset. Pym's themes tend to emerge tentatively from the exigencies of the characters and mild plot; Brookner imposes her theme of "a life ruined by literature" in an arresting opening line, and any expectations which the reader might entertain of Cinderella-like wish fulfilment are roundly quashed in Brookner's elegant, encapsulating style. Brookner is given to aphoristic, authorial comment, much in the manner of her heroine, Ruth, who assiduously copies the odd maxim, gleaned from her studies in the library. We are introduced to Dr Ruth Weiss, aged 40, after the catastrophic event:

Dr Weiss, at forty, knew that her life had been ruined by literature.

In her thoughtful and academic way, she put it down to her faulty moral education which dictated, through the conflicting but in this one instance united agencies of her mother and father, that she ponder the careers of Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary, but that she emulate those of David Copperfield [sic] and Little Dorrit.

But really it had started much earlier than that, when, at an unremembered moment in her extreme infancy, she had fallen asleep, enraptured, as her nurse breathed the words, 'Cinderella shall go to the ball.'

The ball had never materialized (SL:7)<sup>1</sup>

Ruth Weiss also blames her looks on literature, and "she aimed, instinctively, at a slightly old-fashioned effect" (SL:8).

Ruth's misfortune is to expect, in the manner of David Copperfield and Little

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1 SL refers to BROOKNER, Anita. 1982. *A Start in Life*. London : Triad/Granada.

Dorrit, that virtue be rewarded, but she learns, through costly experience, that Balzac is closer to the truth:

But she was working on *Eugénie Grandet* and Balzac's unnervingly accurate assessment of Eugénie's innocent and hopeless love was making her uncomfortable, as it always did. '*Je ne suis pas assez belle pour lui.*'<sup>1</sup> Why had her nurse not read her a translation of *Eugénie Grandet*? The whole of life might have been different. For moral fortitude, as Dr Weiss knew, but never told her students, was quite irrelevant in the conduct of one's life; it was better, or in any event, easier, to be engaging. And attractive. Sometimes Dr Weiss perceived that her obsession with Balzac stemmed from the fact that he had revealed this knowledge to her, too late. She grieved over Eugénie, and this was the only permissible grief she allowed herself. Beyond the imposed limits it hovered, threatening, insinuating, subversive. Better to invite Ned to dinner again and tell him her theories about Eugénie's relations with her parents, whom she still blamed for the defection of Eugénie's lover. She was wrong to do so, she knew. For had not Balzac given the right explanation? '*Aussi, se dit-elle en se mirant, sans savoir encore ce qu'était l'amour: "Je suis trop laide, il ne fera pas attention à moi!"*' (SL:8-9).<sup>2</sup>

Brookner also gives an intimation of Ruth's ironic fate, when her narrative is described as "the stuff of literature itself" (SL:9), for, like in the novels of Balzac, Ruth's "great terror, great emotion" moves to its inexorable climax with the implacable momentum of Greek tragedy.

Ruth's early, cloistered childhood is described in claustrophobic detail. In this Brookner appears to have emulated Balzac, whose description of background is almost as important as his development of characters. Balzac once said that

1 I am not beautiful enough for him.

2 Also, she said to herself wonderingly, without yet knowing what love was, 'I am too ugly, he won't notice me.'

"the events of public and private life are intimately linked up with architecture", and consequently he portrayed the houses and rooms through which his characters move in such a way as to reveal their passions and desires. Ruth is provided with "sad but improving" books:

From Grimm and Hans Andersen she graduated to the works of Charles Dickens. The moral universe was unveiled. For virtue would surely triumph, patience would surely be rewarded. So eager was she to join this upward movement towards the light that she hardly noticed that her home resembled the ones she was reading about: a superficial veil of amusement over a deep well of disappointment (SL:11).

The Weiss household is presided over by her sombre, East European grandmother, whose "sad European past was a constant rebuke of her father George (born Georg) Weiss's desperately assumed English nonchalance" (SL:11). George is a ponderous, affable, rather dim dandy, who conducts a perennial, middle-aged honeymoon with Helen, a mythomaniacal *matinée* coquette, who is just a little past it. Like Pym, Brookner makes sedulous use of parallels and contrasts: the elder Mrs Weiss and Helen, Ruth and Helen, the dining room, over which Mrs Weiss presides, and the drawing-room and bedroom, where Helen holds sway:

Mrs Weiss had brought with her from Berlin pieces of furniture of incredible magnitude in dark woods which looked as though they had absorbed the blood of horses . . . To the child, it seemed as if all dining rooms must be dark, as if sodden with a miasma of gravy and tears. She imagined, across the unknown land, silent grandmothers, purple flock wallpaper, thunderous seascapes, heavy meats eaten at speed . . . if the dining room belonged to her grandmother, the drawing room was Helen's. It was light and bright and frivolous, and it had a piano and a lot of photographs in silver frames and cut glass vases filled with slightly stale flowers, and a white carpet. It looked

exactly like the set for one of Helen's more successful comedy roles and she used it as an extension of her dressing room . . . Her quarters seemed less substantial than the grandmother's. More alluring, but less safe (SL:12-13).

Pym is prone to vivid descriptions of houses, drawing-rooms and bedrooms, but Brookner's descriptions are more felling. Ruth, even as a young child, is cognizant of her absurd parents' dependence on illusion, rather than reality. Amidst the ridiculous, hectic, hothouse, honeymoon atmosphere of their ageing lives, "the child loved her parents passionately and knew them to be unsafe . . . To the child they were still glamorous and beautiful. To the grandmother they were fools" (SL:15-16). George, who is a dealer in rare books, although his temperament and intelligence fit him to sell cars or insurance instead, ironically provides Ruth with the wherewithal for her tragedy:

Her father kindly kept her supplied with books, usually in the Everyman edition, with its comfortable assurance in the fly-leaf: 'Everyman, I will go with thee, and be thy guide. In thy most need to go by thy side' (SL:17).

When the elder Mrs Weiss dies, reality punctures George and Helen's honeymoon hotel. George's acknowledgement of their change in fortunes revolves around his gastronomic wellbeing: "'There will be no dinner,' said George dully" (SL:17). Helen's remark is more ominous, as it hints at what is to come: "'And you need a rest, too, darling heart. Breakfast in bed for both of us, from now on'" (SL:18).

Mrs Cutler ("our darling Maggie") is installed as a housekeeper, whom Ruth instinctively recognises as "one of those louche women who thrive on the intimacy of couples" (SL:20). Mrs Cutler is a more ominous figure than Barbara

Pym's well-meaning cleaning women with their gratuitous advice to the excellent women to make the most of themselves. Mrs Cutler, a figure of "demotic blowsiness" (Duchêne, 1981:595), becomes a monstrous puppet master, an insidious manipulator, trading on the confidences of both her charges. Ruth retreats from this unhealthy ménage, revealing excellent woman tendencies in culinary matters:

When Helen came home from the studio, she would be so tired that she would go to bed for an hour or two. At seven o'clock Maggie would take in a whisky and soda for George and a gin and tonic for Helen and herself. The ashtrays filled steadily; it was just like the old days in Helen's dressing room. Sometimes Ruth would emerge from her room, where she was doing her homework, and penetrate the smoke, interrupting her mother in the middle of an anecdote to ask if there was any supper. She was seduced and alarmed by the sight of three grown-up people behaving as if they were having a midnight feast, her mother in bed in the daytime, her father sitting astride a chair, Mrs Cutler on the edge of the bed, a cigarette in her mouth, a smear of lipstick on her chin. 'All right, Ruth, you can be heating up some soup. Just for yourself. I'll have something later. As for these two, they're well away.' They doubled up again. How delightful, how lax, how vile! So Ruth took to getting her own food, instinctively skirting the expensive made-up pies and pâtés and tinned vegetables preferred by her father and mother and above all Mrs Cutler. She made herself eggs and boiled potatoes and salads, but this spinsterish fare did not sit well on the dining room table, was not worthy of the solemn oils and her grandmother's chair, so she took to eating in the kitchen (SL:19-20).

Brookner depicts Ruth's adolescence as a time of need, which only her father vaguely and uneasily recognises; however, he is a prisoner to Helen's needs:

But George's main job in life was to keep Helen happy, a task he now performed with the aid of Mrs Cutler, who seemed to have made it her purpose in life too. Meals were now eaten from trays, the three of them cosily jiggling it in the bedroom (SL:22).

School becomes a refuge, a sort of day nursery which caters to her material wants, if not her intellectual needs. Brookner's acute perspicacity is revealed by the remarks of a teacher, Miss Parker, who sees Ruth's only hope as:

to go to a university and become a scholar. It was her only hope because it was obvious that she needed to be taken into care . . . 'But I should like,' said Miss Parker to her colleague Mrs Brain, 'to subject her to an experiment. She may become a good scholar out of sheer love of the safety net beneath her. She may grow up and throw the whole thing away . . .!' (SL:23).

On meeting Ruth's parents, Miss Parker perceives her need to be pressing, and resolves to "put Ruth into the wholesome environment of a university library":

So George and Helen met Miss Parker. It was quite a while since they had been out together in the daytime and Ruth thought they were over-acting. George tucked Helen into the car as if bringing her home from hospital after childbirth. They both looked smart, anyway. It would be alright.

Miss Parker saw a rather uneasy couple. Why else should they hold hands? For protection? (SL:25).

While Helen, after involuntary retirement, becomes more closeted and bed-bound, Ruth's new academic life becomes an extension of her school days:

She was never happier than when taking notes, rather elaborate notes in different coloured ball-point pens, for the need to be doing something while reading, or with reading, was beginning to assert itself. Her essays, which she approached as many women approach a meeting with a potential lover, were well received. She was heartbroken when one came back with the words 'I cannot read your writing' on the bottom (SL:29).

Ruth's days are filled with lectures, tutorials, meals in sandwich bars, long walks in the streets of London, and work in the library at night - activities which keep her well away from the flat and its appalling inhabitants. In typical Pym fashion, she makes friends with one of the beautiful and the lucky, whom Brookner portrays with psychological acuity.

Anthea "had already run through the entire gamut of adult female experience, from promiscuity to dyed blonde streaks in the hair. She radiated sexual energy, had an eternal, almost professional smile on her beautiful mouth, and turned her intense charm on man and woman alike" (SL:32):

'But don't you ever go out?' asked her friend Anthea. For she was surprised to find that she made friends easily. She was of that placid appearance and benign or perhaps indifferent disposition that invites confidences, particularly from those too restless to harbour information. In many ways Anthea was like Helen: amusing, sharp-witted, light-weight and beautiful. Needing a foil or acolyte for her flirtatious popularity, she had found her way to Ruth unerringly; Ruth, needing the social protection of a glamorous friend, was grateful. Both were satisfied with the friendship although each was secretly bored by the other. Anthea's conversation consisted either of triumphant reminiscences - how she had spurned this one, accepted that one, how she had got the last pair of boots in Harrods' sale, how she had shed five pounds in a fortnight - or recommendations beginning 'Why don't you?' . . . These questions would be followed rapidly by variants beginning 'Why haven't you?' . . . It was as if her exigent temperament required immediate results (SL:30-31).

While Helen lies in bed, planning her autobiography which her lethargy prevents her from writing, Ruth has chosen "Vice and Virtue in Balzac's Novels" as the subject for her dissertation. Brookner's authorial comment is supremely ironic, for Ruth is positively dyslectic when it comes to reading the realities of her

own situation. "Balzac teaches the supreme effectiveness of bad behaviour, a matter which Ruth was beginning to perceive" (SL:33). The excellent women do not share the execrable taste in reading matter of the less excellent women, and Helen's only concession to serious reading is *Anna Karenina*. The boudoir café society is portrayed with malicious humour:

At home, things had become a little disquieting. Helen was out of work. At least, she had chosen to be. She had been offered a couple of parts as the heroine's mother and these she had spurned with hauteur. She rarely got dressed these days, preferring to lie on her bed in the caftan and bracelets, smoking and drinking cups of instant coffee brought in by Mrs Cutler. Like early theologians or doctors of the church, the two women would debate whether she should include this or that skirmish with a director, this or that love affair, in her autobiography. This now filled half of one of the notebooks that George had bought her two years before. As neither Helen nor Mrs Cutler possessed any literary gifts or were given to reading anything more serious than historical romances (though Helen still kept her old copy of *Anna Karenina* on the bedside table) the writing did not proceed. But points of content were hotly argued (SL:34).

An early intimation of Ruth's fate occurs when she falls in love with a peripatetic prig, which throws her into a whirl of activity. Once again, Brookner intimates that this Cinderella's hubris will exclude her from the ball:

Anthea's gesture was prompted by the fact that Richard was a prize beyond the expectations of most women and certainly beyond those of Ruth. He was one of those exceptionally beautiful men whose violent presence makes other men, however superior, look makeshift. Richard was famous on at least three counts. He had the unblemished blond good looks of his Scandinavian mother; he was a resolute Christian; and he had an ulcer. Women who had had no success with him assumed that the ulcer was a result of the Christianity, or indeed the way he professed it, for Richard, a psychologist by training, was a student counsellor, and would devote three days a week to answering the telephone and persuading anxious undergraduates

that it was all right to enjoy sex with every partner, or alternatively, that it didn't matter if you didn't. Then Richard would wing home to his parish and stay up for two whole nights answering the telephone to teenage dropouts, battered wives, recidivists, and alcoholics. There seemed to be no end to the amount of bad news he could absorb (SL:37-38).

Ruth, in temporarily absconding from her parents' stifling needs, does not effect a fair exchange:

'He's sick,' said Anthea . . . 'He can't have enough of other people's problems. He's insatiable. He doesn't recognize anybody's needs, only their demands. And he glories in it. It gives him the right to be more tired, more busy, more overworked than anyone he knows . . .'  
(SL:38-39).

Ruth's frenetic attempts to cut the tenuous umbilical cord which links her to her appalling parents entail moving into a flat and preparing a chicken casserole from *Larousse gastronomique* which engages two full chapters of the novel. One immediately is put in mind of Pym's chaste dinner parties, which the author uses as a setting for her skirmishes (battle being too fraught a word) of the sexes. Brookner builds up dramatic tension with each step of the preparation for this momentous event, which in typical Brookner style, is doomed to failure. Richard arrives late; the dinner is ruined; his sensibility triumphs over Ruth's sense, and he delivers the *coup de grâce*:

'Sometimes, Ruth,' he murmured, letting his golden-lashed eyelids slowly fall, 'I wonder if you're really a caring person' (SL:59).

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Ruth is still misled by Balzac: "*Je ne suis pas assez belle pour lui*" (SL:37), and authorial comment keeps the reader cognizant of the fact ahead of Ruth:

Had she but known it, her looks were beside the point; she was attractive enough for a clever woman, but it was principally as a clever woman that she was attractive (SL:37).

Ruth's tentative foray into some sort of independence is short-lived; her traumatic dinner party is enough to send her scurrying back to the claustrophobic flat, where the summer holidays are not conducive to work. This affords her the opportunity of aphoristic speculation at length:

Work was a refuge and she found herself unable to seek that particular sort of asylum. Work, she thought, was a paradox: it is the sort of thing people do out of sheer inability to do anything else. Work is the chosen avocation of those who have no other calls on their time (SL:67).

Meanwhile George has begun an affair of the stomach with Sally Jacobs, the new owner of the book shop. The immaculate kitsch of Mrs Jacobs's Bayswater flat is described with Brookner's customary comic gusto ("the effect was of entering a seraglio") (SL:61), and while George instals various home comforts from the electrical department of Peter Jones, he entertains mild erotic fantasies of hanging his towelling bathrobe beside hers in the bathroom.

George and Helen's seaside holiday with Molly, a stalwart but arthritic Christian Scientist, affords Brookner an increasingly tragic picture of Helen's detachment from reality. The absurd and rakish denim peaked cap which she dons becomes a symbol of her only link with reality, and Molly, the antithesis of Helen,

knows that the other woman is doomed by her sense of illusion, her inability to face the merest pin-pricks of reality. Like Dulcie and Viola's seaside holiday which is made tolerable by the purchase of a bottle of gin, Molly, the staunch adherent to Mrs Eddy's principles, is forced to relent:

Helen, with frozen hands, jammed on her peaked cap. They were all, for various reasons, subdued. Then Molly, against every principle she held dear, reached into her canvas hold-all and produced a bottle of gin.

Helen turned to her, with her beautiful smile restored. 'Molly, my darling, you are an angel. Always were. Never jealous or ratty. Not even when I had that little affair with Eric.'

Molly had not known about this. She had trusted her late husband implicitly. But she was a sensible woman; she saw in Helen's face the end of many love affairs. We shall none of us ever make love again, she thought, and did not much care. Life had not been too harsh. The sea would still be there at the end. She was nearly ready.

But Helen, she saw, would be taken unawares (SL:83).

Ruth is thrown upon the company of Mrs Cutler during her parents' holiday, and Mrs Cutler is not loath to swop her allegiance. On their return she realises just how far Helen has slipped into agoraphobia and total dependence, and mindful of her own well-being, opts for the more lucrative possibilities of a marriage bureau, thereby placing her own needs before Helen's. Ruth departs for Paris and life in a garret with Humphrey and Rhoda, two Anglo-French relies of the 'thirties, engrossed in their own needs, and whom Mrs Cutler rightly dismisses as a "dead loss". On Ruth's arrival at the rue des Marronniers, she finds that the loneliness of her existence is as nullifying as the loneliness of the stifling flat in London:

'Sounds like a dead loss to me,' said Mrs Cutler, who would be confirmed in her opinion if she ever met them. Rhoda, thin and beautiful like Helen, but much older, was dedicated to the preservation of Humphrey, who was even older and who was currently engaged on a life of the Duchesse de Berry (SL:76).

In Paris, Ruth is taken up by the next instalment of cadgers and scroungers. Hugh and Jill, "an unknown species" because they are happy, are the hares, who flaunt their marriage before the dazzled Ruth. In Pym's world, their clothes would typify them as *nouveau riche*, and therefore unsuitable attachments:

They were a picturesque couple, she so dark, he so prematurely white. They had the perfect teeth and the permanent tan of the very rich, yet the girl's accent was suburban. The man was even less easy to place. He was young, immaculate, worldly, yet Ruth sensed that the last two attributes had been acquired quite recently. His watch was too expensive, his shoes, obviously handmade, too new. But above all, they were pleasant (SL:96).

The change wrought by these Rocky and Helena Napier clones is so immediate and transforming that Ruth's existence is acknowledged by the *concierge* for the first time. Hugh is prodigal with advice and outings which do not inconvenience him or put him out of pocket. His mentorship extends from advice on clothes and hair, to making love to Ruth in her room. Ruth pays for these attentions in the form of expensive lunches and dinners for the beautiful people. One may view the relationship in much the same light as that of Mildred and Rocky; Ruth, however, appears less concerned with the morality of the situation, and this lack of scruples distinguishes her from Pym's excellent

women.<sup>1</sup> Hugh and Jill foreshadow Nick and Alix of *Look at Me*; they are the hares, in whose charismatic shadow the excellent woman temporarily flourishes:

Hugh, she was well aware, was an adventurer. She had read about such people, and anyway he made no bones about it. He did most things for money or pleasure; if it was possible to combine the two, he did. His wife, who earned enough to pay their weekly bills, regarded him sympathetically as an agreeable and amusing accomplice. She, who had had many trips and much hospitality free from the travel agency, did not doubt that you made the most of what was offered and took it by force if necessary. If Hugh got his lunches paid for she did not grudge him the time spent with Ruth, whom she regarded as a pleasant bore (SL:99).

Despite the transformation of Ruth, the reader is aware that she is about to be swept as inexorably to her doom as Tess of the D'Urbervilles (possibly a more apt role model). Having reviewed and revised the faulty lessons of literature, she is prepared to take her place confidently among the hares:

Ruth . . . began to think of the world in terms of Balzacian opportunism. Her insights improved. She perceived that most tales of morality were wrong, that even Charles Dickens was wrong, and that the world is not won by virtue. Eternal life, perhaps - but who knows about that? Not the world. If the moral code she had learnt, through the literature she was now beginning to reinterpret, were correct, she should surely have flourished in her heavy unbecoming coat, in her laborious solitude, with her notes and the daily bus ride and the healthful lonely walks. Yet here she was, looking really not too bad, having spent more than half her money, eating and drinking better than she had ever done in her life, and absconding from the Bibliothèque Nationale to spend time with another woman's husband . . . Yet she was aware of something out of joint. She would have preferred the books to have been

1 With the exception of Barbara Bird in *Crampton Hodnet*, although that affair is conducted on a more exalted romantic (and comic) sphere. Viola Dace and Prudence Bates conduct affairs with married men in their heads only.

right. The patient striving for virtue, the long term of trial, the ecstasy of earned reward: these things would never now be hers. She had deviated from the only path she knew and she had lost her understanding of the world before the fall. That there had been a fall, she was quite sure. She had only to look at her glowing self to be assured of that. And selfishness and greed and bad faith and extravagance had made her into this semblance of a confident and attractive woman, and performed the miracle of forcing her to grow up and deal competently with the world (SL:99-100).

Ruth is given knowing advice by Anthea when she is about to embark on an adulterous fling with Professor Duplessis. In reply to Anthea's ubiquitous gratuitous advice, Ruth sadly asks whether it is all a game. Anthea is a street-sharp here:

Anthea looked sadly back. 'Only if you win,' was her reply. 'If you lose, it's far more serious.'

Professor Duplessis is wise, kind and understanding, but Ruth's desperate assumption of the mildest of hubris, in her rejection of the false truths of literature and in her assumption of a new literary role model, is temporary:

Must she only do one thing and do it all the time? Or was the random factor, the chance disposition, so often enjoyed by Balzac, nearer to reality? She was aware that writing her dissertation on vice and virtue was an easier proposition than working it out in real life. Such matters can more easily be appraised when they are dead and gone. Dead in life and dead on the page. She had learned much from Balzac. Above all she had learned that she did not wish to live as virtuously as Henriette de Mortsauf or as Eugénie Grandet; she did not wish to be as courageous and ridiculous as Dinah de la Baudraye, who is nevertheless a great woman; she did not wish to be the Duchesse de Langeais, who has many lovers but who ends in a nunnery. She would rather be like the lady who spells death to Eugénie Grandet's hopes, a beauty glimpsed at a ball in Paris with feathers in her hair. Better a bad winner than a good loser. Balzac had taught her that too (SL:136).

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Despite her rejection of Eugénie Grandet, "an anomaly, so biddable, so inert on her bench in the garden, while her mother wasted away and her father grew more angry" (SL:140), and despite her yet again frenzied preparations for Duplessis, she is summoned home by what Duchêne wittily calls "the collapse of the Middle Aged P's" (1981:595).

Mrs Cutler has relinquished the humus-like atmosphere of Oakwood Court to become Mrs Dunlop, and Helen has learned that George's relationship with Mrs Jacobs is not quite kosher. Brookner's plot positively gallops towards its inevitable climax: George suffers a heart attack and Mrs Jacobs absconds; Helen dies in a taxi after a disastrous night at Hove with Molly (with stark symbolic significance her end is marked by her denim cap falling off into the mud). Ruth, the dutiful daughter, is left to bear the burdens.

Brookner describes Ruth's fate with pathos, and with the eye of the critical art historian, the Old Masters, like the writers, are proved wrong:

She felt a sudden wave of fury, which she directed against all painters of martyrdoms and depositions. 'About suffering, they were never wrong, the Old Masters,' said Auden. But they were. Frequently. Death was usually heroic, old age serene and wise. And of course, the element of time, that was what was missing. Duration. How many more nights would she have to undress her mother, only to dress her again in the morning? Would she soon have to wash her, to bath her, to feed her? Was there any way in which this could be avoided? (SL:159-160);

In the country of the old and sick there are environmental hazards. Cautious days. Early nights. A silent, ageing life in which the anxiety of the invalid overrides the vitality of the untouched. A wariness, in case the unto-

ward might go undetected. Sudden gratitude that turns bitterness into self-reproach. George fretted more over Ruth now than he had ever done during her childhood. If she went out, she would look back and see him at the window, watching her. When she returned, he would still be there. He had time to think of the meals that might tempt him but no appetite to eat much of them. He resisted attempts to get him out of his dressing gown. He refused to walk far. Above all, he required constant reassurance that she would not leave him (SL:170).

Improbably, although in keeping with the narrative of Eugénie Grandet, Ruth makes a loveless marriage when she marries Roddy, Mrs Jacobs's nephew. Even more improbably, he is killed in a car accident. Ruth and George are left to console each other, and Ruth to complete her *magnum opus* on Balzac. The section on Eugénie Grandet turns out longer than expected:

They could not believe that such a thing had happened, that they were both, once again, survivors. They wondered how they had been singled out for such a privilege (SL:173).

Brookner's debut is a plangent tale of unrequited love on a somewhat more ambitious scale than Pym's less dolorous comedies of manners. In tenor, *A Start in Life* resembles *Quartet in Autumn*, although their themes are not compatible. Although there are passages of great melancholy and pathos, and almost unbearable loneliness, the novel is saved from mawkishness by Brookner's stringent control of tone, and above all by her consummate comic creations: George, Helen, "the poor, pitiable, Medusa-figure of the mother" (Duchêne, 1981:595), and above all, Mrs Cutler, provide grotesque comic relief. Given Brookner's impeccable style, and meticulous and insistent omniscient narrative voice, one is hesitant to voice a tiny note of criticism. Was Ruth ruined by literature, by her insufferable parents, or by her own pallid nature and

irresolution? Would Ruth have been in greater control of her life without her parents? Indeed, is the whole novel a mountain created, albeit with impeccable artistry, out of a molehill?

In comparing Brookner's novels with Pym's fictional artistry, one is bound to observe that Pym's heroines have solace in "the trivial round, the common task", whether this be in the form of tea, a drop of gin, or a High Church service with the best incense.

Brookner's heroine, like the heroines of Pym, has a merciless eye for detail, but this evokes little laughter. Ruth is appalled by the horror of her parents; she is never struck by their risible absurdity, and this makes her a less sympathetic heroine than Pym's protagonists.

*A Start in Life* is a densely packed novel, in which Brookner relentlessly expounds her thesis. In plot and style there are nuances of Pym, and the following are some eloquent examples:

After Mrs Weiss's death there was Mrs Cutler who claimed to be able to say her prayers just as well in an open field as any of those sanctimonious buggers down the road (SL:101);

'Of course a lot of very good people aren't religious in the sense of being church-goers,' persisted Mrs Bonner.

'No, I know they aren't,' I agreed, feeling that at any moment she would begin talking about it being just as easy to worship God in a beechwood or on the golf links on a fine Sunday morning (W:50).

Helen, too, in the manner of Pym's women, is not above getting a quotation hilariously but appositely wrong:

'They were right when they said how sharper than a servant's tooth is man's ingratitude.'

'Serpent's,' corrected George. He was very tired (SL:125).

Excellent women are not always for marrying:

Hugh looked at her and thought of his beautiful wife, of whom he had such doubts. Ruth, in so many and such surprising ways the better woman, would not measure up, he thought. In that moment he threw in his lot with Jill and the baby she would have. He could not do without her. But he smiled kindly at Ruth, grateful to her for making up his mind (SL:134).

The cake Ruth bakes for Duplessis, is called "la Reine de Saba" (culled, once again, no doubt, from *Larousse gastronomique*); it is possibly purely fortuitous that this is the name of the sherry which Edwin, Norman and Letty share after Marcia's death in *Quartet in Autumn*. Mrs Cutler becomes the raffish warden of the Clarence Nursing Home, a character not unlike the warden of Holmhurst in *Quartet in Autumn*, although more given to clichés:

Their visitor, to their very great surprise, was Mrs Cutler, in a fun fur coat and high-heeled boots . . . After she had returned from the bathroom, leaving the door open as usual, and after she had drunk a cup of tea and smoked three cigarettes, she regaled them with stories of life at the Clarence Nursing Home. 'Of course,' she said, screwing up her eyes against the smoke, 'we've made a lot of improvements there. Colour telly. Fluorescent lighting in all the bedrooms. The old dears think the world of us.' Ruth looked at her in her checked mini-skirt, her unventilated royal blue angora jersey, her necklace of vaguely ethnic ceramic platelets. She could not do it. The

temptation to put George into a nursing home had never been very strong, although Anthea had introduced her to the idea long ago. But George, thought Ruth, had had style; he could not end up like that. She knew what the Clarence would be like: the television on all day, the residents encouraged to sit outside in the brisk sea wind, the food consisting of mince and mashed potatoes and masses and masses of prunes. And Mrs Cutler or Mrs Dunlop or whatever she was passing among them graciously with a kind word ('Never say die!') and a cigarette somewhere about her person (SL:174-175).

Finally, Pym's tendency to resurrect her characters appears in Brookner's novels as a predilection for resurrection of plot. Although Brookner does not allow the same characters to reappear, her novels are essentially rewrites of the same story, with the same gullible heroine. Some sort of intimation of this is given (once again by omniscient authorial comment), and this is intrinsic to Ruth's ironic fate:

What she tended to ignore these days . . . was Balzac's strange sense of the unfinished, the sudden unforeseen deaths, the endless and unexpected remorse, the mutation of one grand lady into someone else's grander wife, the ruthless pursuit of ambition. She did not understand, and few women do, that Balzac's rascally heroes are in fact consumed with a sense of vocation, in which love only plays an evanescent if passionate part, that they will go on and on and on and never rest until death cuts them down. What she did understand, and this is not difficult, is Balzac's sense of cosmic energy, in which all the characters are submerged, until thrown up again, like atoms, to dance on the surface of one particular story, to disappear, to reappear in another guise, in another novel (SL:140).

Sheila Hale argues that Anita Brookner's heroines do not fit any contemporary mould, and her comments might profitably be quoted at length:

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"Anita Brookner writes about the passion of an unusual and distinguished woman. The woman is given a different name and address in each of her four published novels. But these variations, far from protecting her identity, only confirm our apprehension of her individuality. Although the author knows exactly how it feels to be this woman, she doesn't always like her and she underestimates the value of qualities which we perceive to be extraordinary. Nor does Anita Brookner pity the inevitable loneliness of her creation . . .

"The woman Anita Brookner could not be, however hard she tried, appears in different guises in all the novels. Sometimes she is an ageing actress, sometimes a trendy, confident, outrageous golden girl, elsewhere a modern odalisque. She is the kind of woman given to arranging her hair in public, turning her head from side to side in the glass for the benefit of her admirers; she knows how to pause on the threshold of a room for just long enough to capture the centre of attention. If she reads at all it is rubbish; but she is certain that she would make an excellent writer if only writing weren't such a pointless activity.<sup>1</sup> Often, she has 'come down in the world'. She is shallow, manipulative, vain and driven by glorious appetites. And Dr Brookner has not the shadow of a doubt that whatever the feminist movement may teach us, it is this super-feminine woman who wins the race every time. 'I have to tell you that the dirty old tricks work better than the brave new ones'" (Hale, 1984:96-98).

Pym is gentler and her works effect a more compassionate agape; excellent women do occasionally get their just deserts, even if the reward is suspect. Pym is stronger on love, hope and charity, not to mention vicars.

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1 Helen being a case in point.

5.2 *Providence*

In the ironically titled *Providence*, Anita Brookner's second novel, in addition to a nodding acquaintance with the French language (ranging from *merde*, *alors* to fairly lengthy extracts from the Bible and from literature), the reader is also forced to sit through a lengthy and taxing seminar on Henri Benjamin Constant de Rebecque's *Adolphe*.

As in *A Start in Life*, Brookner clearly articulates her themes. As usual, her heroine is myopic, failing to see the ironic parallel between her unrequited love for Maurice, and Adolphe's rejection of his mistress; despite her detailed explication of the text of *Adolphe* during her seminars, she "lacks the information".

The novel is an acute study of loneliness couched in stronger terms than in Barbara Pym's novels.<sup>1</sup> Brookner intimates that unrequited love results in failure and humiliation; love and marriage are the only satisfactory options which will fulfil women's needs, and work is declared to be a panacea for those who have not attained these prerequisites, or as a counter to too much introspection. The heroine suffers from far greater spiritual aridity than the protagonists of Pym, as Kitty grasps at the straws of horoscopes and clairvoyants in her attempts to gain clarity about her relationship with Maurice. As in the novels of Pym, Brookner illustrates that women's craving for romantic love imbues unsuitable love objects with an aura of greatness.

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1 With the exception of *Quartet in Autumn*.

Other themes encountered in the novel are those of filial duty and the burdens imposed by the expectations of relations, as well as isolation caused by an undefined cultural milieu. Above all, the novel skilfully articulates tentative hubris destroyed by reality, as expectations and illusions are shattered, and innocence is destroyed by experience. The novel explores the downfall of the outsider, the observer who is reserved, intelligent and controlled, effected by those who are born knowing the rules of the game:

"Kitty is a self aware outsider. Her breath constantly fogs the pane of glass through which she sees, so that when she tries to be like others she is hampered by not really perceiving what these others are like. At ease within the relationships of fiction, in real life she has no capacity to understand and perform the dance of friendship and passion that makes up the grist of life for most single people. She is the reader's great-aunt before her time, which is a bit disconcerting" (Waugh, 1982:27).

As usual, Brookner delineates her themes meticulously, sedulously laying clues about Kitty Maule's predestined fate.

Kitty's amorphous cultural background is minutely described; her French couturière grandmother and Russian acrobat grandfather imbue her with shrewd French traits, while her dead English father, whom she has never known, as well as her insufferable lover Maurice, with his "county" background, represents the English aspect of her life, to which she aspires:

She usually said, 'My father was in the army. He died before I was born.' This was the exact truth, but it was not all the truth, for the father to whom she delegated the prominent role in her family history had never even registered in her consciousness as absent. Quite simply, he had never been there. Her mother was there, and her grandmother and grandfather; they would continue, long after their own deaths, as parents, racial memories, a certain kind of expertise, a certain milieu, untouched by their almost accidental mingling with the conventional life of an English wartime marriage. Yet Kitty felt herself to be English; hence her explanation, 'My father was in the army.' And indeed no one had ever faulted her on grounds of Englishness. Yet she felt a part of her to be shrewd and watchful, mistrusting others, paying less attention to their words than to the words they were not voicing. She thought these characteristics were a sign of some moral defect, and always hastened back to her life's work of establishing the true and the good and perhaps the beautiful, of believing the best of everyone, of enjoying what life offered, not lamenting what it withheld. This, in fact, was how her father had been (P:6).<sup>1</sup>

Kitty's dual personality, imposed by the past, gives the novel a more exotic, but at the same time, a more claustrophobic and airless quality than the novels of Pym. As usual, Brookner relentlessly describes the surroundings of her heroine. In Pym's novels, this generally adds to the "cosiness" deprecated by some critics, but Brookner succeeds in creating an atmosphere which makes filial duty more onerous and more compelling.<sup>2</sup>

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1 P refers to BROOKNER, Anita. 1985d. Providence. London: Triad/Panther.

2 Pym makes less obvious use of domiciliary contrasts, for example, the chintzy cosiness of Deirdre's suburban home is contrasted with the more bohemian surroundings of Catherine's flat (*Less than Angels*). To Deirdre, the homely comfort is stultifying, and indicative of the life which she is trying to escape. Laurel in *No Fond Return of Love* also wishes to escape from Dulec's comfortable, middle-class home to the independence of an uncomfortable bed-sitter.

Her mother, Marie-Thérèse, remained the little French girl whom her parents destined for a good marriage, even though that marriage had come and gone some time ago. Marie-Thérèse was the eternal *pensionnaire*, homeloving, conventional, quiet, and obedient to those strange parents of hers, Kitty's grandparents, who so consistently undid the myth of Kitty's Englishness, in which she believed so fervently and which no one who knew her sought to disbelieve. She had two homes; one, a small flat in Chelsea, where she kept her father's photograph, taken on his last leave; the other, her grandparents' house in the suburbs, where, once inside the front door, one encountered the smells, the furnishings, the continual discussion that might take place in an apartment house in Paris or perhaps further east. An air of dimness, of stuffy comfort, an emanation of ceremonious meals, long past, an airlessness, hours spent on the routine matters of rising and eating and drinking coffee; an insistence on food, the centrality of food; great sadness, organizing the simply empty days, but never despair, never the complaint known to English doctors as depression. But sadness, much sadness. When Kitty went back to her other home, the rational little flat in Chelsea, it seemed to her quite empty of everything, of smell, taste, atmosphere, sound, food. She would look out of the window for signs of life, not realizing that she never did this in her other home, in the suburbs, where her grandparents lived. Occasionally a shout would come from the pub on the corner, but it seemed to her that even there very little was going on. And on these Sunday evenings she would survey the empty street, vaguely disquieted, longing to be one thing or the other, for she felt that she was not what she seemed. She looked enquiringly at the photograph of her father, whom she thought of as 'Father'. Her grandfather she called Papa and her grandmother Maman Louise. They called her Thérèse, the name she resumed when she went back to them. Away from them, she was Kitty. And most of the time she felt like Kitty. Not all the time, but most of it (P:6-7).

Kitty, while competently lecturing on the Romantic Tradition at a provincial university, and repairing to her bleak Chelsea flat, is primed for marriage by Papa and Maman Louise. Her exquisite clothes, made for her by her grandmother, distinguish her from her dowdy colleagues, and create ironically false impressions: "Milady Maule . . . Must be rolling in it" (P:15).

To her grandparents, her intellectual English life is foreign, and the obligations which they impose on her, which range from eating vast quantities of French food, and religious scepticism, to the filial duty of fulfilment through love and marriage, are onerous:

After Marie-Thérèse's death, quickly one evening at the dinner table, the old people became older and seemed to revert to their less illustrious days in Paris, before success had brought them their modest affluence . . . She [Kitty] asked them questions about the past in an effort to animate them, for she remembered them as the liveliest of people she had ever known. All Louise would say was, 'If only she had married again!' 'But Maman Louise, she is with Father now,' said Kitty, her voice sounding as false to her as had the prayers she had murmured at school. Louise would shrug and an expression of pity would pass over Papa's face, as if only now registering the fact that his grand-daughter had been affected by an alien and sentimental culture . . . They were waiting for news and she had none to tell them. Occasionally Louise, energized by a strange kind of malice, would stir from her semi-permanent doze, would open her eyes, survey Kitty from head to foot, and question her. 'Well, *ma fille*, where are your lovers? Who will take you home tonight? For whom do you wash your hair? And your studies, will you ever finish them?' Turning her puffy hands in her lap in a strange mute appeal, she said, 'I do not understand your life. Are your colleagues real men? Is it so different here? What do you discuss over your tea and biscuits? Come,' she would say, with a glint in her eye, but the hands still turning, sadly, 'come *ma fille*, tell me about England' (P:16-17).

Kitty is in love with Maurice, the Professor of Mediaeval History. She is even more blind to his faults than is the average Pym heroine,<sup>1</sup> and the Roger Fry Professor of Significant Form (Brookner gives a wonderful picture of the

1 "Maurice is a bad but enthusiastic lecturer on churches, who believes in Providence, and lives with such ease and simplicity within the sight of God that he does what he likes, when he likes, without any thought to the consequences for those around him. He is like the hero in the Romantic Tradition, truly and beautifully selfish" (Waugh, 1982:28).

pettiness of academe) is close on the mark when he calls him a "sanctimonious bastard" and his work "charismatic shit" (P:19). Like all Pym heroines, Kitty's solitary meals are sorry, makeshift affairs; however, Maurice's needs are assiduously catered to, but the affair is a one-sidedly tenuous one, to say the least:

Kitty Maule, dressed in her best, although Maurice could not see her, would watch the handsome smiling figure mounting the steps to the platform, and try not to sigh as he surveyed the image on the screen before turning to his audience, his hands on his hips, his legs and buttocks braced as if for sexual activity. He was a beautiful man and everyone was faintly in love with him. Kitty herself had loved him for two years and had entertained secret hopes. But their brief affair had settled down into a strange comradely routine which puzzled her but which she accepted. She accepted his random telephone calls, too random for her taste, and his eventual reappearance at her dinner table, where he would talk about his work and eat her food appreciatively; and seeing him there, she too, at last, would eat.

Tonight was Friday, she would see him on Wednesday, and the following Monday he would come to dinner . . . She could hardly go up to him and ask him what time he would arrive at the flat, nor would he bother to let her know, so she could only nurse her glass of sherry in a corner, watching him being charming to the Friends, and calculate whether or not to prepare something that would only need reheating or whether to do something fresh on the night and therefore easier in terms of forward planning but more difficult in terms of realization (P:20-21).

Like all Pym women, Kitty is proficient at fulfilling men's needs - in this case providing elegant dinners and typing his notes on the cathedrals of England (a Pym touch, this), while being rewarded by the intermittent pleasure of his company, and, one surmises, a desultory sexual relationship.<sup>1</sup>

1 Critics generally designate Brookner's novels as being more erotic than Pym's, although one sometimes suspects that the protagonist's affair with the undeserving wimp is all in her mind.

While Pym frequently views her vicars with gentle satire, Brookner treats her male characters of Christian disposition with less sympathy. Kitty, the displaced person, cannot match Maurice's apparent devotion to God, and is more oblivious of any defects in her personal object of adoration than most Pym heroines. In addition, she is enfeebled by what she supposes to be Maurice's ineffable Englishness:

. . . for, although a historian by profession, he was also a romantic and devout Christian, a strange combination which appeared to keep him perfectly happy . . . She [Kitty] kept her scepticism to herself, paying respect to Maurice's unquestioned beliefs, nourished on certainty, she thought . . . It seemed as if he could take the cathedrals of France without any human company to dilute them, his passion for the absolute, for God and beauty, sustaining him where she herself would have counted the hours on her own and calculated the moment at which she might have crept out to the pâtisserie. She felt humbled by the comparison between them, as always; he was finer, larger, better than she was, his insights nobler, his whole fabric superior. With his background, I suppose, she thought vaguely, imagining spacious lawns and grey stone and summer afternoons and his impeccable mother receiving guests (P:19-23).

One recalls Pym's Archdeacon Hocceve (*Some Tame Gazelle*), but his pretensions are more risible, and recognised by Belinda as such.

Kitty's need, as opposed to that of Maurice, calls to mind Dr Johnson's pronouncements on love, quoted in *Some Tame Gazelle*:

That had been two years ago. Since that time, his smile had become no less pleasant and no less vague, for however much she pined for him she knew that she was not indispensable to him. And at bad moments, when she woke in the night, she knew that she was not even necessary

. . . He remained formal and pleasant, but he disarmed her easily. She wanted to know if he ever thought about her (but she supposed not, for he was always busy) and anyway, to ask that sort of question was unimaginable. But if he took her to France, that would be a sign, and moreover a sign that the world would see, a sign that her grandmother would welcome (P:24-25).

Kitty, although well versed in the cruelty of the literary Byronic hero, is too obtuse to see the signs of rejection, and in typical deprecating manner, defers to what she mistakenly assumes to be Maurice's superior sense and sensibility:

He straightened up, hands on hips. 'You ought to come with me, Kitty,' he said. She turned away from him, to hide her trembling hands. 'Why not?' she said, after a minute, and with no particular inflection in her voice. 'My dear child,' he laughed, stretching out a long arm and resting it on her shoulder. 'You know perfectly well why not. Just think of your reputation.'

This was his way and it confused her. She did not know whether, in his world, it would have been truly scandalous to contemplate such a journey with a woman not merely of marriageable age but of marriageable intentions. He was, after all, such a very superior person, and it was typical of him to remain untouched by the inconclusive character that sometimes attends such episodes. Her being an orphan, she supposed, made him feel more responsible for her reputation, and he did not know that if only she could be seen to be with him a little more obviously, her reputation would be made for life (P:25-26).

Although Pym's novels are studies of loneliness, Brookner imbues her novels with far more psychological terror and acidie than Pym:

She had thought that he might guide her towards some conclusion, and because that conclusion had been so long delayed, she wondered if she herself might be too pressing and urgent in wanting it, pressed and urged by the need to justify herself in Louise's eyes and to bring happiness to those grandparents whom she had so far disappointed. Although she knew that she was threatened - by their

eventual death, which would leave her alone and undirected - she felt that she was at fault in failing to make some vital connection with Maurice's desires and intentions, and when she thought this she was in despair, for how could she put right what her very ignorance had put wrong? The vague, pleasant, and somehow mysterious smile closed her out, while closing in something highly significant, something that she did not know, something foreign to her. Tell me about England, she thought . . . She sat in her kitchen in Old Church Street, her plate washed up and put away, the crumbs for the birds strewn on the window-sill. She allowed her fears and griefs to come to the surface, in the timid hope that it was now safe to do so. Some day, unless a miracle took place, she would spend all her time in this kitchen and it would become her permanent and only home, instead of the temporary staging post she had always thought it might be. But this was too dangerous to contemplate, and she turned her head aside, to the window (P:26-29).

Kitty's hopes for a life with Maurice become a life-line; she does not find her academic work particularly onerous, and unlike her colleague, Pauline Bentley, another epitome of filial devotion, who uses work as a weapon against depression, Kitty sees it as no more than a temporary diversion. Her life is spent waiting for Maurice, and much in the manner of Pym's excellent women and their endless church socials, tea and biscuits at the staff meeting are for Kitty, "the high point of an otherwise socially unadventurous week" (P:36-37):

Secretly she regarded her task as a temporary and rather pleasant way of filling in the time until her true occupation should be revealed to her. She did not quite know what this was but she sensed that she would rather excel at duties other than the ones with which she had occupied herself over the last few years (P:32).

The agnostic Kitty has difficulty in living up to Maurice's previous fiancée, who, having renounced Maurice, is working with Mother Theresa in Calcutta; in her own soul she finds only "weariness, boredom and fear" (P:28). One

suspects that Kitty might be protesting too much; that too much pity and terror might be wasted on unrequited love, which is, after all, not an extraordinary event in most people's lives; one suspects that for Kitty, as in the case of the Romantics, there might not be the possibility of a middle way:

Maurice, thought Kitty, will you not look in my direction? I am only here for your sake. I do not, I confess, care about the New Building, or even believe in it. I am fond of all these people, even of Professor Redmile, but if you were to vanish and they were to remain I cannot think that I should stay here long. You have done so much for me. You have made me believe in what I am doing, whereas I really only started it as a sort of hobby; since knowing you, I have done better than I thought I could. And they are pleased with me; that is a new sensation for me. I find this work easy because in a way I am doing it for you. I want to be excellent, for you . . .

She did not know what she found more impressive: the ability to stagger on through a life exaggeratedly devoid of normal happiness, or the ability to admit a radiant fragmentation of the mind that would put one out of the struggle altogether. What worried her was that there appeared to be no middle way. She could not accept that so much ardour and longing, so much torment and courage, should peter out into the flatlands of middle and old age. And anyway, where did the Romantic Tradition end? Easy enough to decide when it began, and even how. But did it, terrible thought, still persist? Might she have started something that might prove to be more extensive than she had originally supposed? Might the Romantic Tradition outlive her desire to have anything more to do with it? (P:34-35).

The "coming back to an empty house" is redolent of Pym (*An Unsuitable Attachment*) but "the trivial round, the common task" do not furnish much compensation or even restore composure:

It was almost dark in the gloomy room, and in that moment before the lights were switched on, she thought ahead in panic to her return home, with its docile routines that she longed to bring to a violent end. Her sedulously

careful rituals for outwitting the long nights, the exorcism of her various familiars and dreams, were losing their virtue and their ability to soothe her (P:38).

Kitty's timorous hubris, which accelerates her predestined fate, is to forsake "wise passiveness", and to abandon the waiting and carefulness. She ironically finds an apt analogy in the pose of the Romantics for future behaviour:

An assumption of effortlessness. Whatever it cost her. The elegance of a behaviour calculated to disarm, never to give offence. No apparent pain. The dandyism of great endeavour combined with a gracious ease of manner. Like a Stoic. Like a Romantic. Why, she thought, in some surprise, they were both (P:40).

The central irony of the novel centres around *Adolphe*. Constant contributed to the development of Romanticism and *Adolphe* is one of the precursors of the psychological novel. Kitty's tale is an ironic parallel of *Adolphe*, but once again the erudite academic is positively dyslectic when confronted by her own accidie:

To Kitty's resolutely professional eye, *Adolphe* was mainly interesting for its conjunction of eighteenth-century classicism and Romantic melancholy. If she concentrated on this aspect of the story, she could overlook its terribly enfeebling message: that a man gets tired of a woman if she sacrifices everything for him, that such a woman will eventually die of her failure, and that the man will be poisoned by remorse for the rest of his life (P:44).

A premonition of Kitty's fate is Miss Fairchild's remark about the novel. Miss Fairchild is exquisitely beautiful and exquisitely dim, but she is to play the hare to Kitty's tortoise:

Miss Fairchild raised her startling eyelids and smiled, to herself rather than at the question, as Kitty feared. 'Well,' she said, very slowly, 'this woman is a nuisance. She's old and she's foreign. She's ruining his career. Obviously, she's being unfair' (P:48).

Constant's preface is the key to the novel as well as the key to Kitty's dilemma:

It is felt that attachments which have been made without reflection can be broken without any harm being done . . . But when one sees the anguish that results from these broken attachments, the painful astonishment of a deceived soul, that mistrust that succeeds perfect trust, and which, forced to direct itself against one being out of the whole world, that esteem driven back on itself and not capable of being re-absorbed, one feels, then, that there is something sacred in the heart that suffers because it loves; one discovers how deep are the roots of the affection one thought to inspire without sharing it; and if one overcomes what one calls weakness, it is by destroying in oneself all that was generous, by tearing up all that was faithful, by sacrificing all that was noble and good (P:50).

While consuming Kitty's lemon pudding and excellent coffee, Maurice reveals himself to be an affected, sanctimonious charlatan, one who makes a career of despondency, much in the manner of Pym's Fabian Driver. Maurice complacently avers that he has Providence on his side in his facile talk about being without the one he loves. Kitty wishes to be an English hare, rather than an anomalous tortoise:

But I want more, she thought, blowing her nose resolutely. I do not want to be trustworthy, and safe, and discreet. I do not want to be the one who understands and sympathizes and soothes. I do not want to be reliable, I do not want to do wonders with Professor Redmile's group, I do not even care what happens to Larter. I do not want to be good at pleasing everybody. I do not even want to be such a good cook, she thought, turning the tap with full

force on to a bowl rusted with the stains of her fresh tomato soup. I want to be totally unreasonable, totally unfair, very demanding, and very beautiful. I do not want my grandmother to tell me what to wear. I want to wear jeans and old sweaters belonging to my brother whom of course I do not have. I do not want to spend my life in this rotten little flat. I want wedding presents. I want to be half of a recognized couple. I want a future away from this place. I want Maurice (P:62-63).

Kitty is prepared to abet Providence by consulting a clairvoyant in the company of Caroline, a glamorous hare temporarily on hold, and, like Pauline, one of Brookner's peripheral needy characters. Like Mildred in *Excellent Women*, her rebellion begins with a change of image, and her visit to the clairvoyant acts as a catalyst in her determination to ordain her own destiny:

During the short but tedious journey to her grandparents' house, Kitty Maule reflected on her present situation. Now that the emotion was ebbing away (but leaving her very tired), she thought pityingly of her former passivity, her illusion that time would sort out the present, that she need only wait, feeding on the sort of hope represented by a random passage from her mother's Bible. But I must act, she thought. I am a total bore as I am. A nonentity. Not even a pawn in the game. She began to review her clothes, mentally consigning those which were safe and neutral and represented her grandmother's outdated notions of classic good taste to the back of her cupboard (P:76-77).

Preparation for looking her best when she meets Maurice in Paris entails accepting Pauline's invitation to a weekend in the country. Brookner paints a pathetic picture of filial duty in Pauline's subservience to her blind mother's needs, and Brookner intimates, somewhat in the manner of Pym, that female academics feature lower on the scale of achievement than do their male counterparts:

At the sight of Pauline, a thin clever woman, Kitty was once again reminded of what awaited her if her life failed to change. Pauline was a gifted and honourable teacher but she was admired rather than liked, for years of hiding her feelings had made her sarcastic, unsentimental, in a way that was good for departmental efficiency but bad for students looking for the sort of glamorous governess figure they were prepared to tolerate in a female tutor. Pauline lived with her widowed mother, who was nearly blind; she drove from the university every night to this small place, with the shopping in the back of the car. When she got home, she would switch on the lights, for it made no difference to her mother whether she sat in the dark or not, put a match to the fire, and cook the dinner. Her mother liked to hear all the news. She had been a distinguished don herself, and prided herself on keeping in touch. She found her daughter praiseworthy but unambitious, and urged her constantly to publish more. Washing up in the chilly kitchen, Pauline would shift from one aching foot to the other and think only of her electric blanket and the World Service of the BBC which would keep her company through her increasingly sleepless nights (P:81-82).

Kitty sees in Pauline an intimation of her own fate, should her plans not materialise, and her premonitory ideas reflect Pym's musings on the education of women. As usual, Brookner is the more morose, as her women have no compensations:

Kitty felt a pang of pain for her. She comes here every night, even in the darkest winter, she said to herself. There is no one for her to talk to. She has to make arrangements for people to come in and see to her mother during the day. And when her mother dies, what will she do? Probably go on living in the same place, even lonelier. And she knows all this. She is too clever not to know. She is what is called a liberated woman, thought Kitty. The kind envied by captive housewives. She felt an urgent need to put her own life into some sort of order, to ensure that she did not turn out like Caroline or like Pauline, the one so stupid, the other so intelligent, and both so bereft. She saw her two friends, who would have nothing to say to each other if they should ever meet, as casualties of the same conflict, as losers in the war in which Providence was deemed to play so large a part, and to determine the outcome, for some, not for others (P:83-84).

Kitty's new-found grasp of manipulating her situation extends to Pauline's future as well:

She looked, thought Kitty, very English. Shy but invincible. She will be all right, she decided. She will see the world, that I guarantee. She will marry a retired colonial official and settle down in Hong Kong. I shall hear from her once a year - a letter inside a Christmas card, ending 'George joins me in sending his warmest wishes.' I see it clearly (P:90).

Once again, marriage is seen as the sole panacea for the loneliness of the single woman.

In addition to using the seminar on *Adolphe* as a vehicle to underline her theme, Brookner also uses an erudite discussion between Kitty and Mrs Bentley to contrast Kitty's role, as a mere pawn in the game, with Maurice's complacent beliefs. Once again, Kitty's words are ironical with regard to her own condition:

The proposition is that man's natural condition is inherently absurd because he constantly makes assumptions and these assumptions are usually incorrect. Beginnings do not naturally predispose one to good fortune or its opposite. There is therefore no sound basis for reassurance or optimism. All forces are indifferent (P:88-89).

Kitty's hopes for deliverance are exacerbated by her witnessing an aged mother and almost equally aged daughter in the public gardens. She sees Maurice as her deliverer from a lifetime of the Romantic Tradition and loneliness (her

English self), while her French *alter ego* shrewdly plans an encounter with Maurice in Paris:

At this distance and in this context Maurice took on a superhuman, almost a metaphysical significance for Kitty. His brilliance and ease, his seeming physical invulnerability, the elevated character of his decisions, the distances he covered, his power of choice and strength of resolve, cast him in the guise of the unfettered man, the mythic hero, the deliverer . . . She saw her life, all physical geography removed, as an inexorable progress towards further loneliness . . . And the Romantic Tradition, growing ever longer and more elaborate, would have to fill her days . . . Her other self, the wise and shrewd self that had come from her grandmother, argued that she had made a good move in deciding to go to France, where she would appear to her advantage, at ease, almost at home (P:94-95).

Kitty's obsession with Maurice makes her side-step a possible romantic encounter, dinner *à deux* with Mr Pascoe, a teacher accompanying a party of schoolgirls to Naples. Ironically, what she takes to be a Romantic affectation transpires to be a genuine affliction. The rest of the novel is made up of stultifying waiting: Kitty waits for Maurice in Paris for days, and inordinate space is devoted to waiting for the public lecture which will secure Kitty a permanent academic appointment, and for the dinner party which Maurice has promised her afterwards. Much is made of Kitty's having embraced the English tradition of her father, and forsaken the French *joie de vivre* of her relations:

For she had embraced what she thought of as her father's tradition, although she had never known him and had no real idea of what he stood for. She had made the young soldier in the faded photograph her image of England just as she had made Maurice her ideal of England (P:164).

An unbearable sense of breathless expectation is built up as Kitty perambulates the hot summer streets, waiting for the dinner party which is to change her life.<sup>1</sup> She is assured that her marriage to Maurice will decide her future happiness:

Coming home alone, afterwards, she had felt a sense of well-being and almost of worth; she was assured of a permanent post for next year and could thus conclude that her apprenticeship was at an end. For two days she had rested secure in this knowledge and also in anticipation of a pleasant future. Pleasant in the sense of corresponding to her modest worth; pleasant in the sense of its being the correct conclusion of her attempts to achieve a position that would somehow merge her anomalous beginnings into her stronger linguistic background; pleasant in the sense that at last she had a feeling of place and could connect herself with an institution in which her ambitions, which were as modest as her experience, could be and would be realized. This would be, as it were, her daytime self. For stronger emotions and delights, for a more positive future, she would place her faith in the events that would be brought to birth by Maurice's (and her) dinner party. For the first time in her life she felt nothing but confidence in the future (P:179).

Her talismans are discarded: *Adolphe*, the history of Gothic architecture and Marie-Thérèse's Bible have seen her through. But Kitty has lacked the information, she has not learnt the English rules at all, for Maurice has selected the beautiful Jane Fairchild as his helpmeet, and Kitty faces public humiliation at

<sup>1</sup> Although Kitty applauds the absence of an objective correlative in *Adolphe*, the somnolent heat of the London streets provides an apt objective correlative for her apparently endless and empty state of waiting:

"On the whole, she thought, looking out gravely on to the sunlit fields, there is less obfuscation when nature is out of the way. The author of *Adolphe* is entirely correct when he sets his story '*dans la petite ville de D-*'. I hadn't realized how very clever the book was. Everything in it is accurate and pitiless, and contained in the author's own reflections" (P:81).

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the dinner party, "her innocence . . . destroyed by the very sophistication she so desperately aspires to acquire" (Kakutani, 1984:19):

They took their places at the table, Maurice and Miss Fairchild at either end. I lacked the information, thought Kitty, trying to control her trembling hands. Quite simply, I lacked the information. She had the impression of having been sent right back to the beginning of a game she thought she had been playing according to the rules. And there was the rest of the evening to be got through. Professor Redmile was in ever more radiant form. 'I must confess, Miss Maule, that we were trying to work out which half of you was French.' The Roger Fry Professor's wife exploded into sudden high-pitched laughter. 'It was Kitty's mother,' supplied Maurice. 'Isn't that right, Kitty?' 'My father was in the army,' said Kitty Maule slowly. 'He died before I was born.' And picking up her spoon, she prepared to eat (P:189).

Kitty is left bereft, as unable now as ever to tell Maman Louise about England. As in all Brookner novels, the hare is the winner, and Miss Fairchild qualifies on all counts as suitable, except in intelligence, which Brookner bleakly intimates does not count in this game.

Brookner's craftsmanship, her sedulous laying of clues which are never red herrings for the reader, once again makes of *Providence* an articulate novel, densely packed with meaning.<sup>1</sup> *Providence* mirrors *Adolphe*, and Kitty's seminar points the way for the reader:

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1 Cf. "Words meant such a very great deal to her - and more than that, information conveyed by means of words - that she wanted them to mean a great deal to everyone else.

"For some reason she thought of her student Mr Mills and his clumsy translations. You are accurate, she had told him, and yet you are not very near the meaning. Aim at both. This way you are losing a great deal of the available information. You are eliding it" (P:117-118).

'I am sorry to be so pedantic about words, but the potency of this particular story comes from the juxtaposition of extremely dry language and extremely heated, almost uncontrollable sentiments . . . But there is a feeling that it is almost kept under lock and key, that even if the despair is total, the control remains. This is very elegant, very important . . .' (P:135).<sup>1</sup>

Although there are various intimations of the themes and style of Barbara Pym in the novel, for example, the catering to men's gastronomic needs, and even echoes like the following:

Kitty who felt suddenly stifled, summoned a passing waiter for the bill. Mrs Bentley, hauled to her feet by Pauline, now seemed to her more ruthless, less sympathetic. Mrs Bentley's teeth, she noted, were as long and as yellow as those of the dog (P:91);

The room seemed suddenly very hot and I saw Mrs Gray's face rather too close to mine, her eyes wide open and penetrating, her teeth small and pointed, her skin a smooth apricot colour (EW:120),

Brookner's heroines are left to nurture their accidie, something which is not permissible in Pym's more resolutely Christian world. Tom Mallow, who succumbs to it, has to die. Brookner's ironies are more overwhelming, her narrative structure more semantically loaded. Pym's irony is the irony of omission, and although Brookner's craftsmanship is sedulous and her writing sapid - she is adept at creating and sustaining a miasma of torpid expectation, an ambience of anaesthesia before the felling denouement - one is left with the uneasy feeling that the irony has been too heavily underscored, and an even uneasier feeling that too much emotion has been expended on what is, after all,

1 Possibly the ultimate statement about Brookner's own style.

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an occurrence which most women experience on their path to maturity. One is also tempted to agree with Harriet Waugh:

"One of the oddities of the novel, and I was not sure if this was intentional, is that Kitty is so unsexual, refined, grown-up and innocent that I suspected for about half the book that she was not having a physical relationship at all with Maurice; that instead of being a swine and a cad he was merely taking the occasional dinner off a young woman he quite liked, and that the 'affair' was entirely in her head" (Waugh, 1982:28).

Judith Gies (1984:17) claims that "predictability and artfulness" are the most serious dangers to Brookner's work:

"Kitty's plight sometimes seems metaphorical, and Kitty herself not so much a real woman as a symbol of the disappointed child in all of us."

Although the authorial wink is sometimes too broad, the irony so heavily underscored that the omniscient reader loses sympathy with the obtuse heroine, and the counterpoint between Maurice's beliefs and Kitty's superstitions, *Adolphe* and Kitty's fate somewhat overdone, *Providence* remains a deft and elegant, if somewhat recondite study of loneliness and despair.

However, the slender plot is in danger of being swamped by what Kearns calls the "elaborate intellectual framework for Kitty's crisis, a framework that becomes problematic for both Kitty and the novel" (1984:39). According to Galen Strawson, *Providence* is a portrait which studies a personality, but "she [Kitty] fails to come completely to life, surrounded though she is by some

marvellously drawn minor characters. She remains something of a novelist's laboratory, a repository of disparate states of consciousness. Part of the point about her is that she is like that; but she still fails, somehow, to attain to reality - even as a woman whose own sense of herself is of someone who fails to attain to reality" (Strawson, 1982:579).

Rubin contends that Brookner is "concerned with exploring the many-layered structure of the mind trying to apprehend reality, the complex relationship between expectation and disappointment, desire, and frustration" (1984a:25). The novel is therefore more complex than a comedy of manners, and a more ambitious psychological study of loneliness, aspiration and need than most of Pym's work.

### 5.3 *Look at Me*

Superficially, *Look at Me* appears to have at least some of the hallmarks of Barbara Pym's *No Fond Return of Love*. Both protagonists are orphans, still living in the parental home. Both work "on the dustier fringes of the academic world" (NFRL:7), neither are churchgoers, both have suffered at least one unhappy affair of the heart, and, above all, both are rabid observers of life. Frances Hinton, however, is at the outset of the novel a writer *manqué*, of the order of Barbara Pym:

... and I like to think that one day I will use this material and write a comic novel, one of those droll and piquant chronicles, enjoyed by dons at Oxford and Cambridge colleges<sup>1</sup> (LM:16).<sup>2</sup>

Frances Hinton (alias Anita Brookner) does not produce something of the order of Barbara Pym. In *Look at Me*, she reveals herself as an ironic chronicler of loneliness and disillusionment, of innocence flayed by experience, of the realisation that:

... this is one of the cruellest tricks we play on ourselves, this inability to banish early expectation (LM:177).

While Barbara Pym is the subtle ironist and satirist of mild vices like pride, vanity and condescension, Anita Brookner, in *Look at Me*, reveals herself as less a satirist (Frances concedes that anger is a prerequisite for satire) than a supreme ironist. *Look at Me* is an incisive condemnation of not so much contemporary Britain, and the demise of the middle-class values of gentility chronicled sympathetically and more superficially by Barbara Pym, but of contemporary values, as epitomised by the beautiful and the lucky, the manipulative hares:

"As in *A Start in Life*, Anita Brookner's first novel, a Balzacian opposition is established between bad behaviour - 'attractive shamelessness' - and the bourgeois codes of duty and self-control. The beautiful and powerful get what they

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1 Possibly an allusion to Barbara Pym, as some of her staunchest critics are (or were) Oxbridge dons: Lord David Cecil, A.L. Rowse, and A.N. Wilson.

2 LM refers to BROOKNER, Anita. 1985c. *Look at Me*. London: Triad/Panther.

want; the self-disciplined end up slighted and lonely. Solitude has its bitter rewards, however: it breeds the writer" (Lee, 1983b:32).

With the exception of Leonora Eyre, Pym's heroines never forfeit the reader's sympathy. Anne Duchêne, in an adroit and perspicacious review, elucidates Brookner's position as a supreme and consummate ironist:

"Since she came to fiction two novels ago, Anita Brookner has shown herself fascinated by the wilder shores of loneliness, and this third novel is a study in the kind of loneliness that is self-induced and self-destructive. It is very short, and very sophisticated, in the fullest sense of the term - extremely clever, and brilliantly polished. One can appreciate immediately the skill and ease with which it moves between two extreme focal lengths: one reflecting a very precise and elegant sardonic microcosm, the other a sea of raging private misery. It takes rather longer, as the author intends it should, to appreciate its full irony - that the unhappiness which first engages our sympathy should finally forfeit it" (Duchêne, 1983:289).

*Look at Me* established Anita Brookner as a cult novelist, and several reviewers contend that it should have been short-listed for the Booker Prize of 1983. Its themes are themes common to much of Pym's writing, but it is, in its relentless and morbid depiction of Frances's consciousness, in its unabated mesmerism of the reader, and in its unabashed exposure of the soul, restrained by the reins of irony and a flawless, controlled elegance of style, a much more ambitious novel than any of Barbara Pym's works. As Kate Fullbrook avers, Brookner's "powerful control of a reticent and allusive prose that only half-veils the explosiveness of her material" (1983:452) makes of the novel an exceptionally fine achievement.

*Look at Me* chronicles the worsting of the outsider, the observer, by a couple of beautiful, amoral manipulators, who are depicted with infinitely more relish (to the tune of approximately one-third of the novel, in fact)<sup>1</sup> than the cadgers and scroungers of *A Start in Life*. They exert an "emotional *droit de seigneur*" on "Little Orphan Fanny", and she is the "beggar at their feast". Unlike Duleie Mainwaring, Frances has the revenge and the catharsis of writing,<sup>2</sup> and she becomes the manipulator in this rawly articulated parable of art and the artist. The novel is a disturbing study of loneliness, of a person functioning outside the mainstream of society, of the social anachronism. Secondary themes are the power of the imagination, the transformation wrought by love, filial duty, and the panacea of work, as well as what Kate Fullbrook enumerates as the following:

- 1 Several critics have once again commented on the heroine's obtuseness. Elaine Jordan (1983:23), for example, finds "One problem is how far Frances is presented ironically. The sharpening of her self-knowledge often seems excessively depreciatory, while her bedazzlement by the aura and gusto of the Frasers can hardly be shared by the reader: we can't look at them, and the author doesn't give them marvellous things to say - they are just abominable. It is hard to say whether this is because the writer's early experience of them is constantly attended by the sadism of revenge or whether she just cannot capture in words what makes them so fascinating".

Brookner herself has intimated that she "despised" Frances Hinton "for her susceptibility, her lack of divination, her *stupidity*. I felt myself getting madder and madder as I wrote it" (Hale, 1984:98).

- 2 Duleie is cheated of her indignation in Pym's witty allusion to predestination:

"It seemed hardly suitable that the first hymn should be 'All things bright and beautiful'. Duleie sang in a loud indignant voice, waiting for the lines

The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate,  
God made them high or lowly and ordered their estate,

but they never came. Then she saw that the verse had been left out. She sat down, feeling cheated of her indignation" (NFRL:27).

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"The themes of melancholy, truth, memory and the retreat to childishness dominate the work, all contributing subtly to a novel that is a profound comment on both the well-springs of art and the art of life" (1983:452).

As is usual, Brookner articulates her themes in the opening chapter, and Frances is revealed as a character given to endless introspection, as befits the first-person narrative:

Once a thing is known it can never be unknown. It can only be forgotten. And, in a way that bends time, so long as it is remembered, it will indicate the future. It is wiser, in every circumstance, to forget, to cultivate the art of forgetting. To remember is to face the enemy. The truth lies in remembering.

My name is Frances Hinton and I do not like to be called Fanny (LM:5).

Frances Hinton works in the reference library of a medical research institute of human behaviour, and is in charge of historical pictorial material depicting various deviant or inevitable aspects of the human condition, such as melancholy, madness and death. The pictures of melancholy are particularly ironic with regard to Frances's own existence, for she attempts to keep despair at bay with work and endless walks.<sup>1</sup> Brookner distinguishes between male and female melancholy, with a dry wit which Pym (and Fabian Driver) might have appreciated:

Take the problem of melancholy, for example. I could almost write a treatise on melancholy, simply from looking through the files. In old prints melancholy is usually

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1 Brookner's heroines perambulate endless pavements in a perennial attempt to kill time.

portrayed as a woman, dishevelled, deranged, surrounded by broken pitchers, leaning casks, torn books. She may be sunk in unpeaceful sleep, heavy limbed, overpowered by her inability to take the world's measure, her compass and book laid aside. She is very frightening, but the person she frightens most is herself. She is her own disease. Dürer shows her wearing a large ungainly dress, winged, a garland in her tangled hair. She has a fierce frown and so great is her disarray that she is closed in by emblems of study, duty, and suffering: a bell, an hourglass, a pair of scales, a globe, a compass, a ladder, nails. Sometimes this woman is shown surrounded by encroaching weeds, a cobweb undisturbed above her head.<sup>1</sup> Sometimes she gazes out of the window at a full moon, for she is moonstruck. And should melancholy strike a man it will be because he is suffering from romantic love: he will lean his padded satin arm on a velvet cushion and gaze skywards under the nodding plume of his hat, or he will grasp a thorn or a nettle and indicate that he does not sleep. These men seem to me to be striking a bit of a pose, unlike the women, whose melancholy is less picturesque. The women look as if they are in the grip of an affliction too serious to be put into words. The men, on the other hand, appear to have dressed up for the occasion, and are anxious to put a noble face on their suffering. Which shows that nothing much has changed since the sixteenth century, at least in that respect (LM:6-7).

Even melancholy appears to recognise men's needs!

The library is populated by peripheral needy characters, Brookner's only concession to comedy in the novel. One is reminded of Dr Parnell, Pym's librarian obsessed with "conveniences", as Dr Simek, the reticent Czech (or Pole) and Mrs Halloran, of the drunken cliché "both come every day, largely . . . because the Library is so very well heated" (LM:10). The despair occasioned by this human detritus of the reading room is broken by the appearance of Dr Nick Fraser, who is an upmarket hare, and whose appearance and apparent charm allow him to ride roughshod over the feelings of the less for-

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1 This could well be a disturbing analogy for Marcia Ivory.

tunately endowed. Frances's lucid, candid and disinterested observations are ironical with regard to her incipient role of court jester:

It is just that occasionally, very occasionally, one meets someone who is so markedly a contrast with the general run of people that one's instinctive reaction is one of admiration, indulgence, and, no doubt, if one is not very careful indeed, of supplication. I am not arguing the rights and wrongs of this: I am simply stating the facts as they appear to me. And not only to me, for I have noticed that extremely handsome men and extremely beautiful women exercise a power over others which they themselves have no need, or indeed no time, to analyse. People like Nick attract admirers, adherents, followers. They also attract people like me: observers. One is never totally at ease with such people, for they are like sovereigns and one's duty is to divert them. Matters like worth or merit rarely receive much of their attention, for, with the power of choice which their looks bestow on them, they can change their minds whenever they care to do so. Because of their great range of possibilities, their attention span is very limited. And their beauty has accustomed them to continuous gratification (LM:14-15).

The remainder of the opening chapter is devoted to Frances's description of herself and her credentials for writing, and this is elaborated into a manifesto of the writer. Under the firm restraint of the writing, and the dispassionate introspection of Frances, there is an undercurrent of almost unbridled tension, and the following passage deserves to be quoted at length as an example of credo, theme and style:

Fortunately, I am not a hysterical person. I am used to being on my own and sometimes I doubt whether I could endure a lot of excitement. This remains an academic question, for I have never yet been tempted in this way. I am very orderly, and Spartan in my habits. I am famous for my control, which has seen me through many crises. By a supreme irony, my control is so great that these crises remain unknown to the rest of the world, and so I am thought to be unfeeling. And of course I never speak of them. That would be intolerable. If I ever suffer

loneliness it is because I have settled for the harsh destiny of dealing with these matters by myself.

Sometimes I wish it were different. I wish I were beautiful and lazy and spoiled and not to be trusted. I wish, in short, that I had it easier. Sometimes I find myself lying awake in bed, after one of these silent evenings, wondering if this is to be my lot, if this solitude is to last for the rest of my days. Such thoughts sweep me to the edge of panic. For I want more, and I even think that I deserve it. I have something to offer. I am no beauty but I am quite pleasant-looking. In fact people tell me that I am 'attractive', which always depresses me. It is like being told that you are 'brilliant', which means precisely nothing. But apart from that, I am in good health and have ample private means. I have few bad habits, apart from my sharp tongue. I have no religion, but I observe certain rules of conduct with considerable piety.<sup>1</sup> I feel quite deeply, I think. If I am not very careful, I shall grow into the most awful old battle-axe.

That is why I write, and why I have to. When I feel swamped in my solitude and hidden by it, physically obscured by it, rendered invisible, in fact, writing is my way of piping up. Of reminding people that I am here. And when I have ordered my characters, plundered my store of images, removed from them all the sadness that I might feel in myself, then I can switch on that current that allows me to write so easily, once I get started, and to make people laugh. That, it seems, is what they like to do. And if I manage this well enough and beguile all the dons and the critics, they will fail to register my real message, which is a simple one. If my looks and my manner were of greater assistance to me I could deliver this message in person. 'Look at me,' I would say. 'Look at me.' But since I am on my own in this matter, I must use subterfuge and guile, and with a bit of luck and good management this particular message will never be deciphered, and my reasons for delivering it in this manner remain obscure (LM:18-20).

With this devastating authorial confession, the writer reveals herself as mercilessly narcissistic, and on this uncomfortable note, the reader is relentlessly immersed in the story of the destruction of Frances Hinton.

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1 Once again, Christian certainty, and the therapeutic satisfaction of "the trivial round, the common task", make Pym's novels more hopeful.

Frances lives with an aged maid, Nancy, in a large and comfortable Maida Vale flat cluttered with 'thirties immemorabilia, which she has inherited from her parents. Once again, as in her previous novels, Brookner relentlessly delineates her milieu, which is stifling in its comfortable sameness. Unlike Barbara Pym's heroines, Brookner's women are unappeased by home comforts or the pleasures of the familiar:

Although the days are so different, the nights, when I hear Nancy shuffling down the corridor to lock up, and shuffling back again, are just the same. The food is the same. And I can make no more impression on the décor than did my mother (LM:26).

Filial duty, too, is imbued with anguish and terror, and Frances's mechanical movements after the death of her mother are reminiscent of that other chronicler of death, Emily Dickinson:<sup>1</sup>

She [Nancy] had been fearless in her nursing. She would hold my mother's head, during those spasms of which I cannot bear to think, while I would fly in terror to the door . . . But it was for me that my mother stayed awake, for my goodnight kiss, which I came to dread, like all the rest. 'My darling Fan', she would murmur, and Nancy would stay with her until she fell asleep (LM:26).

The plot of the novel is easily paraphrased; not so the interior action of Frances's anguished psyche. Francis King (1983:28) suggests that the theme of an innocent betrayed and destroyed by two jaded sophisticates is a familiar one, viz. *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* and *The Wings of the Dove*. Alix, Nick's

1 Cf. Dickinson's "After great pain, a formal feeling comes" (*Poem 341*), and "There's been a Death, in the Opposite House" (*Poem 389*).

beautiful and predatory wife, is willing to be diverted by Frances. Like Ned, the predator from *The Sweet Dove Died*, she and Nick take inventory of Frances's flat. Ironically, Alix plays the role of the "distressed gentlewoman",<sup>1</sup> that stalwart of Pym novels. She is the eternal confidante, and the authorial irony is heavily underscored:

I said that I thought she was performing a great service.

She sighed again. 'One likes to think so,' she said. 'And if it helps Nick . . . After all, that's my job now. And of course I am totally trustworthy. Everyone knows that. I am a *mine* of secrets' (LM:33).

Apart from desultory invitations to sample Alix's famous spaghetti, Little Orphan Fanny plays Daddy Roebucks to Nick and Alix, and like all Pym heroines is profligate with restaurant dinners. At the restaurant which they patronise, Frances is introduced to Maria, another member of the incestuous little clique, and again Frances's revelations are ironical. Energised by Nick and Alix's overwhelming *brio*, she muses:

I felt as if I had been reprieved from the most dreadful emptiness. I had tried so hard to live sensibly and without undue expectation - for my expectations, alas, have often led me to make mistakes - and now that something so encompassing and vivifying had turned up I found it difficult to believe in my luck. Good things could only follow . . . Some friends change your life . . . I had been rescued from my solitude; I had been given another chance; and I had high hopes of a future that would cancel out the past (LM:36).

Frances's relegation of herself to something inferior in the sight of these

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1 Reminiscent of Allegra Gray in *Excellent Women*.

absolute sovereigns is reminiscent of Mildred Lathbury's self-deprecation, when beguiled by the Napiers:<sup>1</sup>

I forebore to remark that women like me really expected very little - nothing, almost (EW:36).

Nick's "hectic charm . . . his generally golden quality" elevate him to Darwinian status:

The first time that I saw Nick and Alix together, I felt as if I were witnessing the vindication of nineteenth-century theories of natural selection. In the persons of Nick and Alix, the fittest had very clearly survived, leaving people like Olivia and me and Mrs Halloran and Dr Simek and Dr Leventhal to founder into unproductive obscurity. So stunning was their physical presence, one might almost say their physical triumph, that I immediately felt weak and pale, not so much decadent as undernourished, unfed by life's more potent forces, condemned to dark rooms, and tiny meals, and an obscure creeping existence which would be appropriate to my enfeebled status and which would allow me gently to decline into extinction (LM:37).

Their lives are not humdrum:

What impressed me most about this was not their breadth of view, but the fact that their lives contained no element of routine, that they would obey any summons, providing, of course, that it amused them to do so, answer any invitation, go anywhere, do anything. I thought them brave. They merely thought themselves sensible (LM:41).<sup>2</sup>

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1 Although Mildred is cognizant of the danger of Rocky's charm, as she frequently recalls the image of him in Italy, being kind to the Wren officers in their ill-fitting uniforms.

2 Rather in the manner of the Buchanans in *The Great Gatsby*, who rush off on impulse to the Plaza Hotel for mint juleps.

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The Frasers give the impression of gilded couples in old copies of the *Tattler*, "pictured here enjoying a joke". The Frasers' joke is the joke of collusion:

The Frasers' joke was of the same elevated and exclusive variety. It was no mere affair of hilarity, no spasm of passing amusement; it was, rather, an area of collusion, a shared knowledge of some ultimate delight which they desired to keep to themselves (LM:41).

There are early intimations of Frances's own incipient cruelty:

I needed to learn, from experts, that pure egotism that had always escaped me, for the little I had managed to build up, and which had so far only gone into my writing, was quickly vanquished by the sight of that tremulousness, that lost look in the eye, that *disappointment* that seemed to haunt me, to get in my way, even to obtrude on my consciousness, when I was busy building up my resources of selfishness . . . I write to be hard. I do not intend to spare any feelings, except, of course, my own (LM:43-44).<sup>1</sup>

Nick is revealed as an erotic adjunct to Alix's rapaciousness, and much as in Pym's novels, it is intimated by the coarse Mrs Halloran that it is not the "excellent women" who are rewarded:

'I hope you were paying attention. That's how to treat a man, if you ever get one, which I doubt, in this place. You won't get *him*, that's for sure. She has him by the balls' (LM:50).

The erotic kick which makes Frances a necessary accessory to their marriage,

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1 This is possibly the ultimate statement about Brookner's work, and it is this quality of "not sparing feelings" which distinguishes her from Pym's more compassionate tone.

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makes the novel reminiscent of that turbid and degenerate James Ivory film

*Quartet*:

What interested me far more, although I also found it repellent, was their intimacy as a married couple. I sensed that it was in this respect that they found my company necessary: they exhibited their marriage to me, while sharing it only with each other. I soon learned to keep a pleasant noncommittal smile on my face when they looked into each other's eyes, or even caressed each other; I felt lonely and excited. I was there because some element in that perfect marriage was deficient, because ritual demonstrations were needed to maintain a level of arousal which they were too complacent, perhaps too spoilt, even too lazy, to supply for themselves, out of their own imagination. I was the beggar at their feast, reassuring them by my very presence that they were richer than I was. Or indeed could ever hope to be (LM:57).

Frances is cast in the role of apprentice, although she fears that her bourgeois role as excellent woman might pall.

There is a constant relegation of Frances to the role of the child. Nancy still plays the nanny, and Miss Morpeth,<sup>1</sup> the retired librarian on whom Frances makes dreaded duty calls, serves her a nursery tea. Brookner, like Pym, is also adept at plangent descriptions of the "Public Holiday Syndrome", of empty Sundays, and lonely Christmas days spent by lonely souls and emotional derelicts in the launderette. Under the mentorship of Nick and Alix, Frances, like Mildred, undergoes a change, as she endeavours to divest herself of the bourgeois way of life which entails "regularity of behaviour and courtesy of manner and due attention paid to the existence of other people".

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1 Miss Morpeth, ironically, is the needy antithesis of Miss Grimes, and would be a more appropriate beneficiary of Ianthe's ministrations.

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She realises that "these things have little currency where matters of love and friendship are concerned" and "that an attractive shamelessness is a good passport to social success" (LM:59).

Alix, who is "extremely good about practical arrangements, and seemed able to dispose of anybody's random or unfinished business, their previous contracts, their future plans, with an efficiency that amounted to *brio*" (LM:72),<sup>1</sup> wishes to instal Frances in their spare room, but she is hesitant to accept, for she has her novel to write, and the silent flat in Maida Vale, with the amorphous Nancy in attendance, is more conducive to writing. Dr James Anstey makes the quartet complete; his haughty demeanour makes him reminiscent of Mildred Lathbury's Everard Bone.<sup>2</sup>

Frances and James are drawn to each other, so much so that Frances forsakes her writing in her new-found love and happiness. Her explanation of the writer's torment and ferment is analogous to Brookner's own,<sup>3</sup> and turbulent emotion is encapsulated in the attar of restrained prose:

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1 Brookner seems unable to write a sentence which does not reverberate with irony or is not rife with layers of meaning.

2 Brookner fails to imbue her male protagonists with personalities of their own, cf. Maurice in *Providence* who remains, as Marion Glastonbury contends "part-iron and part-knitting pattern: a pair of ivory ears over a cashmere pullover" (1982:25), and they remain extensions of the heroines' consciousness.

3 Cf. Haffenden (1985:62), in interview with Anita Brookner:

"It's a very perverse energy which has gone into the novels - conversion hysteria, I would say. If I could say it, I would; as I can't say it, I have to write it. And I can't say it because there is no one to listen: people don't want to hear it. I wish I could cry, scream, stamp, make myself felt, but I can't. Other people don't want to hear: they find it embarrassing, out of bounds."

And I did not write for many evenings that followed. In my new security I began to see it all in a different light. I began to hate that inner chemical excitement that made me run the words through in my head while getting ready to set them down on the page; I felt a revulsion against the long isolation that writing imposes, the clausturation, the sense of exclusion; I experienced a thrill of distaste for the alternative life that writing is supposed to represent. It was then that I saw the business of writing for what it truly was and is to me. It is your penance for not being lucky. It is an attempt to reach others and to make them love you. It is your instinctive protest, when you find you have no voice at the world's tribunals, and that no one will speak for you. I would give my entire output of words, past, present, and to come, in exchange for easier access to the world, for permission to state 'I hurt' or 'I hate' or 'I want'. Or, indeed, 'Look at me'. And I do not go back on this. For once a thing is known it can never be unknown. It can only be forgotten. And writing is the enemy of forgetfulness, of thoughtlessness. For the writer there is no oblivion. Only endless memory (LM:84).<sup>1</sup>

Frances is rejuvenated and transformed by love; this is symbolised by her recognition of the needs of Nancy, and the refurbishing of her wardrobe. Like all Brookner heroines, she has been delivered from decrepit and lonely old age by a man, a rescuer:

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1 In reply to John Haffenden's statement to Brookner: "You clearly committed yourself to an enormous emotional investment in writing *Look at Me*", her answer was "It didn't pay off. I saw it through, and predictably I was ill afterwards" (Haffenden, 1985:61).

With what thankfulness did I register my deliverance from this dread, which had possessed me for as long as I could remember. I breathed more deeply, slept more soundly, ate more heartily, freed from this weight. Nancy's mumblings and shufflings ceased to bother me, for they no longer represented the shades of the prison house. In fact I began to love her as I had loved her long ago, when, as a child, I ran to her to be kissed, and made up treats for her . . . I resurrected a pale grey dress with a white puritan collar and a black bow at the neck that I had not worn for a couple of years and had folded up and put aside because I thought it looked too elaborate for the sort of life I led. Now, as I examined myself with a franker sort of appreciation, I thought it made me look interesting, almost unusually so. I began to look forward to dressing up for the day that lay before me (LM:86-87).

Like all Brookner men, James remains a shadowy cipher; the courtship ritual appears to consist of long nocturnal walks from the restaurant followed by a nightcap left for the lovers by Nancy. Seen through Frances's eyes, through the persona of the first-person narrator, he appears once again as the mythical rescuer, a physical presence endowed with god-like qualities:

I began to see him as one of those persons whose destiny I had always desired to follow. To be in his company, to hold his hand, to feel his large fingers tighten round my own, made me feel very humble, very fortunate, very chosen (LM:92).

There is a constant reiteration of Frances's deverbilisation through love; her transformation through her love for James has rendered her wordless, unable to confide in Alex, "she who must be obeyed", and who demands and devours confidenees:

It was not like anything I had ever known before. But I seemed to be unable to explain this to her. Or rather she seemed unable to accept it. Perhaps I was simply at a loss, for suddenly all the available words, scenarios, plots,

exaggerations, seemed to have failed me. That was the most extraordinary thing; I was wordless. Yet Alix could not see that this was the most extraordinary thing. I could, but she couldn't. She assumed that I was being furtive. 'Darling,' she would call out to Nick, 'she's holding out on me again.' I would laugh, as I always did, although I was making such rapid strides in self-confidence that I thought it time she took James and myself for granted. But as she had introduced us, she felt she had a proprietorial right in the matter, and she would often exercise this. There was, I perceived, a certain feudalism in her attitude; she not only exacted a sort of emotional *droit de seigneur*; she extended this into perpetual suzerainty. Part of me observed this, but there was nothing I could do about it. I had lost the words with which I might once have investigated the matter (LM:92).

The subtle corruption of James begins when Alix persuades James to take their spare room. Frances's gradual disillusionment, the disengagement of the love affair, is possibly the best part of the novel. Nick and Alix are also gradually revealed as the predators that they are. The spare room has connotations of ensnarement, and the reader is reminded of Leonora Eyre's spare room which completes the ensnarement of another James:

. . . the image, coming from some basement area of my personality and imagination, presented itself as extremely disturbing. Collusive. I saw the three of them talking together, laughing. I was particularly alarmed by this, the laughter. I could find no clue to it (LM:102);

My state of doubt was curious. I knew that James loved me and yet I felt that he was in danger. Or that I was in danger. This was not quite clear to me. I felt that I was being hurried along a path that I had not originally wanted to take, or at least not with so much dispatch, so much secrecy. I had wanted the company of my friends to sustain my golden enjoyment and my new future, but those friends had turned into spectators, demanding their money's worth, urging their right to be entertained. And I no longer wanted to be available for that particular function (LM:105).

Frances's distraught state of consciousness is portrayed with considerable skill by Brookner. She is perturbed by James's cool behaviour: either he is humouring Alix at her expense, or Alix has fallen in love with him and is trying to estrange Frances from James:

When this thought came I found I could not dislodge it and it swirled round and round in my head with accompaniment of ugly and erotic images. I saw the three of them in some hateful collusion, as I had once pictured them at the breakfast table, laughing. Pictured here enjoying a joke. My madness disposed them in arrangements which I did not know I knew. I heard Mrs Halloran saying once again, 'She has him by the balls', and I acknowledged the power and capricious will of Alix, her mastery, her autonomy, her fearlessness. She who must be obeyed (LM:119-120).

Frances makes a last-ditch effort to regain James, to "prove myself viable", by attempting to sexually consummate the relationship. Frances's new-found maturity, symbolised by Nancy's no longer locking the door at night, dissolves when James rejects her advances, and she deduces from James's rejection that "he had looked on me only as a friend, that this was a friendship that must be preserved in its nursery simplicity, with its healthy walks and its cups of coffee" (LM:129). The rosewood cigarette box becomes a symbol of sexual maturity, and Frances is reduced to childhood once again:

That was how I saw the rosewood cigarette box again, looking very large. It looked large because I was so small; I was running a child's hand over the slightly irregular, slightly imperfect edge. I was repeating the gesture over and over again. I had nothing else to do, because I was a child and I was waiting for the adults to come back from what was so mysteriously keeping them and to allow me once again into their company (LM:131).

When Frances calls on Niek and Alix after her traumatic visit to Miss Morpeth, she finds them methodically demolishing a box of chocolates while mesmerised

by the spurious emotions of a television soap opera. Their voyeuristic and gluttonous emotions are well illustrated by this apparently trivial incident, a parallel for their treatment of Frances. Two reviewers have remarked on Alix's propensity for eating people; the relevance of the chocolate parallel has, however, escaped the critics:

"Frances is young and rather pretty . . . but she is cursed with good manners, the kind that impede appetite. For all her need to be noticed, she is not quite hungry enough, not like Alix Forbes [sic], who eats people. Those who continue to interest or amuse her are digested; the rest Alix spits out. Frances, or Little Orphan Fanny . . . gives her a few months of good chewing" (Cantwell, 1983:14).

Frances is excluded "by a special loneliness" as Nick and Alix flaunt the more intimate aspects of their marriage before her, and Frances's final humiliation is a public one at the restaurant, where James is revealed as the coarse Maria's lover. (Significantly Alix is clad in sinuous black, rather like a panther.) Frances's ruin and disillusionment are complete as she views the lords of misrule amidst the debris of the meal, and the fact that she has the last word, in her defence of Olivia, is a significant pointer to her future role:

'Well . . . she's crippled.'

I said, 'Only physically', and I must have spoken rather loudly, because there was a brief silence (LM:161).

Frances's nightmare journey through the dark streets of London provides the opportunity for introspection and revision, a kind of dark night of the soul;

significantly, on her arrival at the flat, Nancy has locked the door, and Frances is temporarily reduced to childhood again in her revival by the sympathetic but unspoken ministrations of her old nanny. However, Frances has grown up, innocence has been routed by experience, and in a significant piece of symbolic writing, Frances is put to sleep in her mother's bed, wearing her mother's nightgown.

The novel which Frances will write will not be a Pym-like comedy of manners; the novel will not skate over the surface, jazz things up, or play for laughs. The novel will not be a satire: "What disturbed me most was my absence of anger, for without anger where is the satire?" (LM:180). The novel will tell the truth. The novel which Frances will write is *Look at Me*:

It is very quiet now. A voice says, 'My darling Fan.' I pick up my pen. I start writing (LM:192).

Frances has become the predator, feeding off people like Nick and Alix for material. The court jester has become the knowing fool; her emotional attainment is avenged. Anne Duchêne comments that "the ultimate readjustment, for the reader, is having to realize that Frances, with whom initially we were ready to sympathize, is a very disturbing and distasteful character herself, who has met her match in Alix and has been routed" (1983:289). The reader is, of course, given intimations of the less appealing aspects of Frances's nature, as it is James who informs her of the pathos behind the lives of the inhabitants of the library, and Miss Morpeth, who not only reveals the insincerity and vacuity of the Fraser duo, but also gives Frances a disconcerting insight into her own soul.

*Look at Me* is an impeccably crafted novel; the images of melancholy, madness and death which introduce it are consummately realised in Brookner's revelation of Frances's psyche. With Miss Morpeth's breakdown, Frances's avowal might be taken as Brookner's own artistic creed, for *Look at Me* is a revelation of the rawest emotion in the sparest of prose:

I looked at Miss Morpeth, now tearing angrily at the corner of her handkerchief, her mouth making small gobbling movements, and I saw that maybe the instinct to avoid the truth was a healthy one, for if one were to give way to such a display of naked need how could one ever recover any semblance of adulthood? To have the world see one in such a state of disorder seemed to me at that moment so terrible that I began once again to revise my estimate of human behaviour and to see new virtues in civilized dissimulation.<sup>1</sup> One must, at all events, keep up appearances. And as Miss Morpeth slowly righted herself, and I sat there warily, waiting for it to be safe to leave, I made a vow that I must never draw attention to myself in that way, must never cry my need (LM:139-140).

Kakutani calls Brookner a "fastidious craftsman who always keeps the moral vision of this novel in sharp focus", and characterises her writing as a "spare, felicitous prose". The device of the first-person narrator appropriately balances irony and compassion (1983b:14). The reader of *Look at Me* is unable to be disaffected; the novel is not one which can be read with any equanimity, but although the book is an emotional blockbuster, the tension hums beneath the surface, controlled at an insidious pitch. *Look at Me* is Brookner's most

1 Civilised dissimulation would appear to be a peculiarly British trait, cf. No *Fond Return of Love*:

"... Perhaps I've said too much.'  
'Oh, that's all right. It's better when people say what they really think.'  
'Is it? How could we ever carry on with our everyday life if we did that?'" (NFRL:252-253).

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consummate and disturbing literary creation; manners have been sacrificed totally to melancholy:

". . . Anita Brookner's talent is deceptive: her 'little bit (two inches wide) of ivory' gives form to important and substantial matters - including art and reality, aspiration and actuality - with rigorous perception and wit. There is a protest at the heart of her fiction, a shock recorded precisely and unsentimentally: to be gifted but without cunning is to be out of step with modern manners. Naïve expectations, self-deception, a dishonesty and flagrant disingenuousness: such are her subjects, and the small scale of her novels should not mislead us into thinking that her themes are narrow. Brookner's unflinchingly clear-eyed inspection of personal conduct and motive, and her exceptional stylistic gifts, make an adroit and painful combination" (Haffenden, 1985:57-58).

*Look at Me* is superficially comparable to *Quartet in Autumn* in its relentless evocation of the truth. The bulk of Barbara Pym's work is less plangent, however, and never achieves the relentless artistic heights of *Look at Me*, a novel which elevates Brookner to the level of being one of the great writers of contemporary English fiction. Pym reveals humour, wit and compassion through dialogue and conversations; Brookner's conversations are more disconcerting, as they are monologues with the terror and pathos of the human heart.

Elaine Jordan (1983:23) says that *Look at Me* is "not a novel of scenes, but a meditation on experience in the French tradition". In an interview with Michael Barber, Brookner admitted to Stendhal as a favourite writer, and her comments might be appropriated to fit much of her own work:

"Stendhal,' she replied, in a voice suddenly husky. 'Got to be him. Courage. Wit. Lack of sentiment. Very deep feeling. Tremendous style . . . And irony. which can be very tender'" (Harber, 1983a:27).

#### 5.4 *Hotel du Lac*

Brookner's fourth novel, *Hotel du Lac*, swept the boards for the 1984 Booker McConnell Prize, in the face of stiff opposition from J.G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*, and *Flaubert's Parrot*, by Julian Barnes. Rupert Lancaster, publicity director at Cape, comments on the enormous sales engendered by Brookner's winning of this prestigious prize:

"When we sat down last summer to decide on the print run for Anita Brookner's fourth novel *Hotel du Lac* we had a good track record to go on but hardly overwhelming popular success. Sales had been increasing from about 2,000 to about 3,000.

"All three previous novels had received considerable acclaim. Anita Brookner had been interviewed in all the right places. It was even whispered that she had a Barbara Pym-like following. Everybody thought *Hotel du Lac* a very strong book with a very good jacket which could be a breakthrough in sales terms. And we were nervously confident that *Hotel du Lac* would be on the Booker shortlist. So the first print run was fixed at 4,000" (Lancaster, 1985:1604).

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By 25 January 1985 (*Hotel du Lac* was published on 6 September 1984), the novel had sold 51,021 copies, and a television film of the novel was released early in 1986.

Anita Brookner herself has conceded that *Hotel du Lac* is the least "impure" of her novels, the least autobiographical in terms of personal *angst*, at least (Haffenden, 1985:59). After three somewhat unmitigatedly gloomy novels, Brookner, with some insight, remarked: "I feel I could get into the *Guinness Book of Records* as the world's loneliest, most miserable woman! I felt very pleased about the first novel - because I didn't think I could do it - and people were pleased with me; but since then it's been downhill all the way. I hope this latest novel, *Hotel du Lac*, will slightly redeem me in the public eye" (Haffenden, 1985:75).

Although *Hotel du Lac* reveals a high propensity for subtle literary allusion, it is not based on such rigid literary analogies as *A Start in Life* and *Providence*. In reply to John Haffenden's statement that "I think the analogies and correspondences you draw between *Adolphe* and *Providence* are particularly striking and illuminating", Brookner admitted: "It's a little bit mechanical, I think, or forced: I wouldn't do that again" (Haffenden, 1985:66).

The reader is thus spared too much literary correlation, and unlike in the previous novels, the themes are not insistently imposed on the novel at the outset, but emerge from Édith's consciousness in contemplating the "apparently dreadful thing" which has exiled her to the Hotel du Lac in Switzerland, and from her observation (for once again this is a novel about the outsider) of her

fellow guests, most of whom are in seclusion for not toeing the line imposed by characters who are stronger than they are.

*Hotel du Lac* is less consciously contrived; the over-insistent irony of the previous novels has been subjugated by a cool, sardonic, and sometimes malicious wit. The novel examines the question, "What behaviour most becomes a woman", in its contemplation of the hares and tortoises which populate it. It examines the loneliness of the outsider or observer, while contemplating options for happiness. In its contemplation of the travail of writing, it is lighter than the previous novel, for although Brookner contends that truth is a prerequisite for fiction (although not for pulp romances of "fantasy and obfuscation"), this is leavened by light and malicious jibes at "bodice rippers", literary role models, and even, in the manner of Pym in *A Few Green Leaves*, a few jokes at the expense of modern jargon. As in *Providence* and *Look at Me*, dissimulation and control are the most important criteria:

I too have a past, she thought, with an uncharacteristic spurt of indignation. I too have had my deaths and my departures, some of them quite recent. But I have learned to shield them, to hide them from sight, to keep them at bay. To exhibit my wounds would, for me, denote an emotional incontinence of which I might later be ashamed (HL:83).<sup>1</sup>

For this suppression of "emotional incontinence", Anita Brookner uses the vehicle of a comedy of manners, and the melancholic introspection, combined with the company of sophisticated society and the wit of repartee, makes of the

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1 HL refers to BROOKNER, Anita. 1985b. *Hotel du Lac*. London : Triad/Panther.

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novel a peculiarly British genre, in which the unbridled release of emotion would be un-English, and therefore unthinkable.

Edith Hope (a felicitous choice of name) is a writer of romantic fiction (like Catherine Oliphant of *Less than Angels*) under the "more thrusting" Bloomsbury pseudonym of Vanessa Wilde,<sup>1</sup> and who has been exiled to the Hotel du Lac,

. . . a place which was unlikely to attract unfavourable attention, a place guaranteed to provide a restorative sojourn for those whom life had mistreated or merely fatigued. Its name and situation figured in the card indexes of those whose business it is to know such things. Certain doctors knew it, many solicitors knew it, brokers and accountants knew it. Travel agents did not know it, or had forgotten it. Those families who benefit from the periodic absence of one of their more troublesome members treasured it (H1:15),

for jilting her prosaic fiancé on their wedding day. Unlike that of *Look at Me*, the narrative is not first-person, and therefore less disturbing, but the novel's perspective is visualised through the eyes of Edith, and the first-person narration of her letters to her married lover, David, intensifies the limited point of view.

Edith is, in most respects (except as a sexual recivist, perhaps), an excellent woman *par excellence*:

For I am not to be allowed my lapse, as if I were an artless girl, she thought; and why should I be? I am a

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<sup>1</sup> A literary joke for the hyper-literate reader. Vanessa was Virginia Woolf's elder sister (there are constant allusions to Edith's resemblance to Virginia Woolf) and Oscar Wilde, of course, was the supreme exponent of the English comedy of manners.

serious woman who should know better and am judged by my friends to be past the age of indiscretion; several people have remarked upon my physical resemblance to Virginia Woolf; I am a householder, a ratepayer, a good plain cook, and a deliverer of typescripts well before the deadline; I sign anything that is put in front of me; I never telephone my publisher, and I make no claims for my particular sort of writing, although I understand that it is doing quite well. I have held this rather dim and trusting personality together for a considerable length of time, and although I have certainly bored others I was not to be allowed to bore myself. My profile was deemed to be low and it was agreed by those who thought they knew me that it should stay that way (HL:8-9).

Edith has the deprecating manner, as well as the grit and resilience of Pym's excellent women:

. . . and here was this mild-looking, slightly bony woman in a long cardigan, distant, inoffensive, quite nice eyes, rather large hands and feet, meek neck, not wanting to go anywhere, but having given my word that I would stay away for a month until everyone decides that I am myself again. For a moment I panicked, for I am myself now, and was then, although this fact was not recognized. Not drowning, but waving (HL:10).

Much of the action of the novel is reiterated in the long letters to David (which are never posted). Edith's affair with David, a married auctioneer, tends to strain the reader's credulity, for we are led to believe that Edith, with her succession of long cardigans, and her Virginia Woolf (or Princess Anne) appearance, and sheep-like expression, a drinker of Perrier water, is capable of sustaining a torridly impetuous, if intermittent affair with the pragmatic David, while being courted by the staid Geoffrey (who had looked after his mother so well). After exchanging exactly thirteen words at Penelope's party:

When he came, as she knew he would, two or three hours later, they said nothing but looked at each other long and hard. In bed, they fell instantly into a warm mutual sleep, arms around each other, and when they woke, almost simultaneously, they had laughed with pleasure (III:60).

She feeds him what Barbara Hardy (1984:1019) refers to as "the most amazing post-coital feasts in fact and fiction" - egg, beans, chips and egg custard, while David drops by for what Martha Bayles bluntly calls "a quick boff every four to six weeks" (1985:37). As far as suitors are concerned, Edith's are even less prepossessing (especially in the moral sense) than Pym's mild anthropologists and fusty vicars.

Edith is engaged in the manufacture of literary pabulum, and while the title of her latest potboiler has intimations of Shakespeare's Cleopatra, Brookner is not above a small joke at her own expense, much in the manner of Pym:

She even wrote a few paragraphs of *Beneath the Visiting Moon*, then on re-reading them, realized that she had used the same device in *The Stone and the Star*, and crossed them out (II:24).

At the literary luncheon with her publisher, there are Pym-like intimations of wit when he tries to persuade her to enter the "bodice ripper" market:

'I like the idea of the new one,' said Harold, after a longish pause. 'Although I have to tell you that the romantic market is beginning to change. It's sex for the young woman executive now, the *Cosmopolitan* reader, the girl with the executive briefcase.'

. . .

'What does she take with her on that business trip to Brussels?'

'Glasgow,' emended Edith.

'What? Oh, well, probably. But anyway, she wants something to reassure her that being liberated is fun. She wants something to flatter her ego when she is spending a lonely night in an hotel. She wants something to reflect her lifestyle.'

'Harold,' said Edith, 'I simply do not know anyone who has a lifestyle. What does it mean? It implies that everything you own was bought at exactly the same time, about five years ago, at the most' (HL:26-27).

According to Edith, women prefer the old myths:

'... They want to believe that they are going to be discovered, looking their best, behind closed doors, just when they thought that all was lost, by a man who has battled across continents, abandoning whatever he may have had in his in-tray, to reclaim them . . .' (HL:27).

The most potent myth of all is that of the hare and the tortoise:

'People love this one, especially women. Now you will notice, Harold, that in my books it is the mouse-like unassuming girl who gets the hero, while the scornful temptress with whom he has had a stormy affair retreats baffled from the fray, never to return. The tortoise wins every time. This is a lie, of course . . . In real life, of course, it is the hare who wins. Every time. Look around you. And in any case it is my contention that Aesop was writing for the tortoise market. Axiomatically,' she cried, her voice rising with enthusiasm. 'Hares have no time to read. They are too busy winning the game. The propaganda goes all the other way, but only because it is the tortoise who is in need of consolation. Like the meek who are going to inherit the earth,' she added, with a brief smile . . .

'Of course,' said Edith, ladling chips of sugar coloured like bath salts into her coffee, 'you could argue that the hare might be affected by the tortoise lobby's propaganda, might become more prudent, circumspect, slower, in fact. But

.the hare is always convinced of his own superiority; he simply does not recognize the tortoise as a worthy adversary. That is why the hare wins,' she concluded. 'In life, I mean. Never in fiction. At least, not in mine. The facts of life are too terrible to go into my kind of fiction' (HL:27-28).<sup>1</sup>

Many of the inhabitants of the genteel hotel are tortoises: Mme de Bonneuil is a refugee from her son's marriage, Monica is a titled anorectic, who has to provide an heir for her husband. Only Mrs Pusey and her daughter Jennifer, two creations of Dickensian girth ("veritable concentrations of energy, as well as of charm") are there on their own steam, so as to speak. Mrs Pusey and Jennifer are monuments to the consumerism which Edith has failed to scale ("Where they saw luxury goods, she saw only houses of detention").

Mrs Pusey and Jennifer are the antithesis of Edith, and exacerbate her loneliness:

It was all very well to write up Mrs Pusey and Jennifer, but she was still left with that memory of the two women lovingly entwined as they saw her to the door to say goodnight. For there was love there, love between mother and daughter, and physical contact, the collusion about being pretty, none of which she herself had ever known (III:48).

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1 The last statement is, of course, an ironic comment on the author's own art. Brookner has contended that literature can damage life, and at the same time provide role models:

"I believe it's the virtue and value of fiction. But I think the lessons taught in great books are misleading. The commerce in life is rarely so simple and never so just" (Haffenden, 1985:66).

Cf. also Catherine Oliphant's appraisal of the romantic novelist's role (LA:5).

Like Ruth Weiss, Edith is the archetypal Brookner outsider, created by a disappointed mother and a mild, aphoristic father: "Now, Edith . . . this is where character tells . . . Think again Edith . . . You have made a false equation."

In this novel about marriages of convenience, steps a Henry Jamesian figure, Mr Neville, of the "occasional and secret smile", elegant in panama hats and deer-stalkers, depending on the exigencies of the weather. Brookner generally favours a Byronic hero, but more aptly, given his nature, he resembles a portrait of the Duke of Wellington. Although the novel has Jamesian echoes, Brookner has the grace to concede elsewhere:

She dreaded making nonsense of something precious to her, and, regretfully, disqualified Henry James (HL:66).<sup>1</sup>

During a walk with Mr Neville, both characters reveal a *modus operandi* for life, in conversation redolent of Jane Austen and Henry James, not to mention Barbara Pym:

'Without a huge emotional investment, one can do whatever one pleases. One can take decisions, change one's mind, alter one's plans. There is none of the anxiety of waiting to see if that one other person has everything she desires, if she is discontented, upset, restless, bored. One can be as pleasant or as ruthless as one wants. If one is prepared to do the one thing one is drilled out of doing from earliest childhood - simply please oneself - there is no reason why one should ever be unhappy again' (HL:94-95).

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<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the posturing Aylwin Forbes, who packs *Portrait of a Lady* for his trip to Taviseombe, and ends up talking in an affected Jamesian manner himself (NFRL:241, 246).

Unselfishness, according to Mr Neville, is "a lesson for serfs" (HL:96), but Edith cannot tolerate his life of "low moral standards". She cannot renounce love:

'I cannot think or act or speak or write or even dream with any kind of energy in the absence of love. I feel excluded from the living world. I become cold, fish-like, immobile. I implode. My idea of absolute happiness is to sit in a hot garden all day, reading, or writing, utterly safe in the knowledge that the person I love will come home to me in the evening. Every evening . . . I am not a romantic. I am a domestic animal. I do not sigh and yearn for extravagant displays of passion, for the grand affair, the world well lost for love. I know all that, and know that it leaves you lonely. No, what I crave is the simplicity of routine. An evening walk, arm in arm, in fine weather. A game of cards. Time for idle talk. Preparing a meal together.'

'Putting the cat out?' suggested Mr Neville.

Edith gave him a look of pure dislike (HL:98).

Mr Neville has a Jane Austen-like concept of the social status which marriage confers on a woman:

'What you need, Edith, is not love. What you need is a social position. What you need is marriage' (HL:101).

He offers Edith a loveless marriage of "pride, prejudice and position": his small estate, Regency Gothic house, a well-known collection of *famille rose* dishes (can he really also possess "a sizable electronics firm?"), in return for her reassurance that she "will not shame me, will not ridicule me, *will not hurt my feelings*" (HL:166). The reader is reminded of the several marriages of convenience proposed rather more comically in *Some Tame Gazelle*. Philip Neville's proposal is reminiscent of that of St John Rivers in *Jane Eyre*, and of Everard Bone's in *Excellent Women*. However, it is crueller:

'You are a lady, Edith. They are rather out of fashion these days, as you may have noticed. As my wife, you will do very well. Unmarried, I'm afraid you will soon look a bit of a fool' (HL:165),

and this cruelty is compounded by his vicious and chilling reaction to Edith's tears:

'Edith', said Mr Neville. 'Please don't cry. I cannot bear to see a woman cry; it makes me want to hit her . . .'

(HL:168).

One senses parallels with several Pym situations in his proposal of a partnership "based on esteem".<sup>1</sup> His behaviour, however, is at ironic odds with his affirmations.

The significance of the nocturnal closing doors (and other sedulous clues) which have penetrated Edith's consciousness during her stay at the hotel is revealed when she slips out of her room early the following morning to post the letter to David in which she tells him of her intended marriage. Mr Neville has, predictably, spent the night with the nubile Jennifer. Edith is the one Brookner heroine who has the courage of her convictions to believe in her own creations. Her subsequent telegram to David, however, has ironic intimations of a bleak future, as she is not returning to cosy domesticity, but to a one-sided and desultory affair:

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1 Edith, like Mildred in *Excellent Women* and Miss Morrow in *Crampton Hodnet*, instinctively knows that "respect and esteem [are] cold, lifeless things - dry bones picked clean of flesh" (CH:94). Pym's heroines, however, generally sacrifice romanticism and opt for pragmatism.

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When the requisite form had been found, she sat down at a small glass table in the lobby. 'Simmonds, Chiltern Street, London W1,' she wrote. 'Coming home.' But, after a moment, she thought that this was not entirely accurate and, crossing out the words 'Coming home,' wrote simply, 'Returning' (HL:184).

Once again, a profession, a home, and independence, financial and otherwise, count for very little with Brookner's women.

Edith's long, unposted letters to David, the stilted James-speak of much of the dialogue,<sup>1</sup> the anachronistic snobbery evidenced in much of the novel,<sup>2</sup> an ambivalent moral tone (Edith's superiority to the guests, her imperviousness to adultery), and above all, long descriptive passages and Ciceronian sentences in which the bleak natural surroundings are conducive to Edith's hopeless inertia, are weaknesses in the novel. The following is possibly a representative passage in which the pathetic fallacy is in excess of the emotion which prompted it. These passages are prolific, and the reader's heart tends to sink at the outset of the novel, on realising that the location of the hotel lends itself admirably to Brookner's inevitable walks, fraught with rumination and introspection:

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1 It vacillates between Henry James and Jane Austen, although Brookner manages Mrs Pusey's monologues to perfection.

2 Evident in remarks which seem questionable in 1984:

"There is a nuance in Mrs Pusey's behaviour, and even something, dare I say it, about the cut of Jennifer's jib, that leads me to suspect that my husband might have been the kind of man who calls a shop a retail outlet" (HL:47);

"'Loaded,' said the other. 'Trade, of course. Darling Daddy left them a packet'" (HL:69).

But no, he had forced her on to this terrible boat, this almost deserted and pilotless vessel, from which there was no hope of rescue; she saw them drifting, their aimlessness raised to almost mythological status, into ever thicker mists, while real people, on the shore, went on with their real lives, indifferent to this ghost ship which seemed, to Edith, almost to have passed out of normal existence. For this reason she clung rather tightly to Mr Neville's arm, for, although himself a curiously mythological personage, he nevertheless managed to represent almost tangible reality (HL:160).

These weaknesses are mitigated by a deft, retrospective narrative structure,<sup>2</sup> and comic characters which are portrayed with witty acumen and sympathy (although Edith's reflections on Mrs Pusey on the occasion of her birthday party might be construed as mealy-mouthed). Nonetheless, her depiction of Mrs Pusey and her clone daughter Jennifer verges on Dickensian gusto, and it is in her portrayal of comic characters that she verges on mordant satire.<sup>3</sup> Brookner is adept at turning out the felicitous phrase, capturing a mood, character or incident in an adroit sentence, as in Kiki's (a worthy successor to Mrs Beltane's Felix, in *No Fond Return of Love*) little "accident":

A puddle on the last step brought a momentary closing of the eyes and a quick snap of the fingers from the manager. As a boy in a white jacket wielded a cloth, impassively, as if this happened fairly often, the manager of the Hotel du Lac (Famille Huber) indicated to Edith Hope his distress

- 1 Brookner always sees men as heroes and rescuers.
- 2 Although Bayles (1985:38) is more scathing: "As for her London indiscretion, it is prudent of Miss Brookner not to reveal the details any sooner. If she did, the reader's interest might go from limp to flaccid."
- 3 In *Look at Me*, Brookner acknowledges anger as a prerequisite for satire. Her treatment of Mrs Pusey voices disapprobation and asperity, rather than anger; however the cutting edge is indubitably there:

"She was, Edith thought, an embodiment of the kind of propaganda no contemporary woman could stoop to countenance . . ." (HL:39).

that this incident should mar her arrival, and at the same time expressed disassociation from the misdemeanours of animals and, more important, from those unwise enough to harbour them (HL:16).

In addition, there are vivid nuances of the writing of Barbara Pym. There is much talk by Mr Neville of "excellent women" and "esteem", which recalls "excellent women whom one respects and esteems" (EW:237). The most striking parallel occurs in Edith's conversation with Mr Neville, which seems to be pure, plagiarised Pym:

Mr Neville noticed the brief spasm of feeling that passed over Edith's face, and observed, 'You may feel better if you tell me about it.'

'Oh, do you think that it true?' she enquired, breathing rather hard. 'And even if it is, do you guarantee that the results will be immediately felt? Like those obscure advertisements for ointment that help you to "obtain relief". One is never quite sure from what,' she went on. 'Although there is sometimes a tiny drawing of a man, rather correctly dressed, with a hand pressed to the small of his back' (FL:92);

'Yes,' Dulcie paused, and then went on, 'I had seen an advertisement in the *Telegraph* - an appeal for some distressed gentlewoman, a general's daughter living in very "reduced" circumstances - you know how I can never bear things like that.' She smiled apologetically. 'I sent the money there - it wasn't very much, but it brought some kind of relief. Oh dear, now I sound like Miss Lord and her television advertisements - so many things seem to bring "relief"' (NFRL:102).<sup>1</sup>

Although most of the plethora of reviews were positive, even effusive, some less complimentary voices were raised. Barbara Hardy concedes that the novel's

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1 The novel is rife with literary allusions, from quotations: "A cold coming we had of it", to a style which is redolent of Dickens, James, Austen, and, of course, Pym.

best achievement is Edith's deliberate choice of a fate which is, after all, not one worse than death:

"She is only one of all the lonely people, whose lives are worse, and whose courage is better, than we first suspect. Deprivation and boredom are the norm, but ending up with rather less than half a loaf is not too bad. Making us feel this is the book's best achievement, more interesting and true than the demonstration of Edith's persistent illusion of monogamous, faithful and unique love" (Hardy, 1984:1019). This also brings Brookner's creation closer than any other to Pym's more pragmatic women.

Adam Mars-Jones comments that Brookner protects Edith from all but the lightest ironies. Like Frances in *Look at Me*, "if Edith is meant to be such a mouse, why do her little paws show traces of blood?".

"Edith prefers to disguise her power, and hugs close to herself the knowledge that she is underestimated (by friends who don't know about David, and who fail to see their portraits in her books), but she is plentifully armed. It is just that she (or her author) cannot admit that intelligence is power (as her professional career convincingly demonstrates), or she would need to devise a new persona altogether . . . *Hotel du Lac* works so hard at the limpness of its heroine that it has a perversely bracing effect . . . so Brookner's heroine may make her readers resolve, on next meeting a quiet, shy, painfully sensitive novelist (romantic or otherwise), to give him or her a shake. *Hotel du Lac* is divided between narcissism and self-mortification, between wallowing and astringency; the curious combination of urges that might lead a person, say, to take an ice-cold bubble bath" (Mars-Jones, 1985:18-19).

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Martha Bayles, in a scathing review (1985:38), finds Brookner's literary analogy a false equation:

"By this new standard [Brookner's deliberate embrace of the 'women's fiction' genre, with its contention that there is no subject more compelling than a woman's search for true love], Miss Brookner has written a terribly sophisticated fiction, which not only comments on a certain pulp tradition, but also elevates that tradition to the level of art, by rejecting those who would reject it. In the end it is respect, nor irony, that gets paid to Edith's line of work. In other words, *Hotel du Lac* is a Harlequin Romance for highbrows."

Bayles seems to confuse the genre with the sentiments expressed in it; one would surely have to be a very carping critic to dismiss love out of hand, as she does. After all, Edith settles for a fairly shoddy second-best, in her implied return to David, where marriage (and possibly even real love) are precluded.

Bayles sees the novel as a manifestation of the English trait of preserving the proprieties of good manners (1985:38):

"The reader is probably wondering: if this novel is really so claustrophobic, how did it win the classiest literary prize in Great Britain? One explanation might be that it works as a comedy of manners, capturing a peculiar mode of frustration, which occurs whenever the English encounter one another in a foreign place. Instead of avoiding each other or plunging into forced intimacy (as Americans are apt to do), the English observe the proprieties. But the more

rootless the situation, the more trapped the English become by their own politeness towards strangers they would just as soon ignore."

A more feasible explanation, also cognizant of Pym's use of the comedy of manners, is that the wit and irony implicit in this genre bolster and "straitlace" emotions (like the sorrow of unrequited love), which, although not fatal, could be mawkish. The genre of the comedy of manners is thus the perfect vehicle for British reserve, rather than for American excess.

### 5.5 *Family and Friends*

In the opening chapter of *Family and Friends*, one is reminded (quite fortuitously and inadvertently) of the picture Catherine Oliphant pueckishly envisages when Tom confesses his loss of "faith" in anthropology:

Immediately there sprang into Catherine's mind the picture - surely a sepia daguerrotype - of a high-collared, be-whiskered Victorian clergyman, his beliefs undermined by Darwin and the rationalists (LA:102).

*Family and Friends*, an episodic, photographic "dance to the music of time", dispassionately, as from a disinterested distance, chronicles a family saga spanning, at a guess (for we are never told) the late Edwardian age to the mid 'forties.

The purport of the epigraph from Goethe is not entirely clear; most reviewers ignore it entirely. Lardner (1986:121) comments that "the epigraph indicates

that *Family and Friends* may be taken as a kind of antidote to Goethe's rendition of philosophical romanticism. 'Impropriety' is a better word for the misbehavior Brookner describes than 'rebellion' or 'defiance,' which is what Werther was up to. She does succeed in illustrating Goethe's point about middle-class life - that there is not much excitement to it: an artistic achievement that is less interesting to the reader than to the writer".

Anita Brookner has intimated, in interviews, as well as in her fiction, her belief in the supreme value of reason and accountability; her fiction expresses the tragic irony incurred by this belief, for in her novels, character is unequivocally destiny:

"Quite obstinately, I prefer the stately dance of reason to any conclusion more rapidly arrived at, however persuasive the display" (Haffenden, 1985:58).

There are constant and overt reminders of this in Brookner's fiction; for example, while Frances is working on Van Gogh's self-portrait she muses:

I tried to take a detached and efficient interest in what I was doing, but at some point I became aware of the painter's small crafty blue eye staring back at me from its scarlet setting. I felt no sympathy. On the contrary, I felt a spurt of dislike for him, with his workman's clothes and his silly fur hat. My feelings were all for his benighted brother, trying to be a respectable art dealer in Paris and having to cope with this nutter and his demands. I try to raise a small cheer for sanity, from time to time. We rationalists must fly the flag, you know (LM:51).

Brookner uses the device of a series of family photographs to capture the lives of the family Dorn, a European-Jewish family, now living in London, but

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maintaining the customs, food, and furnishings of their earlier existence. There is the widowed matriarch Sofka, and her four children, two of whom resemble her profligate late husband in behaviour. The technique used by Brookner has the effect of disengagement and distance; the characters never come alive, and although some move across countries and continents, one is aware not so much of action on their part, but of action on the part of the author, as her gaze lights now on this one, now on that, penning their hopes and fates with toneless, if not entirely mirthless resignation. It is the most artificially contrived of Brookner's novels; a novel, certainly, possibly a story, but hardly, by E.M. Forster's definition, a plot.<sup>1</sup> It is a supremely literary creation, and Brookner uses the dispassionate anonymity of a faded photograph to create a kind of *desengagé* fictionality, while her use of the present tense provides a bleak and continuous commentary, reverberating with aphorisms and rife with bleakly clever character sketches.

Although the reader's emotions are not immediately engaged, there is a certain poignancy towards the end, occasioned by a sense of historic inevitability. Susan Hill, herself an author of repute, has made the most sense of Brookner's stylistic stratagem:

"*Family and Friends* . . . is quite unlike anything of hers that has gone before. It is a strange, formal, rather distant book, giving the impression of a faded period photograph - an image used to great effect in its pages. It has a Henry Jamesian feel. Everything is stated by the author, nothing is dramatised, the characters do not express or demonstrate emotions or thoughts for themselves;

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1 Forster, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel*.

instead we are told everything at one remove, by the author. It is not a device used greatly by contemporary fiction writers, but it creates exactly the desired effect: the characters, the 'story' - such as it is - and the style and form of the book, are all of a piece" (1985:195).

In *Family and Friends*, Brookner has relinquished her former quartet of stoic spinsters, and has abandoned the tradition of Barbara Pym and Jane Austen. The present tense narrative gives the effect of a browser paging through an album, pointing out disparate figures: some have been dealt the ludic card, the "wild card"; others are less happy and fortunate, having paid the price of filial duty and devotion. However, some intimations of the former novels remain:

She knows that possession of a husband confers status on a woman, and if that status is undeserved, what of that? Sofka knows, and she is right, that nothing is worth waiting for, not even the ideal partner, not even if that ideal partner exists. Sofka knows that a woman of thirty-five without a husband is to be pitied, and is indeed pitied by those who ignore her essence and who will almost certainly denigrate her virtues (FF:125).<sup>1</sup>

Sofka's boys are designed to conquer, hence they have been given the names of emperors and kings (Alfred and Frederick); the daughters are to flirt, and Mireille and Babette become (more appropriately in their mother's eyes) Mimi and Betty. Betty and Frederick have been dealt the ludic card. Frederick is charming and attractive: the mother's favourite, the favourite of all women, the *Hausfreund*, the original *homo ludens*:

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1 FF refers to BROOKNER, Anita. 1985a. *Family and Friends*. London : Cape.

Frederick is so charming and so attractive that women forgive him his little treacheries. Where others would meet censoriousness Frederick tends to invite collusion. His reputation precedes him, for that is reputation's only useful function. In this, perhaps, he finds the justification for his behaviour (FF:19).

Frederick relinquishes his responsibilities as eldest son to Alfred, and marries healthy and wealthy Evie, to live out a life of relative ease, playing "mine host" in "Dadda's" hotel on the Italian Riviera. He is the original *homo ludens*, in contrast to Alfred:

Frederick's light-heartedness, though so enjoyable, really does not measure up to Alfred's severity. Frederick is for leisure, for diversion, for entertainment; Alfred is for work, for investment, for security (FF:40).

Alfred runs the family business, and craves the life of the ineffable Englishman: a country home, roast beef dinners, and golden dogs.

Betty, with "calculation in her eyes and a tendency for the mouth to remain in a studied moue while the glance ranges thoughtfully above" (FF:32), runs away to Paris, joins the Moulin Rouge, and, in the one section which is prototypical Brookner, destroys Mimi's hopes for love. Once again, rationalism is countered by the tragic irony of reality, as Mimi discovers to her cost when she follows her sister to Paris to win back what she considers a "suitable attachment":

She begins, in the way of all those who are born to lose, to imagine her way past this terrible damage and to try and regain favour in Frank Carian's eyes. She will, she thinks, have a cheerful but honest explanation with him; no reproaches, of course, merely an indication of how she herself feels. Being a decent fellow, Frank will then compare the conduct of the two sisters in his mind and be

won over by Mimi's honesty. Mimi thinks that this is how hearts are won, not believing for a moment that Betty's way is the surer way. Behind this belief lies an unbearable vision of the world's duplicity that must not come to full realization (FF:55-56).

Like all Brookner heroines, Mimi is doomed to an inevitable and inexorable wait (this time in the Hôtel Bedford et West End):

She hears the occasional motor car; she hears footsteps in the corridor and the diminishing sound of voices. She seems to hear a clangorous bell, although there are no churches in this district and the bell is probably in her head. The intense darkness envelops her, envelops also her inviolate dream. At some time in that interminable night she lies down on her bed; on her face the smile is tinged with the intimations of the most absolute horror.

In the morning Mimi leaves Paris, a city to which she will never return (FF:71).

She is left to sadly play "*O doux printemps d'autrefois . . .*" at home, and much later makes a prudent marriage of convenience for the sake of her mother, to the firm's factotum, Lautner (also one of the novel's most sympathetic peripheral characters), who thus elevates his status from "friend", to family, and the privilege of enjoying his coffee and marzipan cake above, rather than below stairs. Alfred is left to run the firm, and to some extent to step into his brother's libidinous shoes by entering into an affair with some sort of cousin. Betty marries a Hungarian film producer, and, less hedonistic after Max's heart attack, settles for disgruntled life by the Beverly Hills pool. In her unfulfilled middle-age she becomes nostalgic for the life she had so hopefully and wilfully discarded:

Of course, life is very dull. Sometimes Betty wonders if she will ever have anyone to talk to again. In the afternoons, when Max is having his rest, she wanders down to the pool. She stares at the water. 'Isn't it a pretty colour?' she says forlornly to the man who has come to filter it. 'I had a hair ribbon just that shade when I was a little girl' (FF:164).

The voyeuristic, yet disaffected state of the reader is enlivened by Brookner's propensity for minute and tender descriptions. There is the wedding picture, one of many, which not only introduces the first episode in the novel, but illustrates Brookner's verbal acumen:

I have no doubt that once the photograph was taken, and the wedding group dispersed, the festivities took their normal course. I have no doubt that great quantities of delicious food - things in aspie, things in baskets of spun sugar - were consumed, and that the music struck up and the bride and bridegroom danced, oblivious of their guests, and that the elders gathered in groups on their gilt chairs while the children, flushed with too many sweetmeats and the lure of the polished parquet floor, ventured forth until restrained by nurses or grandmothers (FF:9).

There is the discreet charm of the bourgeoisie, and of manners and modes long past:

And as for Mireille and Babette (Mimi and Betty), that time of settling down, as they so wistfully think of it, is so far off as to be almost unimaginable. In the manner of sheltered girls in that unliberated age they long to be married; they long for marriage in order that they might be virtuous young matrons, attentive to their duties and their husbands' welfare, able to supervise servants, and, eventually, the children's nurse. Able to present the breadwinner with evidence of good housewifery, his shirts impeccably laundered and scented with lavender and vetiver, his newspaper and journals intact and uncreased, his house and garden tended, his accounts faultless. Where did they unearth these dreams of innocence? (FF:12).

There is Frederick "becalmed in Bordighera", enlivening his sinecure with innocent day-trips to Nice:

Here, on precipitously stepped and cobbled streets, twisting blindly and abruptly around corners and slippery with fish scales, Frederick will tread carefully in his pale shoes, tipping his hat to those stall holders who recognize him from previous visits. He will appreciate, with an equal and a discerning eye, a tuft of coarse grass thrusting up through the cobbles where the alley meets the wall of the church of St Rita, the butcher's boy emerging with uplifted hatchet from the back of the shop to check on the symmetry and the quantity of the day's display of lamp chops in white enamelled trays, the priest with his long soutane and his furled black hat, the basket of cheap but elegant shoes in the doorway of a shop so dark that it is necessary to put most of its goods on the pavement, the sharp and almost sickening smell of the cheeses laid out on leaves of fern and palm, the sudden gleam of a coffee machine and the spurt of its steam, the blessed sight of the fresh loaves of bread, newly baked for lunchtime, being set up vertically in the window of the baker's shop (FF:145).

There are also flashes of the witty, puckish and ironic Brookner humour:

Sofka does not sleep, but addresses the Almighty, rather as she would address her bank manager, with the assurance of one who has always been solvent (FF:123);

If anyone had ever bothered to tell her, Betty would know that she bears a marked resemblance to Colette, that redoubtable French writer of whom Betty has never heard (FF:32);

He was one of the first to respond to the possibilities of television and an audience so captive that it does not have to stir from its favourite chair (FF:158);

Frederick's contacts with England are now confined to whatever Sofka and Mimi care to send. A constant stream of requests for Start-Rite shoes, Dundee marmalade, and Floris's New Mown Hay goes out from Bordighera to London and is answered by carefully packed parcels and letters of credit to a bank in Nice . . . In this way Frederick manages to think of England as a place of funds and commodities, devoted to that business which he always disliked, and functioning as a service area for places of natural enchantment and superiority where lives may be more pleasantly and more attractively lived (FF:143),

and intimations of previous Brookner themes:

Alfred, trying to deal with the antipathy that this way of life has forced upon him, and trying also to deal with the good conscience which is perhaps only blamelessness in disguise and can be forfeited at any moment, knows from his reading that virtue is its own reward. This seems to him rather hard, for by the same token vice is also its own reward. But if he translates his predicament into fiction, if he views it as a pilgrimage or a perilous enterprise or an adventure, if, in fact, he thinks of himself as Henry V or as Nicholas Nickleby, then he can soldier on, comforted by the thought that his efforts and his determination and all his good behaviour will be crowned with success, recognition, apotheosis (FF:50).

There are few intimations that the family is East-European Jewish. Frederick and Evie collaborate amicably with the enemy in war-time Italy. Mrs Beck, a refugee, and Sofka's "remembrance of things past" and *memento mori*, only briefly disturbs the bourgeois dance to the music of time, and in time-honoured Jewish tradition is provided for. More poignantly, on Sofka's death, "Lili and Ursie, alerted by some ancient knowledge, set up a high-pitched keening" (FF:176), while Alfred is sustained by the formality of ritual:

Obedying some ancestral impulse, Alfred takes a silk shawl and covers his mother's looking-glass. Then he turns and takes up his position at the foot of her bed, where he will remain all night . . . At some point he is aware of

Lautner at his elbow, placing a book before him. When he glances down he sees that the book has been opened, and that a marker has been placed in it. His eye seeks the appropriate passage: 'A virtuous woman who can find? Her price is above rubies.' At some further point he is aware of Lautner cutting at the lapel of his jacket, rending his garment (FF:177-178).<sup>1</sup>

In *Family and Friends*, Brookner is saying, not "look at me", but "look at them"; observe familial duty, relations between lovers, friends, family; look at the wretchedness of the human condition, observe the disillusionment, the hopes attained and the dashed dreams, even unto the third and fourth generations. Brookner has revealed, surprisingly, that *Family and Friends* is the most autobiographical of her novels, one written *con amore*, a novel which had "laid ghosts" (Bedford, 1985:29). Although it is intimated that Vicky's father is Alfred, Vicky is possibly Anita Brookner herself, the child of elderly Polish-Jewish parents, who died in her 'twenties. Ironically, the novel ends with the author, albeit in disguise, once again pleading "look at me":

Here is Alfred, tall, stiff, still a handsome man. Here is Nettie, very close to Alfred, leaving Will almost unattached, unpaired. And in the front row, the three children: Laurie, Charlie, and Nettie's child Vicky (Victoria). See that look on Vicky's face, that imperious stare, so unlike a child, so like Sofka. See Alfred's hand proudly clasping her little shoulder. See the resemblance. Wait for the dancing to begin (FF:187).

This last paragraph, in which Brookner disposes of her family, to some extent counters Wandor's assessment that there is no self in the novel. In general, however, her criticism admirably grasps the essence of *Family and Friends*.

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1 This is in marked contrast to Pym's High Church Anglicanism, thurible and thurifer.

Like Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, *Family and Friends* is a novel "whose style is itself about style":

"But Brookner takes no overt moral or political angle; rather one feels a sense of life moving in circles, with a hint of wistful nostalgia combined with a certain coldness. There is no self in this novel, and one is left with an ambiguous response: total admiration of the style, and a frustrated sense of never having been allowed to get involved. But then, perhaps one should look at it another way, as a novel whose style is itself about style. And for the upper middle classes style is of the essence and is always fascinating" (Wandor, 1985:682).

Some critics have classified *Family and Friends* as a comedy of manners.<sup>1</sup> As dialogue is in short supply in this novel, and since the traditional comedy of manners is as much dependent on the wit and repartee of dialogue as on the foibles of its characters, *Family and Friends* would not appear to fit this genre too comfortably.

#### 5.6 *A Misalliance*

In her latest novel, *A Misalliance*, Anita Brookner appears to have appropriated, at least to some extent, Jane Austen's maxim, that "On every formal visit a child ought to be of the party, by way of provision for discourse".<sup>2</sup> Children

1 Bannon (1985) and James (1985).

2 Jane Austen. *Sense and Sensibility*.

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are notably absent from the novels of both Pym<sup>1</sup> and Brookner, and in *A Misalliance*, Brookner seems to intimate that in the procreation of children, there might be something hopeful and optimistic in the human condition.

At least one reviewer has called the sharply satirical *A Misalliance* a comedy of manners (Toomey, 1986:38). The novel is an introspective, psychological study of a divorcee, Blanche Vernon, who has been ditched by her estate agent husband Bertie (a less than credible choice of both profession and name by Brookner), and is left to contemplate the shreds of a twenty-year marriage while drinking fair quantities of very good white wine, "rather steadily".

Like all of Anita Brookner's novels, *A Misalliance* is a palpable study of loneliness. It is both a *memento mori*, and a remembrance of things past. Blanche Vernon, in changing herself to accommodate her husband's needs, as well as through the divorce in which she has little guilt, and through the collusion of friends, is an outsider, one who has been excluded from the mainstream of life. Her need for "something to love", leads to her involvement in the lives of needy, but selfish and conniving people, who illustrate the rewards of bad behaviour. As in previous Brookner novels, a life of gravity and dignity does not reap many benefits or rewards, and Brookner muses, as in *Hotel du Lac*, on what behaviour most becomes a woman, as well as on filial duty, flawed expectations, and the cruelty of life in general. As it behooves (a Brooknerish word) an art historian, Brookner has employed an artistic analogy, rather than a literary one, for her contemplation of images of women.

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1 With the exception of Rowena's children, who play no part in Wilmet's self-absorbed affairs in *A Glass of Blessings*. There are, of course, intimations that the lives of both Wilmet and Sophia (*An Unsuitable Attachment*) might have been more fulfilled by children.

Blanche attempts to maintain some sort of hold on life by filling her days with a rigorous toilette, volunteer hospital work, and visits to the National Gallery:

Blanche Vernon occupied her time most usefully in keeping feelings at bay. In this uneasy month of the year - cold April, long chilly evenings - she considered it a matter of honour to be busy and amused until darkness fell and released her from her obligations. These obligations were in any event minimal, but being self-imposed were all the more rigorous: no one else sustained them. Not quite a widow, and therefore entitled to none of the world's consideration, she bore her divorce nobly but felt its shame. I am innocent, she felt like proclaiming on particularly inclement days, and I always was. My husband left me for a young woman with a degree in computer sciences and in whom I can discern not the slightest spark of imagination. As this event baffled her, she felt humbled by it. Thus humbled, baffled, and innocent, she felt all the more need to hold her head high, to wear a smile that belokened discreet but amused interest in what the world had to offer her, and to complete her toilette, down to the last finger-nail, before leaving her house every morning (M:5).<sup>1</sup>

Blanche has fashioned herself according to what she surmised her husband's needs and expectations to be:

Her husband, Bertie, had left her after a marriage of twenty years, and those twenty years were never absent from her consciousness. She had been very happy, but she supposed he had not. She had, in those days, felt such energy that she had obliged herself to be less exuberant than she might have been, thinking such exuberance an embarrassment in one who was still uncertain of pleasing. She therefore cultivated tastes which she felt instinctively to be thin, sharp, brittle, like the very dry sherry which Bertie assumed that she liked as well as he did. She was thus always ready with bright conversation for him, as they drank their sherry, full of anecdotes, for she had observed him to be uneasy with anything more subjective, expansive . . . She thus became what is known as a

1 M refers to BROOKNER, Anita. 1986. *A Misalliance*. London : Cape.

conversationalist, and always remembered to order more sherry. After his unfaithfulness her husband preferred to think of her as a cold woman, although he knew that she was not. Sometimes he still visited her in the evenings, calling in on his way home. Blanche always kept a few varieties of light discourse on offer, much as she kept certain stores in her cupboards.<sup>1</sup> But these days she drank wine, rather steadily (M:6-7);

Her transformation into the controlled and quizzical creature she had become had been effected on the whole without pain. It was her husband who had fashioned her into the woman she was now, so independent, so dignified, so able to manage on her own (M:12).

Blanche sees intimations of her own lonely end in the pathetic dignity of the wealthy old women of the neighbourhood, and her quizzical and aloof attitude and "armour" of good grooming are attempts to cling to the wreckage of her life:

She was subject to these irrational feelings, largely concerned with her own end, and needed to summon up a particularly quizzical tolerance<sup>2</sup> in order to keep panic at bay (M:6).

She visits the National Gallery and the British Museum for a sign, but the sensuous nymphs and the kouroi, with their secret archaic smiles, exclude her, with her "timorous decency":

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1 An image reminiscent of Leonora Eyre, outwardly a similar character to Blanche:

'One always has *something* - tins and packets and eggs, and things in the fridge' (SDD:23).

2 Also indicative of Brookner's style in her later, wittier novels.

The smile of certain nymphs seemed almost to mock her as she finally stood up to go, and their plump arms seemed to usher her, with much ceremony, from the room. For this reason she always felt slightly reduced by the art of the past, rebuked for her mildness, scorned for her seriousness. The past had its secrets, which she sought very much to know. The National Gallery frequently challenged her assumptions, which was her reason for returning. There was even something contingent about the British Museum, where . . . she had come up against the archaic smile of the kouroi, votive figures who seemed to contain an essential secret knowledge that had always escaped her (M:8-9).

Love, for Blanche, is "arbitrary, unteachable, hardly a matter of reason or election". It is the "passing favour dispensed by the old, cynical, and unfair gods of antiquity". Blanche feels herself to be one of those "whom the gods disdained":

. . . the world was the one after the Fall, where only effort and mournfulness might lead to a promise of safety, where sins would seem to have been committed without joy, where nothing gratuitous could be hoped for, and no lavishness bestowed, and where one's partner, one's referent, one's *vis-à-vis*, the mirror of one's life, had turned into an acquaintance of uncertain intimacy, whose conversation, once so longed for, was, more often than not, alien, uneasy, resentful, and boring (M:20).

The bleakness of the grey days, and the inappropriateness of the paintings she views as an objective correlative for her present life, are underscored by the reiteration of Turner's artistic credo: "The sun is God". There is overwhelming despair, the equivalent of which is never admitted in Pym's novels (with the exception of *Quartet in Autumn*):

For she felt herself to be inanimate and did not know that many people feel like this, men as well as abandoned women. But she knew, without a hint of sentiment, that her life might just as well be over . . . The greyness of

the sky would permeate her evenings and her days would be spent in unrewarding schemes of sustenance and improvement. But she was in need of the unwilling action, the bonus, the discovery that would bring back into her veins the warmth of that illusory sun that had shone for her once and whose whereabouts she could not now locate (M:15-16).

In contrast to the excesses of the nymphs, Blanche's appearance is grave, indicative of suffering and martyrdom:

Her face, in the clouded mirror, had the anxious look, the lugubrious bleached look, of an inhabitant of mediaeval Flanders . . . Below the long white nightdress, her ribbed Gothic feet shone palely (M:21).

Ironically, the lengths to which Blanche has gone to make herself attractive to Bertie, are viewed by him, as well as by his sister Barbara, as eccentricity. Blanche, sensing in Amanda, or Mousie as Bertie's new infatuation is more frivolously called, everything that she is not, avers that she was "not foolish enough . . . I suppose that he got bored with my being sensible all the time" (M:17):

Blanche went to such lengths, thought Barbara, always dressed to the nines, making elliptical remarks that no one knew how to take. Always carrying on about characters in fiction, or characters whom she said should be in fiction,<sup>1</sup> and sipping uninhibitedly from various bottles of wine. But one couldn't deny that she was a first-class wife, although less interesting and open-hearted than she had been when Bertie had first brought her home. And a woman who bore no malice, taking all the blame (M:16-17).

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1 Brookner wittily, ironically and unobtrusively establishes fictionality here, much in the manner of Pym in *No Fond Return of Love* : 217.

Mrs Duff, Blanche's uxorious neighbour, and Miss Elphinstone, her cleaning woman, exemplify excellent women who are fulfilled by various strategies. Mrs Duff, although childless, is an excellent wife, who is content in her traditional role of caring for her husband's every need, devoting her spare time to charity. Miss Elphinstone is a spinster, a Pym spin-off, who, clad in Blanche's cast off Yves St. Laurent, is active in "some excitable church". Brookner's description, especially in view of the "unpleasantness" which seems to permeate her parochial existence, must surely be a jibe at Pym:

Miss Elphinstone seemed to enjoy a lively and dramatic existence lived in the shadow of some excitable church whose activities absorbed most of her time and whose members abounded in competitive acts of selflessness (M:22).

In contrast to these excellent women, there is Mousie, Bertie's mistress, one in a long line of hares, in the tradition of Helen, Anthea, Alix, Penelope, the Puseys, and Betty. Mousie is "used to being loved", and needs to function "from a position of emotional dominance", and Bertie:

. . . used to the calm unemotional woman whom Blanche had become, had been enchanted by the petulance, the self-assurance, and the shamelessness of Mousie . . . Bertie himself, a rich man, of reserved and powerful personality, represented to Mousie the father to whom she could stretch out her infant arms once more, a delightful prolongation of her habitual and instinctive state (M:27).

Mousie is the "Cosmo girl" of *Hotel du Lac*, the archetypal hare, and is wittily described in contemporary jargon terms:

And how could Blanche, so schooled in good behaviour, win in a contest with a naughty child, with tactics long expunged from her life as stupid, dishonest, above all uncharacteristic? It was particularly difficult to behave with dignity in such circumstances; for in order to negotiate successfully, Blanche would have needed to transact in what she privately considered to be an unworthy manner, and would have had to call on reserves of patience and cunning in which she was notably deficient. It was all the more puzzling in that the baby whom she knew Mousie to be was disguised as a young adult woman who earned her living in an adult way and lunched in wine bars with her young upwardly mobile female friends, all of them busy gentrifying the south-western suburbs and comparing notes on their live-in companions. Marriage they scorned, thinking of it as the shackle that kept women at home, or at best tired out with being too successful all round, yet oaths of fealty were exacted, as in some new code of chivalry (M:28-29).

The collusion of former acquaintances, and their lust for blood, intensify the myth of Blanche's eccentricity, sarcasm, and frigidity. Blanche "was to be the loser", and Brookner has a fine eye for the social nuances of divorce:

'You could sleep with their husbands,' said Barbara, who was a plain-spoken woman.

'I only ever wanted to sleep with my own,' said Blanche sadly. 'And apparently that was wrong too. People would have been more sympathetic if I had had a messy and injurious private life. It would have been evidence that I am human' (M:30).

Blanche is given to greater asperity and witty malice than other Brookner women (except, possibly, Edith Hope). This precludes her despair, which is chronicled unabatedly, from being unrelievedly tedious. When Bertie hesitantly

refers to her drinking, Blanche is as uninhibited as Jane Cleveland, although in turn of phrase only:<sup>1</sup>

'Don't worry,' said Blanche. 'I have never been drunk in my life. You do not run the risk of seeing me hanging round a lamp-post with a riotous hat over one eye. I think you are frightened of my turning up at your house and making a scene. Bursting in on your guests while Mousie is dishing up the stuffed peppers. Having to be removed by men in white coats. Reduced to begging in the streets, asking passers-by for five pounds for a cup of tea. Yourself shuddering with disgust on the other side of the road. Anyway, I can afford it. That must be one worry off your mind' (M:33).

Blanche shares all the Pym and Brookner heroines' propensity for investing men with mythical stature, and views Bertie, whom the reader sees as a somewhat silly man indulging himself in a male menopausal fling, as someone to be amused and appeased:

She looked on him, as she had always looked on him, as a kind of gigantic treat, a prize won in a lottery, something fortunate and undeserved, and because undeserved, all the more pleasurable. She even understood his defection, for he was a restless man and she had always dreaded boring him. Over the years she had hidden her sorrows from him, and in doing so had lapsed into odd silences: often Bertie wondered what he had done wrong. And it was a matter of honour to her never to utter a rebuke, although he would have welcomed it (M:36).

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1 Cf. Jane Cleveland's excessive behaviour:

"She ran downstairs into the hall. There was his hat, a bowler of rather an old-fashioned shape, lying on a chair. Oh, the relief of it! He had come not to scold her, but to tune the piano! She wanted to rush in to him, to greet him with some exaggerated mocking gesture, '*Buon giorno, Rigoletto*,' posturing and bowing low. But he would not appreciate it or understand. So she seized his hat and placing it on her head, pirouetted round the hall singing,

*O Donna Clara,  
I saw you dancing last night . . .*" (JP:164).

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Brookner intimates that the communication gap should have been bridged, but Blanche's "greatest hurt" also forms the basis of the novel's slender plot:

'Perhaps you should have given him a child,' Barbara had once said, goaded to harshness by Blanche's passivity.

'Perhaps he should have given me one,' Blanche had replied, speaking for once bitterly, out of her greatest hurt (M:32).

In the course of her volunteer work at the hospital, Blanche meets a mute child, Elinor, and her indolent stepmother, and sees in Sally Beamish<sup>1</sup> a reflection of the invulnerable and patrician nymphs of the National Gallery. Blanche initially sees herself as a more or less disinterested observer, who sees in the mute child a deliberate stratagem, a refusal to come to terms with the world of her casual stepmother, which she perceives as "abnormal, unsatisfactory, deficient". The child is a mirror of Blanche herself, while the mother resembles Mousie; however, Blanche's interest in the child's unassailable dignity reveals more than the longing of a middle-aged woman for a child:

All of this Blanche thought about intently, but without perplexity. For a recognition on two levels had come about: recognition of the mother as the embodiment of that essence that had seemed to mock her, offering its wordless smiling comment on her empty afternoons, and recognition of the child as being one like herself, refusing, at a heroic level, the role that was offered her and which she considered unsuited to her desires. What those desires might be Blanche did not know, could not see. But she perceived the heroism in the stance, and she required, almost painfully, to see it at close quarters, and to dis-mantle it, if possible, before it was too late (M:48).

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1 She is the ironic antithesis of her namesake, Mary Beamish, in *A Glass of Blessings*.

Although Sally and Elinor live in relative squalor, Sally wears the expensive rags which reflect contemporary fashions, and intimates that their present lifestyle is temporary, her husband being indispensably employed by an imposing American millionaire:

'But if he's American, why can't he do this for himself?' asked Blanche, bewildered by the idea of a primitive millionaire with an exquisite sophisticate in his entourage, like an eighteenth-century dancing master, employed to teach deportment (M:61).

Blanche takes to leaving substantial gifts of money for the couple, and her reflections are a more philosophical résumé of Mildred's in *Excellent Women*:

She saw suddenly and precisely something that had previously only appeared to her in a vague and nebulous light: a great chasm dividing the whole of womanhood. On the one side, Barbara with her bridge evenings and her gouty husband, Mrs Duff with her girlish respectability, and her own awkward self, and on the other Mousie and her kind and Sally Beamish, movers and shakers, careless and lawless, dressed in temporary and impractical garments, and in their train men who would subvert their families, abandon their wives and children, for their unsettling companionship. On the one side the evangelical situation - and Miss Elphinstone too came into it at this point - and on the other the pagan world. For 'good' women, Blanche thought, men would present their 'better' selves, saving their primitive and half-conscious energies for the others. And she herself, she further thought, had made the mistake of trying to fashion herself for the better half, assuming the uncomplaining and compliant posture of the Biblical wife when all the time the answer was to be found in the scornful and anarchic posture of the ideal mistress (M:63-64).

Blanche's escape from the onerous filial duty imposed upon her by her own insupportable mother, has, ironically, turned her into the woman that Bertie did not want:

But I did get away, she reassured herself. Although she made it so difficult for me, assuring me that a man like Bertie could not possibly be serious about a woman like me, I did get away, although Bertie himself disliked my mother and seemed at one point only too willing to concede defeat. I got away from all the duties which had been imposed on me, most of which were illusory, and all I learnt from my calculating mother was to be her opposite and not to calculate at all. Thus I began my real life in a state of awful innocence, trying to find more duties to perform, thinking myself forever indebted to the one who had sprung me from that daughterly trap, and forgetting his boredom with all forms of obedience (M:68-69).

Her visits to Sally Beamish become less disinterested, and Blanche herself, aware that "her original misunderstandings could have been corrected by the birth of a child, who would not only be an eternal agent of reconciliation, but the recipient of her own childishness", finds in visits to Elinor "the advancement of her own unfinished story, of her disappointed hopes, and of her unused and unrequited faculties" (M:71). Sally is revealed as a Caroline clone, her talk limited to recollections of more propitious former times:

As far as Blanche could see, Sally spent those days when Elinor was absent simply lying on her *chaise-longue*, smoking, and waiting for someone to turn up. Blanche suspected that there was a man, or even men, in the background . . . Sally had the careless smile and the genuine absent-mindedness of one who was used to a constant stream of favours. Many were her references to her life before she had been marooned in this basement, but they were references to parties, holidays, tremendous sprees that did not end until the dawn of the following day, joy rides, Morocco for breakfast, dinner in Venice. Blanche assisted at these reminiscences in a subordinate capacity, wondering how Sally had the money for this hedonistic life when she was now so obviously in need of it. The answer, as far as she could see, was with the absent Paul, who had obviously spent all he had on her, and, the money having gone, had been forced to take up this curious position with the American, Demuth . . . It was a diet of hedonism, from which the fibrous content of real life had been removed (M:75-77).

Blanche's involvement with the monetary affairs of Sally entails an appeal for help to Patrick Fox, an unmarried civil servant, and former flame. Like all Brookner heroines, Blanche misreads the situation; she is too obtuse to see Patrick's obvious beguilement and infatuation with Sally. Like Mildred, in *Excellent Women*, who has to sort out the practicalities of the Napiers' floundering marriage, the task of extricating Paul from the clutches of the Demuths is delegated to Blanche. Paul is revealed as a gigolo in the employ of Mrs Demuth, and Blanche's dark night of the soul, her realisation that "the world belonged to the young, to the cunning, to the obdurate" (M:149), comes to her amidst a migraine attack on the indifferent pavements of London.<sup>1</sup>

She is succoured by the charity of Mrs Duff and Miss Elphinstone. Blanche realises her irrelevance in the matter of Elinor, and withdraws, knowing that Sally Beamish is a scrounging and conniving woman, and that her vicarious involvement in the lives of the Beamishes has not touched the fabric of their lives:

I was foolish, she thought. They saw my attempts at love as misappropriation. The full force of this truth struck her with incredulity, stupefaction. It was a misalliance, she thought. I have never fully understood the laws of property. If I had, I should not be alone, at this moment, and apparently forced to remain so (M:185).

Blanche changes her appearance and prepares to go abroad with precipitate haste; as in all Brookner's novels, the denouement is unexpected, and, in this

1 Leonora, another icily controlled heroine, also suffers a migraine attack prior to James's departure from her house.

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instance, ambiguous, as Bertie, exhausted by the youthful excesses of Mousie (described by Brookner with gleeful malice), returns. The misalliance, it is intimated, was as much between Bertie and Mousie, as between Blanche and the child Elinor, or even between Elinor and her stepmother.

Lucy Bean (1986:23) mistakenly sees the ending as a happy one. Brookner deliberately leaves the novel open-ended; possibly Blanche has grown beyond the tiresome man, and will refuse to re-admit him into her life. Brookner does not elucidate, and leaves her heroine with more than one option. Although Caroline Moore (1986) finds Blanche's self-pity alienating, most critics concur that Blanche Vernon is one of Brookner's pluckier heroines. She is certainly the wittiest, and in her recognition that "life is not a nightclub", one of Brookner's bravest. The plot is almost superfluous to what is, in essence, a witty and elegant essay on the desolation of life after desertion, and although it lacks the meticulously crafted structure of novels like *Look at Me*, its assurance and tenacity, coupled with Brookner's funniest writing since *A Start in Life*, make *A Misalliance* an admirable vehicle for Brookner's established themes. Although the novel is as introspective as any of her others, the irony is less obtrusive. Brookner has a surer touch with dialogue than in previous novels, and her Pym-like touches:

The cruelty of the world in apportioning children to the wrong mothers plunged her briefly into a kind of mourning, which she modestly added to all the others (M:102),

and jokes at her own expense,<sup>1</sup> preclude any mawkishness naturally inherent in the situation.

Once again, love, and the various contestants in its quest, are intrinsic to the novel. Sheppard (1985:67) contends that "in this arena Brookner is shrewd enough to know that the Geneva convention does not apply. 'The rules are really crude,' she said in a recent issue of the trade magazine *Publishers Weekly*. 'The rules are: Who dares, wins. This is bad news for people who don't dare and who see others win. That's the central problem, I think. I think it's the matter nobody gets completely right.' Not in life, perhaps; but this art historian who dared write novels has found the solution in literature".

## 5.7 Conclusion

As in the novels of Barbara Pym, character and theme are inextricably intertwined in the novels of Anita Brookner; however, Brookner's heroines, in their unmitigated quest for "someone to love",<sup>2</sup> are more single-minded than most of Pym's heroines, who find alternative options and compensations when love eludes them, or otherwise settle, with a pragmatic rather than a philosophical shrug, for whatever life or love has to offer, even if such attachments are unsuitable.

1 Blanche has an uncompleted thesis on Mme de Staël, the cast-off mistress of Constant, the author of *Adolphe* (cf. *A Start in Life*).

2 Animals are scorned as substitutes for love or companionship, cf. *Providence*:

"They had nothing to say to each other, for Kitty did not believe in wasting words on animals" (P:87-88).

Love and marriage are the only options for Brookner's heroines; men are seen as mythical heroes, rescuers, devoid of human weakness or frailties, and the solitary woman, whether unmarried or divorced, is an object of pity, as is most resonantly voiced by Sofka in *Family and Friends*:

'Daughter!' cries Sofka, in a loud voice which startles them both, as does the archaic use of the word. 'I do not want to die and leave you alone. I do not want you to remain my little child, without your mother to run to. Do you know what they say of such women? Do you know what it is like for a woman to grow old without a man? To be a godmother to other women's children, useful for presents and otherwise disregarded? Do you know what it is like never to set a family table? Never to celebrate? To sit alone, because it is inconvenient for your friends to invite you? Do you know what it is to be left out of other people's plans? To be left out of their conversations, even? . . . They talk about you. As if you had some fatal illness, which God forbid. But they will not talk about you after your wedding . . . And when you have a child of your own . . . you will rejoice and be proud and be a real woman at last' (FF:133-134).

The plight of the solitary excellent woman is also explored in Pym's novels, but tends to be more robustly bolstered by Christian fortitude and common sense, or even by self-interest. *The Sweet Dove Died*, for example, examines a similar theme with greater subtlety, and the vehicle of the comedy of manners sustains a tone of brittle sophistication:

There was nothing pathetic about Leonora, and he was as yet too young to assume that a woman living alone is always to be pitied (SDD:23).

Brookner's dissection of the perils of unrequited love results in an acute and analytical examination of the loneliness of the human condition; terror and

accidie are chronicled in a consummate literary style which, although incessantly and obsessively introspective, is too sophisticated and controlled to be termed stream of consciousness. Outwardly a comedy of manners (having the ingredients of sophistication, wit, irony and some sort of love intrigue), the archetypal Brookner narrative of pent-up emotion, barely suppressed *angst* and palpable isolation merely uses the framework of the comedy of manners to support what is in essence a *Bildungsroman*, and even in *Look at Me* and, to a lesser extent in *Hotel du Lac*, a *Künstlerroman*, as well as a penetrating psychological novel which plumbs the depths of loneliness and despair.

The Brookner heroine's quest for love results in failure and humiliation, and Brookner suggests that people cursed with good manners are social anachronisms doomed by the selfishness of the beautiful and the lucky, those who have been dealt the "wild card". Brookner is less concerned with society than with individuals, and while the tortoises may temporarily flourish in the shadow of the more charismatic hares, this transformation is only fleeting, and hubris which must inevitably be punished by shattered illusions and the ignominy of public humiliation. Her novels are littered with ruined expectations and unrequited love; in a Brookner novel innocence is routed by experience, trust by prurient self-interest.

Although sporadically recondite, Brookner's novels are meticulously crafted, and literary parallels are pertinently contrived. Brookner intimates that literary role models do not provide a blueprint for life, and that the lessons taught by literature are misleading. While Brookner's heroines are adept at explicating literary texts, they are myopic in analysing their own predicaments, and therefore irony in Brookner's novels is omnipresent and insistent. Academic

achievement and scholarship are seen as temporary substitutes for more lasting happiness, and work is the refuge of those who have no other calls upon their time.

Obedience to filial duty is a barrier to happiness explored in considerable detail; once again, character is inseparable from theme.

Brookner's women spend little of their formidable leisure counting blessings, or gaining any sort of pleasure or satisfaction from any activity not involved with the objects of their misplaced affections.

Themes are insistently imposed on the novels from the outset, and consequently the reader is more aware of the outcome than in Pym's work, where, although the staples remain, the plots are less predictable. Although Brookner's moral stance is insistent, her deft literary craftsmanship and pervasive irony preclude didacticism.

Unlike Pym's novels, with their solid and comforting English surroundings, Brookner's heroines (orphans all) frequently find themselves in an uneasy no-man's land of cultural uncertainty. Their quasi-European background adds a Chekhovian gloom (through setting, mood and symbolism, rather than dialogue), and this intensifies the estrangement of the outsider and loner.

Brookner has intimated that anger is a prerequisite for satire; her novels are

possibly too emotionally fraught to be unremittingly satirical.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Pym pokes mild fun at her protagonists and peripheral characters, as well as at the foibles of mankind in general, Brookner's more malicious wit is reserved for her minor characters, and particularly for academics. Both Pym and Brookner might be regarded as writers on the periphery of the campus novel genre, as their portrayal of the pettiness and preoccupations of academics is tongue-in-cheek and very funny. Brookner's minor characters are consummate comic creations, and reinforce theme (as in *Hotel du Lac*), provide comic relief, and act as a chorus to the actions of the protagonist (for example, Mrs Cutler in *A Start in Life*, and Miss Elphinstone in *A Misalliance*).

Although the close reader finds numerous nuances of Pym in Brookner's writing, the latter's novels are on a more ambitious emotional and literary scale. Whereas Pym resurrects her characters in subsequent novels to form a cosy, middle-class enclave, a type of *roman-fleuve*, Brookner is essentially engaged in rewriting the same plot, generally centred around the worsting of an innocent. Critics have commented on this as creative straitjacketing; by the same token it might be contested that she has settled into an elegant predictability which confirms her status as a cult novelist. While Pym's novels are traditional, and their witty dialogue and comic incidents characteristic of the comedy of manners, Brookner sustains a breathless, tangible atmosphere of expectation and barely controlled tension, in which dialogue is of less importance than interior monologue. What dialogue there is, is often stilted and artificial (supremely

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1 Brookner's comments on Jane Austen are interesting: "I never felt very easy about Jane Austen: I think she made a tremendous, far-reaching decision to leave certain things out. She forfeited passion for wit, and I think that led her to collude with certain little stratagems which are horrifying in real life. She wrote about getting husbands" (Haffenden, 1985:69).

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fictional dialogue, in fact) and hearkens to earlier exponents of the genre like Jane Austen and Henry James.<sup>1</sup>

Brookner's later novels are less overtly crafted, although *Hotel du Lac* uses a clever retrospective structure which sustains interest. Ironies are less heavily underscored, and the tenor is lightened by a malicious wit, as well as by the odd joke at the author's expense.

In Brookner's unrelieved chronicles of states of anxiety and despair, one is tempted to question whether emotion is not out of proportion to incident. However, Brookner's comprehension, ironic detachment and sheer elegance preclude mawkishness, while the outer trappings of the comedy of manners act as a curb, a British bridle for what could become emotional unrestraint. As Brookner intimates in more than one novel, dissimulation and control are behavioural prerequisites.

Pym does not admit to despair, while Brookner does not allow charity. In her relentless portrayal of unhappiness which is neither assuaged by the comfort of the familiar, nor by "the trivial round, the common task", Brookner does not spare the reader in either style or plot. Brookner's avowal of human need seldom goes beyond the self, and in her novels, there are no happy endings, no redemption.

*Family and Friends*, a disquisition on middle-class values, marks a departure in style, rather than in theme, and Brookner has established a tradition of elegant

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1 And to Margaret Drabble, a novelist much admired by Pym, and much given to authorial comment and lecturing her readers.

musings, encompassed in a flawless literary style, on the elusiveness of love and its suzerainty in human happiness.

## CHAPTER SIX

Understanding somebody else's filing system is just about as easy as really getting to know another human being. Just when you think you know everything about them, there's the impossible happening, the M for Miscellaneous when you naturally assumed it would be under something else.

Barbara Pym: *Less than Angels*

"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!"

Barbara Pym: *Jane and Prudence*

While there's tea there's hope.

Sir Arthur Wing Pinero:  
*The Second Mrs Tanqueray*





According to Visser, the most important criterion for character is that characters in novels be human figurations,<sup>1</sup> and the first requirement of character construction is the tag (a proper name, pronoun, epithet, often bearing an intrinsic semantic load). To the tag "are ascribed actions and attributes of various kinds drawn from the ensemble of typifications contained within both social and literary traditions" (Visser, 1980:60), and thus "characters emerge within a matrix of physical characteristics, habits, purposes, vicissitudes, and social relationships, psychological attributes, and institutional statuses", depending on the preferences of individual writers and differences in period or genre. The reader, or analyst, must grasp the dominant, i.e. a structured system of features hierarchically arranged, and this has, to some extent, been done already by the author: "That is, a character in a novel has been subjected to processes of selection and arrangement, and has usually been pre-interpreted by other characters and through the controlling focus of the narrative situation" (Visser, 1980:61).

Further distinctions may be discerned between direct presentation of character, where the narrator describes and evaluates the character, and indirect presentation, where actions, relationships and speech reveal the character to the reader. Initial exposition presents a character immediately (physical description, personality, history), while distributed exposition "parcels out the data", allowing the character to emerge gradually.

Another common distinction is that between static and developing characters (or E.M. Forster's flat and round ones); however this distinction overlooks "the

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1 This contention would appear to nullify Faustina's contribution to *An Unsuitable Attachment*, not to mention James Herriot's popularity.

question of development in relation to narrative processes and strategies" (Visser, 1980:66), i.e. point of view, the "light in which he [a character] is seen changes", and not the character himself; this is an indication of the intimacy between the processes of narrating or presenting of character, and therefore narration and character are inseparable.

A characteristic of the modern novelistic character is that he tends to be consciously so, and "the typical form of the novel is marked by its emphasis on motivations and feelings, on intellectual, moral and emotional responses to events, situations, and characters" (Visser, 1980:69), and consequently central characters experience, rather than do. The criterion of interiority is, therefore, more common to the modern novel than to its predecessors.

## 6.2 The characters

The previous chapter has indicated that in the novels of both Pym and Brookner, the characters of the protagonists are inseparable from the themes. The protagonist is commonly a single woman, no longer young, not particularly beautiful, in search of "something to love". There is also substantial correlation between the authors' peripheral characters; "peripheral" must be used with caution, however, as these characters often contribute substantially to the illumination of the central theme or themes, as well as to the story and plot of the novels. This thesis will not undertake an exhaustive study of character, but rather indicate correlations and parallels between characters in the novels of Pym and Brookner, while taking cognizance of some of the theoretical aspects of character analysis as listed above.

A major difference is in the size of the writers' respective casts. Jean Caffey Lyles (1986:519) enumerates Pym's characters (or people, as E.M. Forster would simply have them) as "an eccentric cast of winsome curates, pompous vicars and canons, enthusiastic students, vague professors, badly dressed clergy wives, aging men who live with their cranky mothers, bored civil servants, crotchety librarians, 'splendid spinsters,' dotty retirees, professed agnostics, titled nobility, 'distressed gentlewomen' and discreet homosexual couples".

Brookner's list, possibly in keeping with her more interior style, is more circumspect, and Pym is certainly stronger on the vicars.

### 6.2.1 Clergymen

F.E. Christmas (1983:9) comments that the unique position of the clergyman in English fiction is due to his social ubiquity in the past:

"Of the members of the learned professions he alone came into continuous association with the man in the street, even when the man in the street was only fitfully and reluctantly the man in the pew. People who could afford to send for the doctor only at the last gasp turned naturally to the parson in every kind of trouble."

In the twentieth century, the parson has largely been displaced by the medical and welfare services; this demise of the church was mourned by Barbara Pym in her diaries, and intimated in her later novels.

There is a vast preponderance of clergy in Barbara Pym's novels. Belinda's existence is dominated by Archdeacon Hocceve in *Some Tame Gazelle*, while her sister Harriet is consoled by Mr Donne (not pronounced *Durne*), the first in a long line of pale curates. Mr Latimer is bullied and coddled by Miss Doggett in *Crampton Hodnet*, while the unmarried Julian Malory is the cause of much speculation among the excellent women in the novel of the same title. Jane of *Jane and Prudence* is married to the mild Nicholas, while Father Tulliver pops up among all the anthropologists in *Less than Angels*. In *A Glass of Blessings*, Father Thames, Father Bode and the handsome Father Ransome occupy much of the novel, and Neville Forbes of *No Fond Return of Love* has to flee his parish to escape Miss Spicer. The solemn Mark Ainger successfully negotiates a transaction in a fish and chips shop and copes manfully with his wife and her spoilt cat in *An Unsuitable Attachment*.

Edwin is cheered by the companionship of Father G. in *Quartet in Autumn*, while David Lydell is comforted by the company of gentlewomen in the country. Tom plods around the village environs in *A Few Green Leaves*, obsessively involved in history. And in addition to these, there are the missionaries-cum-anthropologists-cum-linguists, as well as the rival clerics: chapel, Roman Catholics, High Church and Low compete for lapsed and absconded members. Only the sophisticated *The Sweet Dove Died* and *An Academic Question* are free from clergymen.

Pym's clergymen, as befits their comic character, are generally static

characters.<sup>1</sup> They (especially the unmarried curates, but also vicars temporarily bereft of home comforts through the absence of wives or absconding of housekeepers) are the willing recipients of the ministrations of the excellent women:

'No, women like to have something to dote on,' he said mildly enough, 'I have noticed that. And we in the Church are usually the victims' (STG:26).

They are also, in the manner of Dickens's cardboard characters, characterised by mannerisms, preoccupations or obsessions. Mark Ainger in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, much in the manner of the Metaphysical poets, tends towards arresting beginnings in order to make his sermons more palatable (as he fondly imagines) to his prosaic parishioners:

He was quite a forceful preacher, too intelligent for the majority of his congregation, so that the rather dry instructive sermons to which he inclined personally had to be diluted and sweetened to suit their taste. Mark usually achieved this by thinking out an arresting beginning, nearly always of the same type, asking his congregation to imagine themselves standing gazing at the Pyramids or the Acropolis or even the New York skyline, hardly realizing, until Sophia pointed it out to him, that these sights would be unfamiliar to the majority of his hearers. But now these beginnings had become something of a joke between them and the congregation had learned to accept them with amused tolerance (UA:53).

Archdeacon Hocceve in *Some Tame Gazelle* beleaguers his parishioners with fire and brimstone sermons, and in contrast to the "intellectual poverty" of the sermons of his rival, Father Plowman, his own are embellished with obscure

1 Concerning Pym/Austen parallels, Mr Collins comes to mind as another apt example of the comic clergyman.

quotations from the lesser known English poets. The supercilious and conceited Archdeacon also affects melancholy, and consequently is much given to trotting out lines from *Urn Burial* and *Young's Night Thoughts*, and frequents the churchyard as a substitute for "yew trees on the lawn and something he called a ha-ha, which no gardener had ever heard of" (STG:23). His sermon on the Judgement Day provides Pym with a marvellous opportunity for a comic interlude;<sup>1</sup> Its broad comedy is typical of her early novels:

The congregation, still rather uneasy and disturbed, reminded themselves that of course such a thing couldn't really happen. Why, scientists told us that it would take millions of years for the sun to move sufficiently far away from the earth for life to become extinct. At least it was perhaps not exactly that, but something very like it. They knew enough to realize that the Archdeacon was being ridiculous and that the Judgment Day could not possibly be tomorrow. When the first uncomfortable shock had passed they were able to laugh at themselves. How could they have been so silly as to be alarmed!

But even as they were thinking thus, the relentless voice from the pulpit was pouring scorn on those scientists who thought they knew how the world had begun and how it would end. How could they know? These matters were incomprehensible mysteries known to God alone. The Judgment Day was as likely to be tomorrow as at any time in the far distant future. The world was indeed very evil, as they had just been singing in that fine hymn translated from the Latin, the times were waxing late. All through our literature poets had been haunted by the idea of the Last Day and what it would be like . . .

The congregation suddenly relaxed. It was just going to be one of the Archdeacon's usual sermons after all. There had been no need for those uncomfortable fears. They settled down again, now completely reassured, and prepared themselves for a long string of quotations, joined together by a few explanations from the Archdeacon (STG:108-109).

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1. Reminiscent of the Reverend Tendril in Waugh's *A Handful of Dust*, who, having served in India most of his life, gives comically unsuitable sermons laced with references to "homes and dear ones far away" and "the ravening tiger . . . and the ponderous elephant" to the bemused English villagers.

The sermon also illustrates the extent of Belinda's admiration for the Archdeacon; there is the perspective of the congregation who think he is mad, as well as that of Belinda, who listens admiringly, and although feeling that "It was not quite the thing to read bits of Restoration drama in church", is not as incensed as the rest of the congregation by the Archdeacon's vehement sermon, in which they are roundly denounced for their evil ways, while their Sunday dinners spoil.

Other vicars also have their little foibles and idiosyncrasies. Nicholas in *Jane and Prudence* is "tagged" by his extrovert wife, Jane's assessment of him: "Beamy and beaky, mild, kindly looks and spectacles", and by his delight in his purchase of animal soaps, and his attempts at growing tobacco. Tom, the rector in *A Few Green Leaves*, is more concerned with the site of the Deserted Mediaeval Village, and the mediaeval practice of burying in wool, than in ministering to his parishioners.

Critics frequently took Pym to task for dwelling on trivialities, occasioning the following outburst in her diary:

"What is wrong with being obsessed with trivia? . . . What are the minds of my critics filled with? What nobler and more worthwhile things?" (Pym, 1984d:260).

Although "going over to Rome", the celibacy of the clergy, "High" versus "Low" church services, and the quality of incense are some of the more appropriate topics associated with their calling, most of the clergymen's preoccupations are with trivia. Moth in clothes, petty squabbles, a server's umbrage at having his

bespoke cassock appropriated, substitute vicars preoccupied with the heating apparatus in church, and foraging in the larder for left-over brussels sprouts, handsome, cellbate vicars hounded by spinsters, a wealthy priest having *bouillabaisse* flown in from Marseilles for Ash Wednesday - the list is endless. As Lyles wittily enumerates:

"Pym's sharp eye and ear take note as well of the sparks flying out of the incense pot, the acolyte tripping over his cassock and falling down the stairs, the shrill sound of the church telephone heard above the organ, the cigarette lighter used to kindle the new fire of Easter in the dark church on Holy Saturday. And she finds love blossoming amid 'the smell of damp mackintoshes' which seems to pervade 'perhaps all parish halls everywhere'" (Lyles, 1986:522).

This obsession with trivia also influences behaviour, and tends to give the reader a different perspective from the besotted heroine. Malice, rather than hospitality, prompts Henry Hocceve, when Bishop Grote comes for an extended visit:

He was not pleased at the prospect of having to entertain the Bishop for an indefinite length of time, but nevertheless he was looking forward to it with a kind of grim relish. He remembered certain minor discomforts about the spare room at the vicarage as he stood there on the cold platform. It was a gloomy room with a northerly aspect and a tall, dark monkey-puzzle growing close to the window, which looked out on to an old potting-shed, full of flower-pots and dried up roots and bulbs. And in addition, although the Archdeacon had not personally made the bed, he knew that there were sides-to-middle sheets on it, for Florrie had come into his study that morning, very agitated because all the whole sheets were still at the laundry. The Archdeacon was delighted. He seemed to remember also that the mattress was a particularly lumpy one, worn into uncomfortable bumps and hollows by a variety of visiting clergy, and that the bedside lamp did

not work. All the same he had taken pleasure in making a suitable selection of books for the bedside table - a volume of Tillotson's sermons, Klaeber's edition of *Beowulf*, the Poems of Mrs Hemans, an old Icelandic grammar, and, as a concession to the Bishop's connection with Africa, a particularly dull anthropological work, which had been included with some other books he had bought at a sale. The Bishop would naturally want thrillers - the clergy always did, he found - but he was keeping his own supply locked up in his study (STG:161-162).

The malice is compounded by the Bishop's subsequent pleasure in the books, and Pym's comedy is often dependent on ironic bathos:

'What a fine poem Young's *Night Thoughts* is,' said the Bishop. 'I have been reading it every night myself. I have a most interesting collection of books in my room,' he went on. 'There is an Icelandic grammar among them and I have been comparing that language with the Mbawawa.'

'But do you find any similarity?' asked Agatha doubtfully.

'Oh, none whatever,' said the Bishop almost gaily, 'but it is a fascinating study, *fascinating* . . .' his voice trailed off on a bleating note (STG:208).

Vicars, as well as being peripheral comic characters, are also essential to many of Pym's plots. They are the recipients of women's ministrations, they illuminate the prevalent theme of "something to love", and are often essential to the action of the narrative. Neville Forbes goes to his mother to escape the attentions of the spinsters of his parish, providing an extension of the theme of flight in the novel, continuing Dulcie's link with her aunt and uncle (and by analogy, forging Viola's with Mr Sedge), as well as providing all kinds of juicy Freudian implications. In *An Unsuitable Attachment*, the parishioners fly to Rome, an "off-limits" meeting place for the various participants in the love intrigue.

While Anita Brookner does not number clergymen among her characters, her male characters with Christian leanings are the complacent recipients of women's adoration as well as of their cooking. Ruth broaches independence from her appalling parents for the sole purpose of providing Richard with dinner. Although not a clergyman (possibly Christmas's modern substitute), he glories in his self-imposed "burden" (that malicious Pym word) of muscular Christianity, and Brookner's description gives a premonition of Ruth's fate:

A man who did things! Her father, as far as she could see, did nothing but listen to her mother. But Richard had been known to race off on his bicycle to the scene of a domestic drama and there wrestle with the conscience of an abusive husband, wife, father, brother, sister, or lover. (He had indeed let it be known that he did this.) His flat was permanently occupied by teenagers found huddled on benches at Waterloo Station, whom he took in until they either found work or escaped while he was at a lecture. The porter at the college was only too well acquainted with the distraught and usually drunk woman who appeared regularly to ask Richard to sort out an article which would redeem her whole life if published in *New Psychology*. He was rarely at home. He rarely slept. He never seemed to eat. His ulcer was the concern of every woman he had ever met in his adult life, and many were eager to tempt his palate with special bland dishes: no obligations entailed. Many were disappointed. His diet was a matter of speculation, as was his physique, which remained oddly splendid. His dark golden hair streamed and his dark blue eyes were clear and obdurate as he pedalled off to the next crisis (SL:38).

Once again, an audience (as with Archdeacon Hoccleve's preposterous sermon) gives a different perspective to Kitty's unsullied admiration of her occasional lover, Maurice. The situation is also similar to, but not as hilarious as, Bishop Grote's lecture (with slides) in the parish hall. Bishop Grote combines

missionary zeal with popular anthropology; Brookner manages a more acerbic comment on Maurice's combination of talents:

She [Kitty] would see him, officially and discreetly, at a lecture the following week; she would sit in the audience with all his other admirers while he discoursed on the cathedrals of England, for, although an historian by profession, he was also a romantic and devout Christian, a strange combination which appeared to keep him perfectly happy. His dispositions and predispositions manifested themselves in a series of public lectures which regularly filled the main theatre of the small provincial university lucky enough to retain him as its Professor of Mediaeval History, although offers were continually coming from Oxford, where, it was predicted, he would take up his next post. His devotion to the cathedrals of England, on which he offered a series of inaccurate but moving insights (with slides), entranced his audience and enraged the Roger Fry Professor of Significant Form who writhed in his seat but was forced to attend through sheer pressure of public opinion. 'Charismatic shit,' he was once overheard muttering to his wife. 'Sanctimonious bastard. How does he know what Canterbury was supposed to look like? I suppose he'll get Durham sorted out next. Is there no end to this?' 'I thought it was lovely,' said his wife, clapping stolidly, along with all the other ladies, the Friends of the University, the departmental secretaries, the retired librarians. 'And anyway, he comes to your lectures on Cézanne. You can hardly do less than return the compliment.' 'Oh yes, he casts his nets wide, does our Maurice,' agreed the Roger Fry Professor. 'Nothing human is alien to him. He really feels at one with those simple mediaeval masons.' 'Oh, shut up, David,' said his wife, adding, fatally, 'You're jealous, that's all.' After which, they said nothing to each other for the rest of the evening (P:19-20).

However, what is for Brookner an encapsulation, a tag, becomes a protracted scene in Pym's novel, a social occasion which wittily illustrates character, extends perspective, and hilariously mocks academic pretensions.

Clergymen, especially in Pym's novels, are by turn supercilious, malicious, condescending, querulous, fussy, and spoiled; above all, they are loved:

How silly Rhoda is, thought Deirdre, almost as if she were interested in Father Tulliver in a flirtatious way. She was as yet too young to have learned that women of her aunt's age could still be interested in men; she would have many years to go before the rather dreadful suspicion came to her that one probably never does cease to be interested (LA:147).

#### 6.2.2 Academics and librarians

Barbara Pym worked as Assistant Editor of the journal *Africa*, and the academics and librarians she encountered there, with their pretensions, pettiness and oddities, provided cannon fodder for many of her novels. Hazel Holt, who worked with Pym for 25 years, comments on this:

"She was a capable and conscientious editor but had no real interest in Africa as such, being far more fascinated by the anthropologists and the linguists than by the subjects they were studying" (Pym, 1984d:183).

In *Some Tame Gazelle*, Bishop Grote combines his missionary zeal with amateur anthropology, and unconsciously provides the villagers with an uproarious lecture, rampant with phallic symbols. The bemused Mildred is introduced to the strange world of the anthropologists in *Excellent Women*, and Everard Bone and Helena Napier appear to be "suitable attachments", given their shared interest in this academic discipline. *Less than Angels* is concerned with anthropologists at various stages of their careers; there is Tom Mallow, a Ph.D. student, dispiritedly completing a thesis, Mark and Digby, ambitious students competing for grants to take them to the "field", Deirdre, puzzled by

her choice of subject, but doggedly persistent, Professor Mainwaring and Father Gemini, anthropologist and linguist, competing for Minnie Foresight's money, the ubiquitous excellent woman, Miss Clovis, and Alaric Lydgate, moping about his failure to collate his notes in the attic, and finding consolation in the vituperative reviews he writes for learned journals:

In one field, however, Alaric had achieved a mild though limited fame. He was well-known as a writer of sarcastic reviews, and he was engaged this night in completing one for a learned journal. The fact that he had not been able to produce an original work himself was perhaps responsible for his harsh treatment of those who had.

He had been pacing about the room, seeking fresh inspiration, but now he flung off his mask and returned to his desk . . .

In his search he came upon a native word wrongly spelt. His pen gathered speed. 'It is a pity,' he went on, 'that the proofs were not read by somebody with even a slight knowledge of the language, so that the consistent misspellings of vernacular terms in everyday use might have been avoided.'

In unfavourable reviews it is sometimes customary for the reviewer to relent towards the end, to throw some crumb of consolation to the author, but this was not Alaric Lydgate's practice. His last paragraph was no less harsh. 'It is a pity,' he concluded, 'that such a reputable institution should have allowed a work of this nature to appear under its auspices. Its reputation will certainly not be enhanced by unscholarly rubbish of this kind, and it can hardly be gratified to learn that its funds, which are known to be limited, have been squandered to no purpose' (LA:55-56).

Rupert Stonebird is an unattached anthropologist in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, while Emma does desultory research and Graham finishes his book in *A Few Green Leaves*. Pym's posthumous novel, *An Academic Question*, deals with the machinations of academics at a provincial university.

Africa is as ubiquitous as Miss Clovis, and "misprision, ignorance, prejudice, all are matters for joyous confusion concerning the subject of anthropology, which, along with the church, is one of the staples of the novels of Barbara Pym" (Burkhart, 1983:47). It surfaces "in comic images, similes, titles of pedantic articles, jargon, incidental sly descriptions, names for anthropologists, and most of all in the confrontations between English and African, two worlds and their ways" (Burkhart, 1983:48).

Pym uses anthropology as a metaphor for detachment and observation, classification and categorisation. Yet her observant eye and cocked ear were not confined to anthropology. Francis Cleveland is an English don and bored academic in *Crampton Hodnet*, Paul is Flora's prosaic geographer boyfriend in *Jane and Prudence*, who, in moments of passion, is given to quoting "Oh my America! My new-found land . . .", while *No Fond Return of Love* introduces the indexers, those working on "the dustier fringes of the academic world", and Aylwin Forbes, who is resourceful enough to have found for research a poet so obscure that not even the Americans have "done" him, and who is a speaker at a conference where all the papers are entitled: "Some problems of . . .".

Some of Pym's most malicious creations are the librarians. Her letters to Philip Larkin (he was chief librarian at the University of Hull) are full of references to the peccadilloes of the librarians at the International African Institute where she worked. Most Pym librarians have an antipathy to books and an aversion to borrowers, and Pym gleaned her characters like Mervyn Cantrell (*An Unsuitable Attachment*), and Evan Cranton (*An Academic Question*) from the Institute library:

"Our library has been made slightly more interesting - in a macabre way - by a rather peculiar young man given to cryptic utterances which one can only half hear. I don't have much to do with him myself but hear all this from the other staff. I find it is pleasanter to observe these things rather than actually participate in them" (Pym, 1984d:230) . . . "Eliz. Bowen said that people never recognize themselves in novels (even if they have been 'put in') but I think one sometimes makes up a character and then he or she appears in the flesh, like a man now working in our Library, who is so like 'Mervyn' in my unpublished one, and even speaks of 'Mother'" (Pym, 1984d:249) . . . "We continue to have trouble staffing our Library at the Institute. A Ghanaian we had was *not* a success and spent a large part of his day conducting endless telephone calls in his native language (Fanti, I think)" (Pym, 1984d:251).

Dr Nicholas Parnell and Mr Mold are librarians at a famous university library ("our great Library") in *Some Tame Gazelle*. Dr Parnell is more concerned with the provision of central heating and ladies' lavatories in the library than with the provision of books, while Mr Mold, his deputy, is partial to a morning snifter at the Crownwheel and Pinion. After a joke in dubious taste, Belinda muses:

. . . one would have thought that moving in a cultured intellectual society would have cured him of any tendency to make jokes not quite in the best of taste. And yet, she thought doubtfully, the Library, great though it was, did not always attract to it cultured and intellectual persons. Nicholas himself, obsessed with central heating and conveniences, was perhaps not the best influence for a weak character like Mr Mold (STG:123).

Edward Killigrew (*Crampton Hodnet*) is "a tall, vague man of uncertain age", a librarian at the Bodleian whose chief task in life is to keep "Mother" titillated with spiteful bits of gossip. Ianthe and John are both librarians under the bitchy suzerainty of Mervyn Cantrell in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, while the peevish Dr Cranton in *An Academic Question* is delighted that the appointment of a new assistant will create catering problems during elevenses.

Pym's jibes at academe are countless; while they are frequently intrinsic to the plot, as in *An Academic Question*, which centres around the academic rat race and the appropriation of the Stillingfleet papers, her funniest scenes concern academic ambition and pretensions. Mark and Digby, two ambitious but indigent anthropology students, mindful of the scholarship race, try to win friends and influence people by treating Miss Clovis and Miss Lydgate, whom they surmise to have influence, to lunch. The scene is reminiscent of the Somerset Maugham story, *The Luncheon*, as Mark and Digby are torn between thrift, hunger, and the desire to impress:

'This place is rather good,' she said, stopping outside a reasonably modest-looking restaurant which had a menu up outside. Reading it, Digby noticed with relief that some of the prices were modest too. He hoped Mark would have the sense to order Chipolata Sausage Toad (2/2) or Braised Tripe (2/-) and not go off the deep end with Steak and Chips (5/6). He supposed Clovis and Lydgate would want that; they looked like the kind of women who would eat red meat, he thought resentfully . . .

'I feel one shouldn't go into learned societies or libraries smelling of drink,' said Mark, at his most prim. 'It might create the wrong impression.'

'Oh, I hadn't thought of that,' said Miss Clovis, sipping her dark foamy drink. 'I don't suppose anyone would notice. Of course it's all right for librarians to smell of drink,' she added jovially.

'Of course,' said Digby enthusiastically. 'But you see we are in a different position, more on show, as it were. We feel that we must be on our best behaviour.'

'I am sure you are always well-behaved,' said Miss Clovis with unusual warmth. 'You were most helpful to me this morning.'

The young men looked pleased. They all finished their first course and ordered the next. Miss Clovis and Miss Lydgate had Apple Pie with Ice Cream (1/6); Mark and Digby declared that they were passionately fond of Jelly (6d). Afterwards the ladies had coffee but the young men declined it.

'It might keep us awake in Dr Vere's lecture,' joked Digby.

'Oh, that would never do!' chortled Miss Clovis (LA:97-99).

The meal is ironically and comically concluded by the ladies' insistence on paying!

The perils, pitfalls and vainglory attendant on the academic dictum "publish or perish", is also narrated with malicious glee:

Rupert opened the envelope and unfolded the bundle of galleys. 'SOME ASPECTS OF EXTRA-MARITAL RELATIONS AMONG THE NGUMU', he read. Not strikingly original as anthropological titles go, but it looked well with his name set out underneath it in italic capitals. The sketch map and kinship diagrams had come out well, also, and the French summary, with its cosy phrase 'chez les Ngumu', seemed adequate. How many offprints did he want - would the usual twenty-five free ones be enough? asked the letter accompanying the proof. Better make it fifty, he thought, seeing himself distributing them like Christmas cards. Then he remembered the eager questioning eyes of the four women he had met that evening - it would hardly be suitable for *them*. And his colleagues would have read it in the journal anyway. It seemed that he was like the poet with his nosegay of visionary flowers:

'That I might there present it - O! to whom?'

All the same, he thought, better make it fifty. When he was an old man the younger generation might clamour for it (UA:43-44).<sup>1</sup>

In her depiction of the pettiness of the librarian Mervyn Cantrell, Pym includes a witty joke at the expense of her employer, the International African Institute:

Later when she was drinking her tea Mervyn came into the room with a card index in his hand.

Ianthe realized from his triumphant expression that he had caught her out in a mistake and waited with resignation to hear what it was.

'*Government in Zassau*,' he declared. 'The place of publication is London, *not* Oxford. It was published by the Oxford University Press for the International African Institute - do you see?' From behind his back he now produced the book itself, open at the title page.

'Of course - how stupid of me. I'm so sorry, I'm afraid I do make mistakes sometimes.'

'But there is no need to make *that* kind of mistake,' he said rather obscurely and left the room with a springy step (UA:28-29).

Anita Brookner spent her early working life as a library assistant, and the quirks of the characters who populate the library, rather than the librarians, are the focus of *Look at Me*. Dr Leventhal, the librarian, is concisely disposed of:<sup>2</sup>

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1 An entry in Pym's diary for 1949 reads: "The angry, umbraged and hurt postcards coming from the Oxford anthropologists: "There seems to be no indication that I should get a copy"" (Pym, 1984d:186).

2 With a certain amount of irony, as Frances reveals something of her supercilious nature, as well as her oblivion to the true nature of Dr Leventhal's withdrawn demeanour.

When I bring Olivia her tea I sometimes take him [Dr Simek] a cup too, and then Dr Leventhal appears in the doorway that divides the Library from his office and wants to know if we are having a party, and could we please remember that silence is the rule. He is the sort of man who only breaks his own silence in order to utter a derogatory remark. But he is otherwise quite harmless. I would not say that we were genuinely fond of him (that would hardly be appropriate) but he is easy to work for, a mild, heavy man, probably shy, probably lonely, very correct, easily tolerated. We all get on very well (LM:11).

Brookner has spent most of her working life as an academic, and reserves her most potent wit for academe, and the Senior Common Room at the university, a place "where low armchairs housed many spreading bottoms and stomachs clad in grey flannel or beige tweed, where legs could be seen protruding in maroon socks and ginger suede shoes, where blouses and shirts gave off the dingy glare of nylon" (P:24).

Pauline Bentley, Kitty's colleague in *Providence*, confesses to Kitty that ". . . when I get to hell I expect to find a perpetual staff meeting in progress" (P:32). These staff meetings are presided over by the genial figure of Professor Sir Hamish Redmile, whose *magnum opus*, the New Building, takes precedence at every function and adorns all his speeches.<sup>1</sup>

From these preoccupations she was sometimes rescued by the jovial figure of Professor Sir Hamish Redmile, the Dean, two years past retirement but showing no signs of retiring, wearing a Vaughan Williams hat to indicate his status as an elder of the university tribe.<sup>2</sup> He had earned his title by serving on a Royal Commission whose recommendations had never been heard of again. He was a

1 A character reminiscent of Gerald Sidewinder in Howard Jacobson's polytechnic "campus novel", *Coming From Behind*.

2 An anthropological touch by Brookner.

tireless fund raiser and enjoyed these occasions, since he did not intend to leave the university until his project - the New Building - was formally established. Sir Redmile, as the Roger Fry Professor called him, treated university life as an endless series of significant little social gatherings, at which contributions might eventually be raised (P:21).

The Roger Fry Professor, Maurice's arch-rival who moves in a sort of academic limbo, is another delightful Brookner creation, and the staff meeting (with Professor Redmile securely mounted on his hobby-horse) is described in punctilious and malicious detail:

The meetings were always held in a gloomy and oleaginous brown room, which had been a dining room when the building had been occupied, in baronial state, by the benefactor of the university. Professor Redmile sat at the head of the table that gleamed with a curious icy veneer in the bad light; at his side, importantly, sat his secretary, Jennifer, taking the minutes. They filed in reluctantly - the historians and the linguists - Dr Martinez, Professors Gault and Bodmin, Mme de Marcoussis, Mrs Vogel, Dr Oliphant, the Roger Fry Professor, whose hapless task it was to teach French art to the French Department, Italian to the Italians, German to the Germans, and still try to maintain some sort of autonomy, and last of all, Maurice Bishop. In front of every seat was a pencil and a pad of paper. With one accord, as Professor Redmile welcomed them at the start of a new term and looked forward to soon being able to give them some definite news about the New Building, all picked up their pencils and started drawing, a defensive move intended to drown out the hearty delight in Professor Redmile's voice but one which gave them the appearance of a rather retarded occupational therapy class. Kitty, all innocent attention, watched the Roger Fry Professor incising a deep jagged abstract on his pad. Mme de Marcoussis favoured a delicate shading, involving ceaseless motion with the pencil. Professor Gault always drew an Archimedes spiral. Once, at the end of the meeting, Kitty had stolen round the table after everyone had left to see what Maurice had drawn: a flying buttress (P:32-33).<sup>1</sup>

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1 Which gives us some insight into Maurice's pseudo-infatuation with cathedrals, and his indifference to Kitty.

Academia and anthropology, librarians and card-indexers provide a comic backdrop to the lives, loves, machinations and melancholy which both novelists depict. In debunking academics and their seemingly pointless preoccupations, Pym proves herself adept at dialogue that is lively, witty, and above all, realistically funny. The following short conversation mocks pretentious and meaningless jargon, gives a brisk insight into three characters, and ends with an intimation prevalent in all Pym's novels - the comfort of the ordinary:

'How debased anthropology has become since Frazer's day,' sighed the Bishop, 'a mere matter of genealogies, meaningless definitions and jargon, words, words, words, as Hamlet has it; lineage, sib, kindred, extended family, ramage - one doesn't know where one is. Even the good old term *clan* is suspect.'

'What is a sib?' asked Harriet. 'It sounds a nice, friendly kind of thing, or it might be something to eat, a biscuit, perhaps.'

The Bishop shook his head and said nothing, either because he did not deign to be associated with present-day anthropological terminology or because he did not really know what a sib was.

The Archdeacon recalled the Anglo-Saxon meaning of the word, and talked for some minutes about the double meaning of peace and relationship, but Harriet had lost interest and soon they were all in the drawing-room, drinking coffee made with coffee essence (STG:206-207).

### 6.2.3 Cleaning women

The excellent women in the novels of both Pym and Brookner are bolstered by a veritable chorus of cleaning women. Cleaning is not as much in evidence as gratuitous advice; clad in an amazing array of garments, they often offer a

reflection in microcosm of the themes of the novels. For example, Miss Lord, Dulcie's cleaning woman in *No Fond Return of Love*, is disproportionately upset when she is refused baked beans in a self-help restaurant:

'... The only thing is that I *have* been unlucky there lately.'

'Unlucky?'

'Yes, with the beans - baked beans, you know. They didn't have any last time I went, and it rather upset me, what happened.'

'Oh?'

'The man in the queue *after* me asked for baked beans and he got them. He was laughing and joking with the girl who was serving - you know the way they do - I didn't say anything, but I was quite upset.'

'Yes, I know, that's what life is like. And it is humiliating. One feels a sense of one's own inadequacy, somehow, almost unworthiness,' said Dulcie thoughtfully. 'But then life is often cruel in small ways, isn't it ...' (NFRL:94-95).

Dulcie comments elsewhere in the novel that life is made up of trivialities, and small disappointments and pinpricks are merely reflections of "the one great sorrow or one great love" most of us have known.

Mrs Morris in *Excellent Women* is tagged by her Welsh accent, by the dark felt hat she always wears, and by her deep distrust of Popish practices. Pym's cleaning women are also an amazing store of gossip, as the vicarage's Florrie and Belinda and Harriet's Emily evince in *Some Tame Gazelle*, and Pym wittily and accurately assesses the extent of human curiosity when Mildred overhears Mrs Morris gossiping about the Naplers at the church jumble sale:

I knew that she was talking about the Napiers, but though my natural curiosity would have liked to hear more, I felt I could hardly encourage her. Is it a kind of natural delicacy that some of us have, or do we just lack the courage to follow our inclinations? (EW:61).

Mrs Morris becomes a domestic go-between, keeping Mildred informed about Helena's lack of domesticity, as well as being a catalyst in Mildred's transformation:

'It's not natural for a woman to live alone, without a husband.'

'No, perhaps not, but many women do and some have no choice in the matter.'

'No choice!' Mrs Morris's scornful laugh rang out. 'You want to think of yourself a bit more, Miss Lathbury, if you don't mind me saying so . . .' (EW:158).

The cosy omniscience of Mrs Glaze, Jane Cleveland's long-suffering domestic in *Jane and Prudence*, is wittily encapsulated in Jane's fantastic train of thought. Mrs Glaze is prosaic, her thoughts occupied by chops and liver, and Jane's daughter Flora is the epitome of her down-to-earth father:

'This is my daughter Flora,' said Jane. 'She's been putting away the china.'

'Well now, isn't that kind,' said Mrs Glaze; 'that's saved me a lot of work. And I see she's even got the vegetables; I can start getting supper right away. Then you will be ready for Father Lomax when he comes for coffee.'

It was almost soothing that she should know so much about one's life, Jane thought. 'Yes,' she said, 'I do hope he will be able to tell us something about the parish and what we should know about everybody. You see, we are like people coming into the cinema in the middle of a film,' she went on, losing consciousness of her audience. 'We do not know what, if anything, has gone before, or at the best we have

a bald and garbled synopsis whispered to us by somebody on his way out; that's Canon Pritchard, of course.'

'Mother,' said Flora a little desperately, 'shall I put out the coffee cups on the silver tray?' (JP:19).

Miss Lord is much in evidence in *No Fond Return of Love*: a "tall, grey-haired spinster", with a passion for small gadgets and "daintiness" (as exemplified by television advertisements), she habitually provides Dulcie with a résumé of her lunch, eaten at a self-service restaurant. She is scathing of Dulcie's university education ("But what does it lead to, Miss Mainwaring?"), of Dulcie's work (card-indexing), and, like Mrs Morris in *Excellent Women*, exhorts her employer to enter the marriage market stakes by "making more" of herself, with a bouffant hairstyle and more eye make-up. Her cooking (gleaned from TV advertisements) is reminiscent of Mrs Cutler's in *A Start in Life*. When Dulcie and Viola return from their holiday at Taviscombe, Miss Lord is quick to take umbrage when Viola is immediately whisked away by Bill Sedge for dinner. In Pym's novels, a disproportionate amount of time is spent in placating domestics:<sup>1</sup>

'But Miss Lord, I shall be here, and I'm certainly ready for your delicious supper,' said Dulcie, wondering if Miss Lord would have taken so much trouble if she had been alone. 'I'm hungry enough to eat for two.'

'I don't know about delicious,' said Miss Lord, slightly mollified. 'It's fillets of plaice in a mushroom sauce.'

'It certainly sounds delicious.'

'You see, the sauce is really that concentrated soup - you just pour it on,' Miss Lord explained. 'I saw it on TV.'

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1 Although on a slightly higher social scale, the episode of the cauliflower cheese in *Some Tame Gazelle* is a case in point.

'How fascinating.' So she had not spent hours making a roux and carefully blending in various subtle ingredients, Dulcie thought. That was certainly a relief (NFRL:260).

Mrs Cutler in *A Start in Life* is certainly not an excellent woman. She plays a more important supporting role in the Weiss ménage than any of Pym's housekeepers, and is given to collusion, rather than to cooking or housekeeping:

So they got a woman in, a Mrs Cutler, 'our darling Maggie', as Helen instantly called her, a wry, spry widow, quick to take offence. She served meals at unpunctual intervals, so that Ruth always found herself too late or too early, kept the radio on while she worked, and smoked all day. In the dining room the damask cloth was never cleared and changed only once a week; the purple velvet curtains began to smell of cigarettes; and in the sideboard cupboards the wine coolers were now gilt with tarnish (SL:19).

Under Mrs Cutler's suzerainty, life at Oakwood Court is lived on the periphery, with slap-dash meals served on trays. When Ruth, on the brink of cooking Richard's momentous dinner, asks Mrs Cutler's advice, her recipes are of Miss Lord's variety:

'... Well, you can buy some chicken pieces at Sainsbury's, put them in a Pyrex dish with a tin of Campbell's mushroom soup, and bung the whole thing in the oven for a couple of hours. Dead easy. I usually serve it with a bit of rice and some frozen beans. Then you could buy one of their apple pies and warm it up for pudding.'

For once Ruth had the feeling that Mrs Cutler was doing her best (SL:43).

The funniest scenes in the novel involve Helen and Maggie's little tiffs, with George as a bumbling mediator. Ironically it is Mrs Cutler, with her "hoarse

smoker's cough, her rakish thinness, her obvious durability" who ensnares a husband, instead of Ruth, notwithstanding the *Larousse gastronomique* and all the other qualities of the "excellent woman". Mrs Cutler is the very fabric of Oakwood Court, and intrinsic to Helen's gradual deterioration:

While George, waited upon once again, sipped his lemon tea in Mount Street, Ruth and her mother and Mrs Cutler sat down to tinned tomato soup, cheese on toast, and instant coffee at Oakwood Court. The aromatic plates were slipped casually into a brimming washing-up bowl by Mrs Cutler and left there to soak. The two women lit cigarettes with an air of exhaustion. Ruth felt a sudden surge of affection for them, Helen in her caftan and bracelets, Mrs Cutler in her dress uniform of elephant-coloured trousers, nylon blouse, and remedial footwear. They managed to be so busy doing the little they had to do. They carried their packets of cigarettes around with them like talismans; they called for cups of coffee; Helen refurbished her make-up with severe and practised strokes; even when they took a rest in the afternoon they made it sound like an assignment to be fitted into a busy day. And then there would be tea - they both groaned for it - and then George would be home, more cheerful than of late, bearing something expensive to eat, and then they would all spruce themselves up for drinks at six. At eight o'clock they would start groaning again, exhausted by their day; Maggie would make a few sandwiches and take them in on a tray; they would swallow a last drink, take their sleeping pills and retire to bed. Mrs Cutler would change into her slippers and dressing gown and watch television until it closed down for the night (SL:48).

Her desultory encouragement to Ruth follows the same pattern as her own actions - to leave before life with Helen becomes impossible. Mrs Cutler is the eternal survivor, and escapes into marriage with Leslie Dunlop and a comfortable life of ruling the roost at the Clarence Nursing Home; the dutiful Ruth is left to cope with the debris of Oakwood Court. However, Mrs Cutler's cliché-ridden exhortations on Ruth's departure to France have a certain comic pathos:

As her taxi drew up and she prepared to say goodbye to Oakwood Court, she glanced up at the window of the dining room. There she saw Mrs Cutler, watchful and pinched once again, her chestnut lights faded, her lipstick incarnadine. Behind her stretched a day already full of instant coffee.

Mrs Cutler raised her thumb. Ruth could not make out the words she was mouthing. Her throat ached, her eyes burned with loneliness. She waved. Mrs Cutler threw open the window.

'Keep in touch,' she shouted, thinly, so as not to attract the attention of the neighbours. Ruth could barely hear her. 'Make the most of it,' yelled Mrs Cutler, getting into the spirit of the thing. 'Go on, Ruth, don't hang about.' She raised her thumb again. 'Never say die!' And she slammed down the window (SL:88).

Miss Elphinstone, Blanche Vernon's weekly cleaning woman, is a character more reminiscent of Barbara Pym's creations. Like Mrs Morris, Mrs Glaze, Emily and Florrie, she is an endless source of information:

How Miss Elphinstone gathered her information was quite unclear to Blanche; she supposed that information, like some heat-seeking particle, flew to its natural home of its own accord or inclination (M:25).

Miss Elphinstone, a committed member of an "excitable church", is much given to monologues and recollections of "unpleasantness"; however, she acts as a touchstone in Blanche's life, as she is the first to discern the "misalliance" between Blanche and the mute child Elinor. Brookner describes her with comic irony, but without malice:

Nothing surprised Miss Elphinstone. Trained in the ways of the Lord, she was proof against all contingencies, although strangely indifferent to life's more savage demonstrations. Routinely cheerful, she could be thought by the unwary to be complacent, were it not for her smile,

which flashed on and off unpredictably; sometimes Blanche would attempt to cut short Miss Elphinstone's elaborate marginalia only to be rewarded by a smile of great benevolence which revealed, if anything, a consciousness greatly superior to her own. Miss Elphinstone, upright and blameless, unchanging in her demeanour and her attributes, was a tribune of excellence before which Blanche was obliged to lay all her plans. Nothing was really tolerable without Miss Elphinstone's approval. It was Miss Elphinstone who had cast doubt on Blanche's attempts to entertain Elinor, saying that Elinor was too young to go out without her mother. Since that remark, Blanche had looked askance at her own efforts and had distanced herself from her earlier eagerness. Part of her reluctance to admit Sally to the flat stemmed from a sense of Miss Elphinstone's disapproval, although this was not the entire story (M:177-178).

The cleaning women, while providing the stock comedy of their trade, also function as a chorus; they are omniscient observers, commenting on the actions of their employers, giving judgements, sensing possibilities. Platitudes are their stock-in-trade, and although class differences are overtly stated by both Pym and Brookner, some sort of female collusion is inevitable:

'Oh, Sunday morning, was it?' she laughed derisively. 'That's all very fine, standing up and talking about the Pope. A lot of us could do that. But who's going to cook the Sunday dinner?'

No answer seemed to be needed or expected to this question, and we laughed together, a couple of women against the whole race of men (EW:24).

### 6.3 Food

"Some day an earnest young scholar in pursuit of a suitably narrow research topic may turn to the works of British writer Barbara Pym and compile an

exhaustive index of the occasions when pots of tea are brewed and consumed in her 11 [sic] novels" (Lyles, 1986:519).

"The power of the ordinary to offer sustenance in the face of the indefiniteness, sadness, and even terror of life, is the most important theme in Barbara Pym's novels. In all her books she illustrates the potential of the mundane, as in the restorative ritual of tea drinking, to shore up the positive in life, even as its very foundations seem to be slipping" (Larson, 1983:17).

Pym's novels are a positive paean to the cup that cheers, and the importance of tea "to shore up the positive in life" is amusingly illustrated when Mildred, after prolonged exposure to the sophisticated lives of the Napiers, questions the ritual of tea at all parish meetings:

Perhaps there can be too much making of cups of tea, I thought, as I watched Miss Statham filling the heavy teapot. We had all had our supper, or were supposed to have had it, and were met together to discuss the arrangements for the Christmas bazaar. Did we really *need* a cup of tea? I even said as much to Miss Statham and she looked at me with a hurt, almost angry look, 'Do we *need* tea?' she echoed. 'But Miss Lathbury . . .' She sounded so puzzled and distressed and I began to realize that my question had struck at something deep and fundamental. It was the kind of question that starts a landslide in the mind (EW:211).

When Catherine realises that Tom is having an affair with Deirdre, she muses on the benison of tea:

A young man in a white coat was pouring some rich fragrant liquid into her cup. She accepted it with gratitude and resignation, for it was strong and bitter, almost medicinal, and as she drank she was conscious that

it was doing her good. Tea is more healthy than alcohol and much cheaper, she reflected, and there must be thousands of people who know this (LA:107).

The comforting rituals of eating and drinking anchor Barbara Pym's novels firmly in the real world. While the occasion of a dinner party is often a narrative prop, food, drink, and their consumption frequently, and very amusingly, offer insights into particular characters, illuminate the roles of men and women in the war of the sexes, and comment on human behaviour in general. Even a negligible incident like being late for a luncheon date separates excellent women from their more beautiful and selfish counterparts. Wilmet is fashionably late for her lunch date with Piers (and is disconcerted to find that the beautiful Piers is even more fashionably late), while in *The Sweet Dove Died*:

Leonora was her usual few minutes late, though not as late as she would have been if meeting a man. Meg was one of those women who are always too early and can be seen waiting outside Swan and Edgar's, with anxious peering faces ready to break into smiles when the person awaited turns up (SDD:49).

The elegant Wilmet, complacently enjoying a platonic extra-marital affair with her best friend's husband, is almost overcome by delicate sensibilities at Simpsons-in-the-Strand:

We met at a rather masculine sort of restaurant, famed for its meat, where great joints were wheeled up to the table for one's choice and approval. This ritual seemed to take the place of the ordeal by fire which the more foreign restaurants went in for, where every dish apparently had to submit itself to being heated up in the leaping flames while the patrons looked nervously on. When the joint came to us I found myself turning aside with a kind of

womanly delicacy, hardly able to look it in the face, for there was something almost indecent about the sight of meat in such abundance. All the same it was very splendid beef and I found myself eating it with enjoyment, even relish (GB:87).

Almost a case of "Alice - Mutton: Mutton - Alice"!

Radner (1985:172) has defined Pym's obsession with food and drink in Freudian terms:

"One theme seems to emerge repeatedly: as adult men and women come together in rituals of contemporary life - church teas, scholarly meetings, business lunches, family dinners - they unconsciously play out one key fantasy: *a self-denying mother generously feeds her ungrateful baby son*. From this fantasy, Pym develops complex patterns of character and action on the basis of such variables as awareness of role, comparative willingness to play it and specific social context. Especially do we note three elements: (a) the opposition between men and women; (b) a specially defined concept of female character, the 'excellent woman'; and (c) imagery that clusters around the acts of eating and drinking, serving and withholding."

Pym's incidents and imagery surrounding eating and drinking provide an interesting insight into the superstructure of her novels. Pym's women (the excellent variety) are obsessively concerned with the gastronomic wellbeing of the objects of their affection. Radner comments that "it is gratifying to note how much variety and comedy Pym is able to generate working off this kernel [the limited character-type of the excellent woman]" (1985:175), and cites Pym's

ability to take servitude to comic absurdity, as in the excellent woman so devoted that she sacrifices her life in the process:

He [Edwin] had come home one evening some years ago to find . . . Phyllis unconscious in the kitchen, about to put a shepherd's pie in the oven (Pym, 1984a:134).

Vicars and curates are the most prevalent "victims" of women's clucking ministrations, and must have meat, preferably a bird of some kind: chicken, with the best white meat reserved for them, or roast duck with a good hock, and in the later novels, poulet niçoise and Orvieto are on the menu, and an indication of the largesse provided for these trenchermen appears in Belinda and Harriet's Sunday supper party. In contrast to the usual vicarage supper of cold meat and beetroot provided for the Archdeacon by Agatha Hocceleve (not a conventional excellent wife):

A very nice supper had been prepared. It had to be so, for not only must the Archdeacon be pleased, but Harriet had thought the curate needed feeding up as he had been looking especially thin and pale lately . . . There were to be cold chickens with ham and tongue and various salads, followed by trifles, jellies, fruit and Stilton cheese (STG:114).

A veritable groaning table, as Dr Parnell complacently points out.

These exemplary qualities of excellent women are not only confined to clergymen. The anthropologists are also the grateful recipients of oxtails and casseroles, and Rupert Stonebird has occasion to consider:

How convenient women were . . . the way they were always 'just going' to make coffee or tea or perhaps had just roasted a joint in the oven or made a cheese soufflé (UA:86).

Using food imagery, Pym makes use of ironic deflation on more than one occasion. Rocky visits Mildred who has been instrumental in reuniting him with his estranged wife, Helena. Mildred has been a little in love with the debonair Rockingham, and the following conversation ensues:

We were standing in one of our usual talking places, the entrance to my kitchen. I could feel Rocky looking at me very intently. I raised my eyes to meet his.

'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"?' (EW:206).

On Jane Cleveland's return from holiday, she is warmly welcomed by her domestic, Mrs Glaze, who airs her disapproval of Nicholas's *locum tenens*, a vicar with missionary leanings:

'It's tired of Africa, we are,' said Mrs Glaze firmly. 'Six sermons about Africa, we've had. It's more than flesh and blood can stand, madam. I was really shocked at some of their customs.' She paused, and then added in a brighter tone, 'I've got some nice chops for your supper . . .' (JP:237).

Excellent women are seen as endless purveyors of fine victuals. When Helena Napier leaves Rocky - "She couldn't even wash a lettuce properly" - Mildred plays the role of devoted woman in succouring the helpless man with an excellent lunch:

I washed a lettuce and dressed it with a little of my hoarded olive oil and some salt. I also had a Camembert cheese, a fresh loaf and a bowl of greengages for dessert. It seemed an idyllic sort of meal that ought to have been eaten in the open air, with a bottle of wine and what is known as 'good' conversation. I thought it unlikely that I should be able to provide either the conversation or the wine, but I remembered that I had a bottle of brandy which I kept, according to old-fashioned custom, for 'emergencies' and I decided to bring it in with the coffee (EW:145).

The meals which the excellent women provide for themselves (and for other women) are sketchy and makeshift in comparison. After Mildred has supervised the removal of Rocky's furniture:

. . . I went upstairs to my flat to eat a melancholy lunch. A dried-up scrap of cheese, a few lettuce leaves for which I could not be bothered to make any dressing, a tomato and a piece of bread-and-butter, followed by a cup of coffee made with coffee essence. A real *woman's* meal, I thought, with no suggestion of brandy afterwards . . . (EW:162).

Her notion of an extravagant lunch for herself is "scrambled eggs, preceded by the remains of some soup and followed by cheese, biscuits and an apple" (EW:201), while Dulcie Mainwaring, another "dim spinster", prepares an equally sketchy supper for herself:

She set about preparing her supper. It would have to be one of those classically simple meals, the sort that French peasants are said to eat and that enlightened English people sometimes enjoy rather self-consciously - a crusty French loaf, cheese, and lettuce and tomatoes from the garden. Of course there should have been wine and a lovingly prepared dressing of oil and vinegar, but Dulcie drank orange squash and ate mayonnaise that came from a bottle (NFRL:56).

Similarly, women generally lunch at cheap, self-service restaurants, and Pym's novels proliferate with examples of women lunching off shredded cabbage leaves in dingy salad bars or eating welsh rarebit and poached eggs (sometimes with a "sweet" to follow) in garishly lit cafeterias:

'Just the kind of place for two women to meet for lunch,' she [Catherine] said when Deirdre had arrived, 'nothing to drink and not all that much to eat - no red meat, no birds, but poached eggs and welsh rarebits, the kind of nourishment that builds the backbone of this great country of ours. And we must help ourselves, too' (LA:163).

However, this self-negatory trait is certainly confined to the excellent women. Prudence Bates, thwarted in love yet again, resolves to be "unusually kind to herself" and her lunch in an expensive restaurant is appropriate to her delicate and bruised sensibilities: a dry martini, smoked salmon, chicken, fresh fruit and "the blackest of black coffee" (JP:225). Leonora Eyre, after a visit to the dentist (one of the few incidents which occasions a *timor mortis* in this self-obsessed woman) betakes herself to one of "several delightful places in Wigmore Street" for consolation with tea and a coffee eclair.

The provision or serving of food is frequently used as an image of humiliation. Belinda muses that "it was so obvious that women should take the blame, it was

both the better and the easier part" (STG:119), and Pym's novels are littered with comic examples of this. Miss Lord is humiliated because she is refused baked beans in a restaurant while a young man in the queue behind her is served; Leonora Eyre is peeved and petulant when Phoebe Sharpe's friend gets the last marron gâteau in a tea shop. Men are complacent and unwittingly rude: Rocky helps himself to the last chocolate biscuit, Rupert eats a ham sandwich in a pub while Penelope, having refused out of delicacy and politeness, starves beside him:

But her life had been, though in different ways, as narrow and sheltered as lanthe's. Men could and did eat sandwiches while their female companions ate nothing. Rupert went to the bar and came back with more drinks for them both and a thick and delicious-looking ham sandwich for himself.

Penelope poured tonic into her gin and looked away from him (UA:82),

and William Caldicote, while wining and dining Mildred in considerable style, "lifted the bottle, judged the amount left in it and refilled his own glass but not mine" (EW:67).

Tea, and its making, constitute much of the pettiness and comedy of office politicking. Pym's fine ear for dialogue is apparent from this hilarious exchange between two obsessively competitive office crones:

In another room Prudence sat with Miss Trapnell and Miss Clothier, discussing the possibility of tea being ready within the foreseeable future.

'Five-past eleven,' said Miss Trapnell. 'I hope they've put the kettle on.'

'I thought I heard a sound,' said Miss Clothier, opening her tin of biscuits.

'What kind of a sound?' asked Prudence idly.

'The sound of running water.'

'Did you say rushing water?' asked Miss Trapnell seriously.

'No, no; *running* water,' said Miss Clothier impatiently.  
'As if somebody was filling a kettle' (JP:110).

When Mildred accompanies the precious William back to the Ministry after lunch, he rushes after the tea-trolley with his china mug, and she irreverently wonders "whether important-sounding people like Calverley-Hibbert and Radcliffe-Forde were also at this moment hurrying along corridors with mugs. Perhaps even the Minister himself was joining in the general scramble" (EW:70).

More seriously, the lack of tea-making skills can jeopardise the position of the professional woman, as Miss Clovis absurdly experiences to her cost:

Esther Clovis had formerly been secretary of a Learned Society, which post she had recently left because of some disagreement with the President. It is often supposed that those who live and work in academic or intellectual circles are above the petty disputes that vex the rest of us, but it does sometimes seem as if the exalted nature of their work makes it necessary for them to descend occasionally and to refresh themselves, as it were, by squabbling about trivialities. The subject of Miss Clovis's quarrel with the President was known only to a privileged few and even those knew no more than that it had something to do with the making of tea. Not that the making of tea can ever really be regarded as a petty or trivial matter and Miss Clovis did seem to have been seriously at fault. Hot water from the tap had been used, the kettle had not been quite boiling, the teapot had not been warmed . . . whatever the details, there had been words, during the course of which other things had come out, things of a darker nature. Voices had been raised, and in the end Miss Clovis had felt bound to hand in her resignation (LA:10-11).

Men are revealed as complacent babies, and both Radner (1985) and Epstein (1986) concur that Pym's men cannot be held quite responsible for their actions, as they are like large and narcissistic children. This image of men as spoilt children is frequently connected with food. In *Quartet in Autumn*, Edwin is inordinately fond of jelly babies, and when Mildred accompanies William to his office:

Two elderly grey men were sitting at a table, one with a bag of sweets which he hastily put away into a drawer, the other with a card-index which he naturally did not attempt to conceal (EW:69).

Other men are portrayed as inept, and unable to cater adequately for themselves, as is seen in various clergymen's heart-rending appeals for succour to the excellent women of the parish in the parish magazine, or even further afield in the *Church Times*:

But an agitated postscript had been added. 'Oh dear me, Mrs Greenhill, our housekeeper, has just come into my study and told me that she will have to leave - she has been finding the work too much, and then there is her fibrositis. Well, perhaps we are all finding the work too much for us. Now we are *really* in the soup! Prayers, please, and *practical* help. Isn't there some good woman (or man) who would feel drawn to do *really Christian work* and look after Father Bode and myself? We can just about boil an egg between us!'(GB:26).

In restaurants and at dinner parties, subtle skirmishes occur to establish male supremacy and dominancy:

Eventually we reached a restaurant and were shown to a table. Some drinks were ordered and one was handed to me. It was something very strong, made with gin, I think. I sipped cautiously while Rocky and Everard argued over the wine list. They were nearly as fussy as William though in a different way, and I began to think that it would really be much easier if we just had water, though I lacked the courage to suggest it (EW:91).

When the parish party in Rome visits a restaurant in Trastevere, the men in the party attempt to outdo each other in apposite quotations from Wordsworth, and Rupert is outclassed as "Mark and Basil consulted together about the wine, while Rupert sat quietly, feeling that he was showing himself to be not quite a man by allowing them to do this" (UA:177).

Jane Cleveland is not the archetypal excellent woman, as her madcap moments and deficient domesticity demonstrate. She and Nicholas are forced to lunch at the Spinning Wheel, a restaurant run by "gentlewomen", as it is Mrs Glaze's day off, and Jane has neglected to make any provision for this type of emergency. Once again there is insistence on "men's needs". Nicholas is provided with two eggs, Jane with one, and Mr Oliver, a regular patron of the restaurant, gets chicken with all the trimmings:

At last Mrs Crampton emerged from behind the velvet curtain carrying two plates on a tray. She put in front of Jane a plate containing an egg, a rasher of bacon and some fried potatoes cut in fancy shapes, and in front of Nicholas a plate with two eggs and rather more potatoes.

Nicholas exclaimed with pleasure.

'Oh, a man needs eggs!' said Mrs Crampton, also looking pleased.

This insistence on a man's needs amused Jane. Men needed meat and eggs - well, yes, that might be allowed; but surely not more than women did? Perhaps Mrs Crampton's

widow-hood had something to do with it; possibly she made up for having no man to feed at home by ministering to the needs of those who frequented her café . . .

Mrs Crampton now returned and set down before Mr Oliver a plate laden with roast chicken and all the proper accompaniments. He accepted it with quite as much complacency as Nicholas had accepted his eggs and bacon and began to eat.

Jane turned away, to save his embarrassment. Man needs bird, she thought. Just the very best, that is what man needs (JP:56-57).

Occasions where men and women get together, whether these be church socials or whist drives for Conservative Party funds, are all opportunities for men to be pampered and pandered to. Rivalry concerning the comparative lightness of sponge cakes becomes a matter of some import, and when Father Anstruther, a retired vicar, returns to his old parish for the occasion of the church bazaar, Pym once again demonstrates her facility for the comic nuances of dialogue:

He shook his head, then took a plate and wandered off to choose cakes for his tea. 'Fairies,' he murmured, 'who was it now who used to make such deliciously light fairies?'

'Why, Father, it was Mother,' said Sister Dew oddly. 'You always did say that her fairies were the lightest you ever tasted' (UA:66).

In *Jane and Prudence*, the village worthies vie with each other as to how the gastronomic needs of the "Member", Edward Lyall, might be met. Only Jane and Miss Morrow are sufficiently detached to appreciate the comedy of the scene; Miss Morrow is drily ironic, while Jane's incipient "excellent woman" tendencies are at odds with her wit:

'Men seem to need a lot of food at all times,' said Miss Morrow in a rough, casual tone.

'Sometimes,' said Mrs Lyall, on what seemed a reproachful note, 'Edward is too tired to eat breakfast when he's been in the House all night.'

'Oh dear . . . ' Mrs Mayhew and Mrs Crampton had now joined the little group round Mrs Lyall.

'Perhaps a nourishing milk drink would be best at a time like that?' suggested Mrs Crampton. 'Benger's or Ovaltine . . . '

'Or a more drastic remedy,' said Miss Doggett boldly. 'Brandy, perhaps?'

'Yes, one does feel that in cases of fatigue, something really strong is needed,' said Mrs Mayhew.

'I always think one should have brandy in the house,' said Mrs Crampton.

'Does she mean in the house or in the House?' said Miss Morrow to Jane. 'I think we can safely leave them to their worship now, don't you?' (JP:102).

Although homosexuals are not a gender prominent in Anita Brookner's novels, Pym's gays cannot be dissociated from food. They are fussy connoisseurs, and when not pampering themselves in elegant restaurants, console themselves with delicate dinners *chez nous* with red wine correctly *chambré*. One suspects that William Caldicote, Mildred's perennial tepid suitor, is a closet queen, given his temperamental fussiness concerning food. His annual lunch with Mildred is positively fraught:

He was in a fussy mood today, I could see, as he went rather petulantly through the menu. The liver would probably be over-done, the duck not enough done, the weather had been too mild for the celery to be good - it seemed as if there was really nothing we could eat. I sat patiently while William and the waiter consulted in angry whispers. A bottle of wine was brought. William took it up and studied the label suspiciously. I watched

apprehensively as he tasted it, for he was one of those men to whom the formality really meant something and he was quite likely to send the bottle back and demand another. But as he tasted, he relaxed. It was all right, or perhaps not that, but it would do (EW:65).

Adam Prince, the food critic, is another camp and pompous bore, whose stress and insomnia are occasioned by rage at seeing "a bottle of wine being warmed up ('chambréed') on a storage heater . . . vinegary bottled mayonnaise instead of home-made, or sliced bread or processed cheese, or there being no Dijon mustard . . . or freshly ground coffee, and finally the use of tea-bags" (FGL:185). Dr. G., whom he consults, prescribes the usual Pym placebo for insomnia: a warm milky drink at bedtime.

Wilf Bason, the kleptomaniac housekeeper at the clergy house in *A Glass of Blessings*, practises one-upmanship on the previous female housekeeper's boiled cod and macaroni cheese, and his Lenten menu includes fried octopus, scampi with garlic butter and escargots. Mervyn Cantrell, while berating Ianthe for allowing a book to be removed from his non-circulating library, is appeased by the possibility that its stained pages might have been caused by "a genuine tomato sauce from a dish of spaghetti or ravioli":

"Nice" he may be but his taste for Brand's A1 Sauce - or is it HP? - Mervyn examined the page more closely - 'does seem to be excessive. Why is it, I wonder, that when books have things spilt on them it is always bottled sauce or gravy of the thickest and most repellent kind rather than something utterly exquisite and delicious?'

'I suppose because the people who read sociological and political books don't eat exquisite and delicious food,' said Ianthe sensibly.

'Of course,' said Mervyn thoughtfully, 'it could just be a genuine tomato sauce from a dish of spaghetti or ravioli.'

Yet it is difficult to imagine anyone reading Talcott Parsons and manipulating spaghetti at the same time.' He closed it up, obviously delighted to have found a reasonable explanation (UA:96).

Epstein (1986:42) discerns a further joke in this episode:

"In a Barbara Pym novel strict attention must be paid, lest a quiet cultivated joke pass over one's head . . . The reference to Talcott Parsons, whose prose could so often be the stylistic equivalent of spaghetti, is exactly right. But then Barbara Pym always gets such things exactly right."

Pym makes pointed character diagnoses with a single stroke of her pen:

Maurice helped himself rather generously and added a dash of water from a glass jug which stood on the tray.

He likes his gin, thought Aylwin, coming into the room just as Maurice was in the act of pouring . . .

Aylwin, feeling all eyes upon him, poured himself a rather smaller gin than Maurice had given himself (NFRL:132-133).

Miss Lord's disappointment about the baked beans is compensated for by her pudding:

' . . . And what will you have for pudding today?' she asked, jerking herself back to reality by a sudden awareness of Miss Lord's pitying look at her vague philosophizings . . .

'Deep apricot tart,' said Miss Lord, suiting her tone to the words (NFRL:95).

Although Belinda muses that "Perhaps it was a mistake to have any kind of serious conversation when eating, or even anywhere at all in mixed company", even providing cauliflower cheese for the visiting seamstress is fraught with perils. Miss Prior's position above or below the salt is not entirely clear:

The trouble was that Miss Prior wasn't entirely the meek person one expected a little sewing woman to be. Belinda had two feelings about her - Pity and Fear, like Aristotle's *Poetics*, she thought confusedly. She was so very nearly a gentlewoman in some ways that one felt that she might even turn out to be related to a clergyman or something like that . . . She was so touchy, so conscious of her position, so quick to detect the slightest suspicion of patronage. One had to be very careful with Miss Prior (STG:44).

The cauliflower cheese episode (Mr Donne, the curate, cannot possibly be expected to eat cauliflower cheese, but must have duck) becomes a farcical scene in the tradition of the true comedy of manners. To the sensitive Belinda's distress, Miss Prior spurns the cauliflower cheese:

'Oh dear, I'm afraid you haven't enjoyed your lunch, Miss Prior,' said Belinda, who now felt near to tears. 'Don't you like cauliflower cheese?'

'Oh, yes, Miss Bede, I do sometimes,' said Miss Prior in an offhand tone, not looking up from her work.

Belinda went on standing in the doorway watching Miss Prior negotiating an awkward bit of chair cover. Then she looked again at the tray, wondering what she could say next. And then, in a flash, she realized what it was. It was almost a relief to know, to see it there, the long, greying caterpillar. Dead now, of course, but unmistakable. It needed a modern poet to put this into words. Eliot, perhaps (STG:49).

This episode illuminates the characters of Belinda, Harriet and Miss Prior; it also gives Belinda an intimation of Agatha's less than exemplary housekeeping, and above all, it is a celebration of the ordinary, the infinite possibilities of "the trivial round, the common task" to provide the wherewithal for life. As Larson (1983:18) avers: ". . . the crises are resolved happily and the rivalry contained within civilized boundaries":

'I'm sure you wouldn't get a caterpillar in your cauliflower cheese there,' said Belinda lightly.

Miss Prior made a noise like a snort. 'It might be about all I *would* get,' she said. 'Very poor meals there.' She lowered her voice. 'Between ourselves, Miss Bede, Mrs Hocceve doesn't keep a good table. At least, I never see any proof of it. An old dried-up scrap of cheese or a bit of cottage pie, no sweet, sometimes. I've heard the maids say so, too, you know how these things get about. Scarcely any meat except at the week-end, the Sunday roast, you know. You always have such nice meals, Miss Bede, and you give me just the same as you have yourselves, I know that. After all, it might just as easily have been you or Miss Harriet that got the unwelcome visitor today,' she concluded with a little giggle.

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, and the afternoon sun streaming in through the window over it all (STG:50).

Isa Kapp (1983:237) notes that Barbara Pym, "unlike the star fiction writers of the last few decades . . . is not much attracted to chaos, whether linguistic or emotional, and nurtures instead a fascination for everything that is orderly and habitual", and food plays an essential role in the power of the ordinary to sustain whom Piers Longridge acknowledges as "colleagues . . . in this grim business of getting through life as best we can" (GB:194). Pym's relentless

description of food is paramount to her characters doing just that, as Epstein (1986:42) contends:

"Description,' said Wallace Stevens, 'is revelation.' In her subtle, ironic, dead-on accurate novels, Barbara Pym endlessly describes: clothes, furniture, gardens, houses, food. Although she always has a story to tell, plot somehow is not quite paramount. Not that things fail to happen: people die, rather less frequently they marry, they pay their small courtesies, and those who have not already given it up as a bad job search to give some purpose to their lives through doing things for others. The compass in a Pym novel is kept narrow. Barbara Pym characters go off to their jobs, lunch carefully, sometimes have a boiled egg with their tea, take comfort from hot, milky drinks, and put out of mind as best they can that life can be as 'empty as the house one was coming back to.'"

Food is as important, if less obtrusively present, in the novels of Anita Brookner. In addition to being a touchstone of character, it is also a symbol and prognosis of mood, and is thus important to Brookner's interior narrative mode. Brookner's culinary background has the foreign flavour of Eastern Europe. When characters in Pym's novels venture beyond the safe confines of English culinary fare, it is with a sense of adventure and misgiving, as when the parish party in Rome samples osso buco and Chianti.

Brookner relentlessly contrasts English and Continental backgrounds in terms of food. The difference between Kitty's English world and her French background is stressed by descriptions of meals which are both idiosyncratic and foreign: cake accompanied by plum brandy (a common Brookner touch, this), plates with

the remnants of crusts of bread, rinds of sausage, fruit peels, empty mustard glasses containing the dregs of wine, the bottle of wine ritually recorked at the end of the meal, the importance of fresh vegetables, the ripeness of the cheese, the freshness of the fish before purchase. English stodge is seen as safe, solid and routine in contrast:

Vadim, an enthusiastic cook, would put plates of food before her at odd times, urging her to taste his latest creation, which was usually both pungent and idiosyncratic. Gradually the comforting monotony of school dinners faded from her memory (P:13).

In *Family and Friends*, Alfred's search for identity is prompted by literature, and exemplified by the largesse of English roast beef dinners; he acquires a country house and an appalling English housekeeper, and "At last Alfred is able to enjoy those terrible meals he has read about and which he thinks he likes" (FF:109). His mother, as a tart counterpoint, serves coffee and marzipan cake.

Ruth Weiss's over-developed sense of duty and order is imbibed from her fraternal grandmother's stern and dolorous European past, and Brookner manages to imbue something as seemingly innocuous as a poppy seed roll with portent:

To the child it seemed as if all dining rooms must be dark, as if sodden with a miasma of gravy and tears . . . The doleful atmosphere at mealtimes the child assumed to be universal, as if the faintly sour flavours of the buttermilk, rye bread, caraway seeds, cucumbers, had something penitential about them . . . In that dining room, while her grandmother buttered a poppy seed roll for her, the child learned an immense sense of responsibility (SL:12-13).

The characters of Ruth and her appalling parents are delineated by their choice of food. Order and sobriety exist in Ruth's chaste meals of eggs, boiled potatoes and salads; chaos and profligacy lie dormant in George and Helen's "expensive made-up pies and pâtés and tinned vegetables" from Fortnum and Mason. The contrast between a sober way of life, with regular meals eaten in the dining room, and "our darling Maggie's" late-night sandwiches and drinks served on trays in the bedroom therefore extends beyond mere character description.

In *Hotel du Lac*, much of the anorectic Monica's problems are revealed through eating: she feeds her dinner to her dog, and gorges on cakes at cafés. The dining room is a veritable plethora of character revelation, as Monica, Mme de Bonneuil and especially the Puseys go through the rituals of eating and drinking. Greed and avarice permeate the lives of the Puseys, and Edith is painfully aware of the gulf separating her staidness from more concupiscent womanhood:

She had also perceived a difference of appetite, one that seemed to carry an implicit threat to her own. Yet she dismissed this as ridiculous (dismissed it also as potentially too painful to contemplate) as she sat drinking coffee in the agreeable company of Jennifer and Mrs Pusey and basking in the high summer of their self-esteem,<sup>1</sup> which in its turn shed a kindly light on all those within its orbit (HL:39).

Significantly, much is made of Edith's veal coloured room at the hotel, which seems to embody her bland and inoffensive nature.

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1 As opposed to Edith's "winter of discontent", presumably.

The nurturing qualities of women are constantly emphasised in Brookner's novels. George finds a Jewish mother-substitute in Sally Jacobs, the new owner of the book shop, who gives him love and food, but mostly food:

. . . George had found Mrs Jacobs in the back room of the shop, sitting down to a simple meal of rye bread and liver sausage, with a dill pickle on the side, and a glass of lemon tea. 'Malzeit,' he said automatically. He had not used the word for years. Her face brightened. 'I've brought far too much,' she confessed. 'I don't eat a lot these days. Won't you join me?' So he did and took to dropping in at the shop quite regularly after that (SL:47).

Although George's physical presence in her flat is somewhat of an inconvenience, Mrs Jacobs needs "something to love", a man to feed and nurture, while George subconsciously desires the civilised order of his mother's household. Indeed it is difficult to decide whether Helen's histrionics or Sally's snacks are more conducive to George's heart attack, as Sally assumes the role of the elder Mrs Weiss in her stern and loving force-feeding:

The delights of his youth. A little bit of smoked fish as an appetizer. Cold meat loaf and horseradish. Cucumbers in sour cream. And cheesecake, which Sally made herself, and which was so rich that he had to eat it with a spoon. And all the while he ate she would sit at the table and watch him sternly, her face propped in her hand, to see that he left nothing on his plate (SL:108).

In *Providence*, Kitty resolutely feeds Maurice lemon pudding and coffee. His churlish behaviour prompts Kitty to crave the benison of tea (in true Pym fashion) on at least one occasion:

At that moment Kitty wanted nothing more than a cup of tea. She wanted it with a passion that she had not felt for food and drink for a very long time (P:64).

Kitty's own meals, in contrast to the continental largesse of her grandparents and her assiduous efforts for Maurice, are as makeshift as a Pym heroine's on a bad day: something on toast, scrambled eggs, fruit and coffee. Meals in Brookner's novels, however, are fraught with emotion; they are a gauge of tenor, a reflection of melancholy. The death of Marie-Thérèse echoes like a plangent *leit-motif* throughout *Providence*:

When dining alone, Kitty Maule tended to dispatch the meal as quickly as possible and also to distract herself from the actual business of eating. She found it helpful to balance a tray on her knees rather than to sit down forlornly at an empty table, and to read, listen to the radio, or even sometimes to wander about, as if only lending herself to the task of digestion. The vagaries of her appetite had increased since her mother's death, at dinner, some three years earlier. It had been a strange and peaceful death, her mother collapsed in her chair, one small hand trailing through some fragments of walnut shell. The faintly sour scent of her grandmother's discarded fruit peel was still in Kitty's nostrils, as well as the sight of her grandfather, with tears pouring down his face, crying, 'Marie-Thérèse!' Somehow the event had been incorporated into their family life, but Kitty Maule could never sit down to a hearty plateful of food without hearing the plaint, 'Marie-Thérèse! Marie-Thérèse!' Her throat would close and a faint trembling would start in her hands. People had given up asking her out. She was better off at home, where she could concentrate on feeding the birds with the crumbs from her plate. Sometimes she was perfectly all right, as now. Sometimes she ate with enjoyment, as when she prepared a meal for her lover, Maurice Bishop. But when she was alone, there hovered faintly in the background of her mind the memory of the hand and the walnut shells, and the cry, 'Marie-Thérèse! Marie-Thérèse!' (P:18).

Blanche Vernon's lonely meals are not quite as dispiriting; civilised dissimulation is paramount:

. . . she was conscious of her well-being and thought it poor-spirited to descend to the sort of food that people tend to eat when they are alone; bits of cheese and fruit and the ends of anything that had not already been eaten. She liked to set a table, even now, and did so as if, were she to be surprised, all would be in order, civilized, devoid of self-pity. Even after a year of this kind of life she still thought in terms of Bertie's calling in, as sometimes he did; she did not care, out of pride, out of love, to cause him any of the uneasiness she was almost sure he must feel. She took out a bottle of Vouvray, nicely chilled, and put it on a small silver tray with some very thin dry biscuits. That was what her shopping was best at these days (M:15).

Blanche's continued nurturing of the delinquent Bertie tends to be as carefully contrived and sophisticated as her appearance: cake and wine, jellied chicken, buttered water biscuits, Wensleydale cheese, peaches. The mute child Elinor is as studiously catered to: scrambled egg, brown bread and butter, stewed apricots, as opposed to the synthetic cake, spaghetti, toast and green apples which her stepmother provides. Blanche - Sally, Blanche - Mousie; once again, as in Pym's novels, most of the excellent women are separated from their louche sisters by the excellence of their food and the pristine state of their kitchens. For Blanche, her own diet is analogous to her state of mind, and the meagreness of the portions an intimation of her own lonely negligibility:

She herself ate without pleasure or interest these days, and even the memory of the beautiful meals she used to cook now seemed insubstantial, as if divorce had cancelled them or reckoned them to be of dwindling significance, like a lost reputation. The things she ate these days - a single chop, an isolated Dover soul - seemed to her rather more suitable subjects for still-life painting than for consumption. They could be bought negligently, distastefully, and

cooked in the same absent way. She thought of titanic roasts of beef, hecatombs of vegetables, puddings stuffed with fruit, trembling custards (M:99-100).

One suspects that Brookner becomes entangled in the ramifications of her style, for elsewhere we read: "Still conscientious, she shopped scrupulously, testing everything for freshness" (M:9).

Brookner invests food with multifarious qualities and significance. In *Providence*, there is fragrantly cloying Keatsian eroticism:

She had slipped next door to the cake-shop and bought two apple caissons and two croissants filled with almond paste. They ate ravenously, their mouths perfumed with the sweet mixtures. When they kissed, they exchanged identical breaths, and she made a vow that she would never forget that particular taste as long as she lived (P:126).

The excesses of Nick and Alix are substantiated by vivid and nauseating detail:

. . . a waiter approached our table with a huge, towering concoction largely composed, as far as I could see, of whipped cream . . . The sight of the yellow and white mass gave me a momentary pang of nausea, but the others were exclaiming with delight, and soon the sweet liquefying mixture was being attacked, devoured . . . I stared down at the yellow custard on my plate and willed my shock not to show . . . The faces before me seemed to me to be flushed, venial, corrupt, gorged with sweet food and drink, presaging danger . . . Alix stubbed out her cigarette in the remains of her yellow custard and smeared red over her wide mouth (LM:160-161).

This Brueghel-like orgy of rapacity gives way to the serenity of a Vermeer, as Frances is succored by the still-life tranquility of Nancy's kitchen:

Tentatively, I reached out and felt the soft clean surface of her deal table. In the centre stood a blue china fruit bowl, and among the apples and the tangerines there was a packet of the harsh mints that she loved so well (LM:173).

The mute sobriety of Nancy, epitomised by nursery puddings, is vividly contrasted with the culinary debris of the predatory Frasers.

Brookner is able to produce images of haunting delicacy; the olfactory and visual senses are repeatedly invoked, and evocative images are conjured in pointillist detail:

The delicate steam of her soup, scenting the kitchen, made her think of greenhouses, of wet grass, and of sun breaking through to shine on rain-spotted windows (M:52).

Although the occasion of a dinner party sometimes presages some intimation of a farcical comedy of manners:

[Muriel] is kind enough to treat Sofka and Mimi as if they were old acquaintances of a faintly unfortunate nature. 'A little more for Mother?' she enquires, with a steaming ladle held aloft. Sofka, repressing a shudder, smilingly shakes her head . . . Muriel is a lavish but uninteresting cook, made fearless by the amount of produce she is able to afford. Yet it is less her cooking that offends Sofka than her appearance, and particularly her appearance at table, where Sofka has no wish to see her. A satin blouse of dubious vintage and an even more dubious pair of trousers greet Sofka's uninflected gaze . . . (FP:108-109),

for Brookner, a dinner party generally unfolds as a narrative of horrendous expectation. Ruth's dinner for Richard is described in merciless detail. By eight thirty she has taken the reader through two pages of preparation and a

lifetime of waiting. By nine thirty five, when the wretch arrives, we have experienced "an ominous browning" around the edges of the casserole, the "rice had cooked, stuck, and been thrown away", and "the apple tart was leaking through the pastry crust". Like all Pym heroines, Brookner's women cater assiduously and with destructive self-abandon to men's selfish needs.

Brookner's use of food in her fictional technique is more complex than Pym's. In Brookner's novels, not only is character illuminated by food and the imagery and occasions surrounding it, but moods are sustained. Alienation, isolation and need are delineated in impeccable prose which is more evocative, dense and symbolic than that of Barbara Pym.

In a final analysis it is important to note that food is never a barometer of character alone, but an integral element of theme and style in both novelists. Above all, it anchors the novels, sometimes comically, sometimes unflinchingly and uncompromisingly traumatically, firmly in reality.

#### **6.4        Clothes**

Barbara Pym retained a life-long interest in and regard for smart clothes and dressing, which is reflected in diary entries stretching from her Oxford days until late in life. An entry in 1933 reads:

"After tea I went to the Bod. and it was sultry sort of weather - one expected it to thunder at almost any moment. I wasn't looking awfully beautiful. I was wearing a brown check skirt, yellow short sleeved jersey - yellow suede coat -

brown hat and Viyella scarf - flesh coloured fishnet stockings, brown and white ghillie shoes (blue eelanesse trollies - pink suspender belt - pink keatos - white vest) - brown gloves - umbrella" (Pym, 1984d:21).

The diary firmly dispels any notions one might entertain of Barbara Pym as a "dim English spinster", and a 1934 entry confesses:

"At Marks and Spencer's I bought a peach coloured vest and trollies to match with insertions of lace. Disgraceful I know but I can't help choosing my underwear with a view to its being seen!" (Pym, 1984d:33).

Her description of the contenders at the 1977 Booker Prize ceremony includes "BP in her 65th year. Tall, short hair, long black pleated skirt, black blouse, Indian with painted flowers (C & A £4.90) and green beads" (Pym, 1984d:311); however her descriptions are not only confined to herself and other women. She describes the great love of her life, Henry Harvey (later to be fictionalised as Archdeacon Hocceve), as follows:

"Henry was absolutely at his best. He wore his grey flannel suit, a bright blue silk shirt with a darker blue tie and blue socks" (Pym, 1984d:52).

Her passion for clothes extended to prolific descriptions in her novels, and her heroines are characterised as much by their clothes as by their actions and dialogue. Although a clergyman's wife "ought to be a comfortable, shabby sort of person, in an old tweed coat and skirt or a sagging stockinette jumper suit" (STG:47), and Jane Cleveland certainly conforms to this depressing image, Agatha Hocceve, in keeping with her superior attitude and position as Belinda's

covert rival, dresses "from the best houses". Belinda's timid nature is typified by "her blue marocain, a rather dim dress of the kind known as 'semi-evening'" (STG:8), while Harriet, with her more extrovert personality, is "radiant in flowered voile. Tropical flowers rioted over her plump body. The background was the green of the jungle, the blossoms were crimson and mauve, of an unknown species. Harriet was still attractive in a fat Teutonic way. She did not wear her pince-nez when curates came to supper" (STG:9-10). Much of Harriet's time is spent in "strengthening corsets", and Pym thereby plays up her plump vanity in comic fashion.

Another vivid portrait is Catherine of *Less than Angels*, whose bohemian looks are vividly sketched:

It was natural for her to look a little ragged and untidy, and the fashions of the day, when women in their thirties could dress like girls of twenty in flat-heeled shoes and loose jackets, their hair apparently cut with nail scissors, suited her very well (LA:5-6).

As has been pointed out in the preceding thematic analysis, Pym is fond of contrasting her characters in terms of dress and appearance: Belinda - Harriet, Mildred - Helena, Jane - Prudence, Catherine - Deirdre, Wilmet - Mary, Dulcie - Viola, Ianthe - Penelope, Leonora - Phoebe, Marcia - Letty, Emma - Claudia; practically each novel has contrasting pairs, who are also often rivals in love.

Pym uses looks and clothes with ironic intent. For example, the dowdy Mary Beamish ensnares the handsome Father Ransome in *A Glass of Blessings*.

Wilmet is complacent about her good looks and good taste. When she sets off to tea at Piers's lodgings:

I was wearing a dress of deep coral-coloured poplin, very simple, with a pair of coral and silver earrings, and a bracelet to match. I always like myself in deep clear colours, and I felt at my best now and wondered if people were looking at me as I passed them (GB:186).

The irony of Piers's sexual preferences is intensified by Wilmet's happy complacency.

Ironically, men are often impervious to women's clothes, and Everard Bone takes Mildred for an impromptu drink and a visit to his mother while she is looking her worst: "I had had a 'lapse' and was hatless and stockingless in an old cotton dress and a cardigan" (EW:130). Sophia, relentlessly matchmaking, notices "with mingled pity and satisfaction that lanthe was looking extremely plain in her sickness, with red nose and eyes, pale lips, and straggling hair" (UA:104), but Rupert continues to think of her as a "suitable attachment". Men are often depicted as being sexually attracted to women's pathetic attempts to look different or alluring. Rupert finds Penelope's split silver lamé dress provocative and endearing, and in Rome, while admiring lanthe's "suitability", is sexually attracted to Penelope's odd appearance:

Behind Sophia he could see lanthe and Penelope standing side by side. He was struck immediately by lanthe's absolute rightness here - the Englishwoman in Rome - in her cool green linen suit and straw hat. Penelope looked slightly grotesque by contrast, in dusty black cotton, with red sandals on her stumpy little bare feet. She reminded him of some of the women who had been at the conference in Perugia. And yet Penelope was more appealing than these and seemed genuinely pleased to see him. Her dusty little toes amused him, for they were such a contrast to lanthe's smooth beige linen shoes (UA:173).

Even the bisexual James finds himself attracted to the rather slatternly Phoebe:

Phoebe looked even more skinny and droopy than usual in a rather unbecoming beige crepe dress which was in the fashion of that summer but yet reminded him dimly of his mother at some unspecified period of his early life. The dress was obviously new and he noticed that she had put silver varnish on her nails. Her appearance was touching and upsetting and he found himself longing to make love to her . . .

'I like your dress,' he said, 'very fashionable.'

She glanced at him suspiciously. 'But the colour doesn't suit me.'

'No?' Of course it didn't, or she needed different make-up or something. Leonora always knew what suited her, almost boringly so. James would have liked to advise a woman what to wear but didn't know where to start with Phoebe (SDD:70-71).

Even the most glamorous heroines get their deserts through the perspectives of others. James notices that Leonora's hair has been freshly done in a style too young for her (SDD:121), and when Leonora, having lost James, attempts to inveigle Humphrey back, she is complacent "that at the candlelit dinner table she would be looking at her best in a black lace dress that Humphrey liked" (SDD:151). Ironically, Humphrey notes that she "looked tired . . . not quite at her best in the black lace dress. Women of Leonora's generation had the idea that black always suited them but often they were mistaken" (SDD:152).

In Pym's novels, clothes and appearance often designate "suitability", but Pym wryly intimates that love doesn't conform to sartorial rules. The *comme il faut* Ianthe settles for John with his too pointed shoes and overcoat of "a thin material in the rather common 'Italian' style", while the sober and academic Rupert chooses a "Pre-Raphaelite beatnik".

Anita Brookner has her share of dim spinsters, and Edith Hope, in her long and shapeless cardigan, appears to be a Mildred/Dulcie clone sartorially speaking. Brookner, predictably, imbues the cardigan with symbolic significance, as it presages Edith's eventual repudiation of Mr Neville (himself a tailor's dummy):

'That cardigan is not warm enough; I do wish you would get rid of it. Whoever told you that you looked like Virginia Woolf did you a grave disservice, although I suppose you thought it was a compliment. As to vice, there is plenty to be found if you know where to look.'

'I never seem to find, it,' said Edith.

'That is because you do not give yourself over wholeheartedly to the pursuit. But, if you remember, we are going to change all that.'

'I really don't see how. If all it involves is giving away my cardigan, I feel I should tell you that I have another one at home. Of course, I could give that away too. But I seem to be too spiritless for radical improvement (HL:158-159).

As in Pym's novels, there are constant contrasts. In contrast to Edith's dowdiness, the Puseys flaunt their charms and their consumer assets:

... Mrs Pusey gestured with a smile to a negligé in oyster-coloured satin, thickly encrusted with lace, which was laid out over the back of a chair. 'My weakness,' she confided. 'I do love nice things. And there's such a good shop in Montreux. That's why we come back here every year' (HL:43).

Edith misses crucial sartorial signals which, in addition to the nocturnal cries and whispers, presage her imminent disillusionment:

Dinner was half-way through before Mrs Pusey, in fine lilac wool, made her appearance. Her full figure, her shining blonde hair, her cloud of scent almost obscured the presence of Jennifer who, although equally well accoutred, signalled something cruder, less exquisite, less highly conscious, less ardently attached to these repeated pleasantries . . . Edith, watching as always with fascinated interest, found her attention drawn to the enigmatic Jennifer, who, indifferent to the chill of the evening, was wearing another of her oddly immodest outfits, a clinging low-necked blue silk sweater and a pair of white knickerbockers. Yet although her appearance was that of a large rich teenager about to be taken off in somebody's car for an evening at a smart discothèque, she was as assiduous as ever in her attentions to her mother whose conversation was apparently all that she required by way of social stimulus (HL:176).

Brookner's perceptions come wrapped in fine irony. The myopic heroine picks up the superficial details, but cannot penetrate their significance. Jennifer is an *outré* creation, an apparently docile nymphet, going on forty.

We are spared too much detail about Blanche Vernon, except that she is groomed to the last finger nail. Her elegant Yves St Laurent ensembles are in glaring contrast to Sally's "radical chic". Ruth Weiss soon finds her own style (which one suspects to be pretty much Brookner's own):

She bought herself a couple of pleated skirts, like those worn by Miss Parker; she bought cardigans and saddle shoes and thus found a style to which she would adhere the rest of her life (SL:29).<sup>1</sup>

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1 "Dr Anita Brookner [now Professor], to address her correctly, is a slim, stylish woman in her mid-forties with a crisp, but by no means unsympathetic, manner. Had I not known she was a Francophile, I might have guessed it from the simple good taste of her clothes: navy blue crew-neck sweater worn over a cream shirt; a pleated check skirt and silver-buckled pumps" (Barber, 1983a:26).

Once again, there are incessant contrasts: Ruth - Helen, Ruth - Mrs Cutler, Ruth - Anthea. For the unnerving denouement of *Look at Me*, Alix is sinuously clad in predatory black:

She looked older, more powerful, in her tight black dress; the curves of her figure seemed more opulent than usual, reducing my dwindling confidence still further. Blameless and understated in my grey dress, I could capture no one's eye. Look at me, I urged silently. Look at me. (LM:158).

The elegant Kitty Maule is comically contrasted with her vapid but flamboyant neighbour, Caroline:

For the visit to the clairvoyant Caroline wore violet trousers, a blue silk shirt, and several chains round her neck . . . Caroline undulated like a siren, clutching her bag, her scarves, touching her chains, her feet slipping about in ridiculously fragile sandals. From time to time she had to steady herself by hanging on to Kitty who assumed a martyr-like pose of rigid stillness until all the necessary adjustments had been made and they could start off again. She wondered how Caroline ever managed to get to Harrods on her own. She also knew that Caroline could walk as easily as anyone else, and was using her as a convenient foil in the absence of a man (P:67-70).

Here again there are contrasts. The elegant Kitty and the extravagantly exotic Caroline are both bereft of the men they love. Jane Fairchild, clad in her brother's too-large, cast off sweaters, gets Maurice.

Dress, like food, permeates Brookrer's novels with tangible expectation. The creation of "the dress" which is to secure Kitty's permanent academic appointment, and Maurice, is fraught with tension:

At the end, the tension in the sitting-room was too much for her. Louise seemed not to have moved from her chair for two days. Kitty carried out with her, into the sunshine, an image of Louise, in her dusty black dress, with a powdering of sugar on the breast, her face impassive, her swollen feet propped on a footstool, stitching with rapid unhesitating strokes. Vadim moving silently around her, his expression watchful, almost severe. The room indifferent to the splendour outside, aromatic and enclosed. In the garden Kitty sat and waited for the hours to pass. It stayed light until very late and she had no idea of the time. Finally, on the Monday, as she was sitting, she heard the window above her open, and turning, saw her grandfather's head emerge, and heard him say, '*Ça y est. Viens, Thérèse.*'

Standing on a sheet in the middle of the floor, she submitted while Louise dropped the dress over her head, while Vadim turned her round and secured it, while Louise then lifted the dress on the shoulders and let it settle. She stood quite still as Louise stepped back, lit a cigarette, and contemplated her handiwork. She stood until the cigarette was smoked, the inspection finished. Not a word was exchanged. Then Louise turned to Vadim and nodded to him. His face broke into his great smile and he kissed her cheek. Then Kitty was allowed to see herself in the glass. The dress was exquisite, so light, so easy, with the famous pleats breaking about the knees, and the long graceful jacket (P:149-150).

William Gass, arguing his case for schematisation in character analysis, wittily notes:

"Characters in fiction are mostly empty canvas. I have known many who have passed through their stories without noses, or heads to hold them; others have lacked bodies altogether, exercise [*sic*] no natural functions, possessed some thoughts, a few emotions, but no psychologies, and apparently made love without the necessary organs" (in Visser, 1980:44-45).

Mercifully both Pym and Brookner spare us the sexual organs, but in their vivid and minute depiction of sartorial detail, not only vivify characters, but suggest

moods, delineate the contrasts so essential to their theme that "the world is not won by virtue" (or indeed, by clothes or, in Pym's case, by striking good looks), and create wry and rueful ironies.

### 6.5 Interiors

Interiors are important in the novels of both Pym and Brookner. In Barbara Pym's novels the interiors of houses are delineations of character, barometers of dissatisfaction, or touchstones of "suitability". Leonora Eyre lives in "quite a sweet little house", and like the more fortunate heroines in Pym's benign novels, "experienced as always the pleasure of being home among the pretty Victorian furniture and objects with which she had surrounded herself" (SDD:16). Similarly, Ianthe, although an orphan, is privileged to have her own house (which makes her in Mervyn Cantrell's eyes a very suitable attachment indeed):

It was sad coming back alone to an empty house, Ianthe thought, but how much worse if it had been a single furnished room, like poor Miss Grimes. Ianthe had always wanted a house of her own and as soon as she had shut the door behind her she forgot the lonely home-coming in the pleasure she still felt at seeing her furniture and possessions in their new setting. Here were the Hepplewhite chairs and the Pembroke table, coveted by Mervyn Cantrell, portraits of her grandparents and of her father in cope and biretta, the corner cupboard with the lustre jugs collected by her mother, the old silky Bokhara rugs on the polished parquet floor of the sitting room, the familiar books in the white-painted book-shelves, and the china ornaments she remembered from childhood (UA:29-30).

Since Ianthe and Rupert have similar adjoining houses, they would appear to be ideal as suitable attachments, but Ianthe is drawn to John, although he lives in a dingy lodging house in a less salubrious neighbourhood:

They were standing in a narrow hall, with a bicycle propped against one wall and stairs leading down to a basement. The floor was littered with papers - coupons offering '3d off' soap powder and frozen peas, and literature about television insurance and reconditioned sewing machines - which had evidently been thrust through the letter box. There was no sound in the house apart from what might have been the twittering of a caged bird coming from one of the closed doors on the ground floor. Then a kind of muffled shouting could be heard somewhere underneath them, as if somebody was having a fight or an argument (UA:110).

Although Jane and Nicholas live in happy disarray in the vicarage, Sophia tries to create a gracious home from uncongenial surroundings:

In these less gracious surroundings she had tried to recapture the atmosphere of her mother's house with bowls of quinces, the fragrance of well polished furniture, and the special Earl Grey tea, but she often realized how different it really was. The vicarage had been built to match the church and the style of the rooms had not yet, and perhaps never would, become fashionable again (UA:20-21).

Young girls like Laurel and Deirdre are impatient with their comfortable and familiar surroundings. Laurel wishes to escape from suburbia to the discomfort and independence of a bed-sitter, while Deirdre disconsolately sees in her room a reflection of her moody discontent:

Most of the furniture had been painted turquoise blue when she was sixteen and had wanted an unusual colour scheme, but the curtains and carpet had become so faded that they would have gone with anything. Deirdre had lost interest in the room now and did not really care or notice how it looked, for somehow it had not fulfilled its promise. The work that was to have been done up here, the poems written, even the little informal parties that were to have been held, had not come to anything after all (LA:39-40).

She is therefore disproportionately delighted with Catherine's flat, itself a reflection of Catherine's unconventional personality:

In daylight the sitting-room, with its pale green walls, looked rather ordinary and in need of redecoration, but the dim lights were as flattering to it as they are to most people, and to Deirdre, used to the beige walls and flowered chintz of her mother's drawing-room, it was the most attractive room she had ever seen. Large jugs filled with leaves or even branches of trees stood on bookcases obviously full of 'interesting' books, but it was really no more remarkable than many another such room in Chelsea, Hampstead, Kensington or Pimlico. Who can say, also, whether there might not be such a room in Balham, East Sheen or Paddington? (LA:69).

Pym is unable to resist the quirky irony of the last line. She invariably relents in the face of human curiosity, and takes us on tours of houses, often with comic effect. Homosexuals take the measure of their female rivals' drawing-rooms and curtains; Wilmet and Rodney are given a Cook's tour of the clergy house by Wilfred Bason, and Avice, craving the spaciousness of the rectory in *A Few Green Leaves*, is constantly and comically foiled in her attempts to see upstairs by Tom's sister Daphne.

Above all, houses and their furnishings are symbols of comfort and privacy, refuges from the world. Pym gives us amusing pictures of guests,

uncomfortably ensconced in bleak spare rooms (Bishop Grote, Patience), and civilised amenities are deemed a proper and necessary setting for her eminently civilised novels:

I was glad to be alone in my room, with the view over the garden, well polished mahogany furniture, pink sheets and towels, and a tablet of rose-geranium soap in the wash-basin. Rowena always remembered that it was my favourite. The room seemed so very comfortable, somehow even more than my room at home - perhaps because I could be alone in it (GB:34).

Brookner's heroines seem to give the impression of occupying their flats in transit, waiting for Mr Right to rescue them, and consequently either make no impression on their bland surroundings, like Kitty in her Chelsea flat, or otherwise listlessly leave things be. Brookner relentlessly describes interiors, creating moods as much as delineating character. For example Frances concludes:

I am hardly aware of this place as home, although I have always lived here, and, as the flat now belongs to me there is no real reason for me to move, particularly as prices are so high at the moment. Indeed I am so excessively comfortable, and my life is so regulated, that the question only rarely crosses my mind . . . Times being what they were, my parents did nothing to change it [the decor]; they were in any case too wrapped up in each other, too fearful for the safety of each other, to care for their surroundings, so long as these were safe, warm, comfortable, and could keep danger at bay. Even when life settled down and became more normal than they ever dared to hope, they changed nothing, perhaps out of superstition. That is how I came to grow up with all manner of terrible cut-glass mirrors with bevelled edges hanging from chains over tiled fireplaces, shaggy off-white fitted carpets, zig-zag patterned rugs, nests of walnut tables, semicircular armchairs upholstered in pale creaking hide, standard lamps with polygonal ivory satin shades, white wrought-iron trellises over the radiators, a dining table massive enough to overshadow the ten dining room chairs whose seats are

composed of beige brocade secured with brass studs, divan beds with headboards which sweep round to accommodate bedside cabinets, dressing tables with sheets of glass covering the surfaces and triple mirrors, and, *pièce de résistance*, a collection of china and glass birds, some rather large, which march along the shelves of highly polished pale wood bookcases with sliding doors made of yet more glass (LM:24).

Warm, sombre, stifling interiors, ponderously furnished, reflect the interior landscape and foreign ambience of Brookner's characters.

Brookner's interiors do not provide much in the form of peace, security or serenity. However, on the day of her wedding to Geoffrey (whose bedroom in Montagu Square is "stuffily authoritative"), Edith is conscious of a sense of loss:

. . . a cessation of things to be taken for granted. Like this little house, so long her private domain, a shell for writing in, for sleeping in, silent and sunny in the deserted afternoons, before the children came home from school, and turned in at other gateways . . . She would miss the garden most, she thought, although she was not really a gardener (HL:120).

"In the canny, delectable novels of the British writer Barbara Pym, we can count on finding sanctuary from the enormous liberties and vast territory that have been gained by modern fiction. Miss Pym's unworldly cast - absentminded vicars beaming kindly over their spectacles, stilted anthropologists back from Africa with charts and kinship diagrams, accommodating clergymen's daughters snug in their modest legacies of Hepplewhite chairs and Victorian ornaments - pre-ordains an absence of garish crime, sexual revelation, or hearts of darkness" (Kapp, 1983:237).

Food, clothes, houses: these nonverbal signifiers contribute significantly to ensconce characters in their cultural enclaves; above all, this hierarchy of psychological needs anchors the novels of Pym and Brookner in tangible reality.

#### 6.6 The "revivalist impulse"

Barbara Pym's predilection for intratextual gymnastics, or what Henry James called "the revivalist impulse on the fond writer's part"<sup>1</sup>, is apparent from her third novel onwards. In *Excellent Women*, Archdeacon Hoocevele incenses London churchgoers with a Lenten service about the Judgement Day, laced with erudite and obscure quotations (one surmises it is the same one served up in *Some Tame Gazelle*); in *Jane and Prudence*, Barbara Bird of *Crampton Hodnet* has shed her sensibilities and settled for sense - she is a gruff, established novelist; Miss Morrow and Miss Doggett of *Crampton Hodnet* make a re-appearance also, and Miss Doggett reveals that "that nice Miss Lathbury has got married" - to an "anthropologist". When Geoffrey Manifold consoles Prudence at a Soho restaurant, William Caldicote pops up at an adjoining table with dire warnings about the *pâté*. In *Less than Angels* Miss Clovis and many of the anthropologists of *Excellent Women* reappear: the Napiers are living in the country, with their child, and Everard and Mildred have gone to Africa. In *A Glass of Blessings*, there are references to Eleanor Hitchens (of *Jane and Prudence*) who works with Rodney at the Ministry. Archdeacon Hoocevele is distantly related to Wilmet, Wilmet and Rowena gleefully recall Rocky and their

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1 Henry James. *The Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces*, quoted in Snow (1980:92).

times together in the Wrens, they read a résumé of the Tom-Catherine-Deirdre affair in a short story by Catherine Oliphant at the hairdresser's, and Rodney has a fling with Prudence Bates. In *No Fond Return of Love*, Dulcie and Viola bump into no less than Wilmet, Rodney, Piers and Keith from *A Glass of Blessings*, while Deirdre's Aunt Rhoda of *Less than Angels*, encountered at a bring and buy sale which Dulcie gatecrashes, informs us that Deirdre is now married to Digby Fox, and is expecting a baby. *An Unsuitable Attachment* welcomes back (through the exigencies of Rupert Stonebird) a whole gaggle of anthropologists, including Miss Clovis. We learn that Wilf Bason's "Mum" has passed on from a gay acquaintance of Mervyn Cantrell, and Belinda and Harriet, accompanied by the requisite pale curate, appear in Rome, as Harriet has been left some property by Count Bianco, now deceased. In *The Sweet Dove Died*, Senhor MacBride-Pereira (that ubiquitous observer from *No Fond Return of Love*) watches Phoebe's friend filching the last marron gâteau, and Edwin in *Quartet in Autumn* remembers the clergymen of St Luke's parish from *A Glass of Blessings*. *A Few Green Leaves* fittingly sees the death of Miss Clovis, as well as of Fabian Driver, appropriately mourned by both Constance and Jessie. Dr Gellibrand is the brother of Father G. of *Quartet in Autumn*, and Adam Prince, the food critic, recalls exquisite fish dishes concocted by Wilf Bason at St. Luke's. Miss Lee takes her summer holiday at "The Anchorage", with its "bright Christian atmosphere", which was briefly visited by Dulcie and Viola in *No Fond Return of Love*. In *An Academic Question*, the death of Miss Clovis is mentioned again, and Sister Dew is installed at Normanhurst, an old people's home.

Barbara Pym conceded "laziness" as a motive for reintroducing old characters:

"I'm considering what you said about bringing characters from one's earlier books into the later ones and I agree that one does have to be careful. It can be a tiresome affectation. With me it's sometimes laziness - if I need a casual clergyman or anthropologist I just take one from an earlier book. Perhaps really one should take such a very minor character that only the author recognises it, like a kind of superstition or a charm" (Pym, 1984d:203).

Lotus Snow (1980:92) avers that Pym "appears to be creating, in all spontaneity, her own small Yoknapatawpha County. It is a microcosm in which the clergy, their parishioners, and friends of the parishioners in London and in the outlying districts inevitably meet. These meetings serve not only to reinforce the individualities of her characters. They also provide the social scene in which Miss Pym can train on her people her special lens of amused irony".

Benet (1986:4-5) comments that this ploy creates a sense of perspective, and the actions and issues that were primary to the characters are restored "to their proper place in the ordinary scheme of things". There are many stories like theirs - "unspectacular, uncatastrophic, and undeniably significant".

A possible explanation might also be that Pym, by bringing characters back, reinforces her theme of survival through "the trivial round, the common task". Above all, her characters survive. Miss Clovis might have suffered the indignity of being fired from her position at the learned institute, but she survives into old age, is fondly remembered by eminent scholars, and is accorded a memorial service. Pym's characters live lives and settle for alternatives and marriages that are, in Dulcie's words, "at once satisfactory and depressing", but they don't go under.

Piers's comment that "we are all colleagues . . . in this grim business of getting through life as best we can" is thus pertinently illustrated. Pym is fond of introducing frightening and claustrophobic images of the tide of humanity:<sup>1</sup>

The room was enormous, like something in a nightmare, one could hardly see from one end of it to the other, and as far as the eye could see was dotted with tables which were all full. In addition, a file of people moved in through a door at one end and formed a long line, fenced off from the main part of the room by a brass rail.

'Time, like an ever-rolling stream  
Bears all its sons away . . .'

I said, more to myself than to Mrs Bonner. 'This place gives me a hopeless kind of feeling' (EW:74).

Pym scoops up flotsam from the mainstream of humanity, recounts their ordinary tales, but never dismisses them as debris, keeping them in focus ever after, as evidence of having some role, however insignificant, to play in life.

Brookner does not revive individual characters. Rather, her heroines are cast

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1 Pym gives constant images of people "clinging to the wreckage", as it were, and her technique of aligning a philosophical *memento mori* notion with the utterly prosaic is reminiscent of the Metaphysical poets she so admired:

"Inside it was a sobering sight indeed and one to put us all in mind of the futility of material things and of our own mortality. *All flesh is but as grass* . . . I thought, watching the women working at their faces with savage concentration, opening their mouths wide, biting and licking their lips, stabbing at their noses and chins with powder-puffs. Some, who had abandoned the struggle to keep up, sat in chairs, their bodies slumped down, their hands resting on their parcels. One woman lay on a couch, her hat and shoes off, her eyes closed. I tiptoed past her with my penny in my hand" (EW:122).

in the same mould, which makes her writing attractively predictable or predictably narrow, depending on the reader's individual interpretation and taste.

As indicated by her revival of characters, Pym's perspective is infinitely wider than that of Brookner, whose point of view is generally limited (cf. *Look at Me*, and *Hotel du Lac*), or fallible (cf. *Look at Me*). To some extent Pym uses the device of the self-conscious narrator. She intrudes (but does not obtrude) as general busybody or "good old Ba", in *The Sweet Dove Died*, with gratuitous advice for Leonora. Rodney has occasion to mildly criticise a "Miss Pim" he works with in *A Glass of Blessings*, and in *No Fond Return of Love*, Pym watches Dulcie and Viola in the guise of a fellow holiday-maker at The Anchorage, with its "bright Christian atmosphere" (Pym's little joke):

It was at this point that somebody came to the unoccupied table, but as she was a woman of about forty, ordinary-looking and unaccompanied, nobody took much notice of her. As it happened, she was a novelist; indeed, some of the occupants of the tables had read and enjoyed her books, but it would never have occurred to them to connect her name, even had they ascertained it from the hotel register, with that of the author they admired. They ate their stewed plums and custard and drank their thimble-sized cups of coffee, quite unconscious that they were being observed (NFRL:196).

Pym reveals her highly developed sense of irony (as well as of the ridiculous) when Viola, after her encounter with Wilmet *et cie*, comments: "What odd people they were! Like characters in a novel" (NFRL:217). Pym mockingly suggests that this is indeed the case, it is only fiction, to be enjoyed and not to be taken too seriously. Dulcie goes on to add: "The extraordinary thing is . . . that these things have always been so, and yet it's only our knowing about them that has made them real" (NFRL:217-218). Pym anchors her characters

firmly in reality by having Keith (Wilmet's incubus or familiar, as Philip Larkin suggests)<sup>1</sup> babble on about washing curtains in Tide.

There is thus frequent reiteration of the image of the observant, detached novelist. In addition there is the distinct possibility that Miss Clovis, that standby and dogsbody of the anthropological institute, might be Pym herself; scorned by some, feared by others, accorded menial tasks but ubiquitous and indefatigable.

Pym is a fine delineator of character, whether by dress, mannerism, or dialogue, as in the irony of Leonora Eyre, her most self-centred heroine, constantly using the impersonal pronoun "one". Given modern structuralist theories of character in which *naturalisation*, and the analysis of character according to *nodes* of cultural stereotypes predominate, one must conclude that the world of Barbara Pym, especially, is particularly accessible to the literate English reader schooled in the tradition of Austen's novels of manners.

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1 Pym, 1984d:203.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Comedies of manners swiftly become obsolete when there are no longer any manners.

Noel Coward: *Relative Values*

. . . a novel of the kind that Prudence enjoyed, well written and tortuous, with a good dash of culture and the inevitable unhappy or indefinite ending, which was so like life.

Barbara Pym: *Jane and Prudence*

"It seems like some dreadful elderly relative doesn't it, your thesis, always with us. Won't it be lovely when it's finished? We can say it's dead - Called to a Higher Sphere, perhaps - and give it a splendid funeral."

Barbara Pym: *Less than Angels*



## 7 MANNERS TO MELANCHOLY: SOME ASPECTS OF STYLE

Nuances of Pym's novels in the work of Anita Brookner have been mooted in the preceding thematic analysis. The close reader could cite examples *ad infinitum*; however the following citations conclusively substantiate Brookner's thematic and stylistic allegiance to and possible familiarity with the work of Barbara Pym:

'Good women always think it is their fault when someone else is being offensive. Bad women never take the blame for anything' (HL:99);

But it was so obvious that women should take the blame, it was both the better and the easier part . . . (STG:119).

A mild and scholarly man who looked like a country doctor, he disliked the more sociable aspects of his calling, but had nevertheless booked a table in a cathedral-like restaurant, where the patrons covered in worship before the marvels to be set in front of them . . . (HL:26);

We met at a rather masculine sort of restaurant, famed for its meat, where great joints were wheeled up to the table for one's choice and approval. This ritual seemed to take the place of the ordeal by fire which the more foreign restaurants went in for, where every dish apparently had to submit itself to being heated up in the leaping flames while the patrons looked nervously on (GB:87).

'There is a buffet car at the other end. I think we both need a cup of coffee. They won't wake up until we get to Paris,' he added. 'And then, God help me.'

'Why should God help you?' asked Kitty as they edged their way round a small metal table and sat down (P:109);

'God, how I want a drink!' said Helena in her characteristic way. She and Rocky had now joined us.

'I hope God is listening,' said Rocky, 'because I do too . . . .' (EW:90).

. . . she had automatically put the cups on the trolley and wheeled it through to the kitchen, moved less by good manners than by an evil desire to know the worst (M:64);

I knew that she was talking about the Napiers, but though my natural curiosity would have liked to hear more, I felt I could hardly encourage her. Is it a kind of natural delicacy that some of us have, or do we just lack the courage to follow our inclinations? (EW:61).

I have become reduced to somebody who is supposed to occupy herself with good works. Not that I am opposed to that, but I sometimes have the feeling that somebody else would do them if I didn't. And it is so terrible to come back to an empty house (M:112);

[Dulcie] felt reluctant to uproot herself and be reduced in status to the spinster aunt, who had had an unfortunate love affair that had somehow 'gone wrong' and who, although she was still quite young, was now relegated to the shelf and good works. When Dulcie wondered, did one begin to take up good works if they didn't come naturally? When - and how? (NFR1:119);

Oh, this coming back to an empty house, Rupert thought, when he had seen her safely up to her door. People - though perhaps it was only women - seemed to make so much of it. As if life itself were not as empty as the house one was coming back to (UA:43).

In addition to this apparent symbiosis, the novels of both Pym and Brookner are dense with literary allusion, and predict the authors' familiarity with the

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English literary tradition. Many of Pym's titles, culled from "the greater English poets", appositely reflect her themes. Brookner's scope is more catholic; in addition to the English stalwarts like Austen, James and Dickens, it encompasses the great French tradition of romance, realism and remembrance: Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, Proust and Zola. Brookner has acknowledged her literary indebtedness to at least some of these authors, and her wide-cast allusive net makes stringent demands on the sensitive and critically alert reader.<sup>1</sup>

Both writers employ the myths of literature as controlling themes, although Pym's *modus operandi* appears more desultory in comparison with Brookner's stringent adherence to a "life ruined by literature", for the latter's parallels are more sedulously crafted, her ironies more persistent.

"Brookner's heroines nurse the idealistic and romantic illusions encouraged by art, and they are nonplussed when their sincerity and virtuous intent come face-to-face with the ways of the worldly" (Haffenden, 1985:57).

Barbara Brothers (1984:61-80) has analysed Pym's women as victims of fictional myth. According to the conventions of our fictions, woman was created for and redeemed by love, but Pym's novels are of women who exist as characters only on the periphery of life as depicted by writers of fiction.

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1 "I think it's Dickens's indignation which is so grand. For moral scruple I would look to Henry James; for decent feelings, Trollope; and for scrutiny, Stendhal and Flaubert . . . and Zola, where you again find the same indignation" (Haffenden, 1985:68-69).

She contrasts her characters and their lives with those which have been presented in literature to mock the idealised view of the romantic paradigm and to attack the myth. Pym chides novelists for not telling the truth about women's lives. The "silences of fiction" have made it seem that the single woman must perforce be a voyeur of life; the image of woman is of one who loves and serves. In Pym's novels even a university education is a mere reflection of the "accomplishments" which women once cultivated in preparation for the marriage market (one surmises *Brothers* implies the genteel occupations of Jane Austen's heroines), and Pym's women qualify as helpmeets by their skills at indexing, typing and proof-reading. Women cling to the romantic fictional notion of men as noble beings, but Pym implies that love is not such an intense sexual emotion as people would like to believe, and women who persist in its quest do not find it. Pym's novels eal the whole myth into question, and in them she turns the myth back into fiction. She constantly reminds her readers that neither character, nor love, nor destiny is as grand as it has been portrayed.

Pym's use of literary allusions and analogies is more prolific and less controlled than Brookner's, and Benet has commented on Pym's extensive literary range:

"Pym's characters are typically educated people, and many of them remember snatches, at least, from 'the greater English poets.' The range of their references is impressive, including hymns and popular songs as well as lines or phrases from every kind of literature. Among the many authors mentioned or quoted are Patmore, Shakespeare, Anthony Trollope, Goldsmith, Milton, Charlotte Brontë, Tennyson, Herbert, Charlotte Yonge, Keats, Thomas Gray, Wordsworth, Pope, Rochester, T.S. Eliot, Samuel Johnson, Woolf, Marvell,

Arnold, Housman, Browning, Donne, Carew, Henry King, Wyatt, Leigh Hunt, John Cleveland, Drayton, Cowley, Henry Vaughan, Christina Rossetti, and Jane Austen. A full analysis of Pym's allusions would probably extend to a book-length study, but even the unsystematic eye will see that they add irony and comedy, and give insight into the characters" (Benet, 1986:5).

Pym's literary allusions frequently work, as does her comic irony, by deflation, and this extends to nomenclature also. Most of Pym's heroines bear little resemblance to their fictional nomenclatural counterparts, and Prudence Bates crossly disavows any resemblance between her and the Miss Bates of fiction:

Prudence disliked being called 'Miss Bates'; if she resembled any character in fiction, it was certainly not poor silly Miss Bates (JP:39).<sup>1</sup>

Examples of this mode of comic deflation abound. For example, when Mildred tells Julian Malory about her new neighbours, the Napiers, he ponderously recites from the Book of Common Prayer, while Mildred is more realistically and ironically omniscient:

*"They that go down to the sea in ships: and occupy their business in great waters; These men see the works of the Lord: and His wonders in the deep,"* Julian said, half to himself.

I did not like to spoil the beauty of the words by pointing out that as far as we knew Rockingham Napier had spent

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1 One could, with reservations, find some parallel between Prudence and Jane Austen's Miss Bates, in Pym's recounting of Prudence's abortive affairs (viz. popularity) in *Jane and Prudence*, and *A Glass of Blessings*: "[Miss Bates] enjoyed a most uncommon degree of popularity for a woman neither young, handsome, rich, nor married". This is a somewhat tenuous ironic link, however, as Prudence is extremely attractive.

most of his service arranging the Admiral's social life. Of course he might very well have seen the works of the Lord and His wonders in the deep (EW:18).

Mildred, having set her sights on Everard Bone, hopes to see him again at the Lenten service, and remembers a romantically apposite poem, *Lenten is come with love to town*, but when she looks it up in the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, she finds little solace:

*Deowes donketh the dounes,  
Deores with huere derne rounes  
Domes forte deme;*

I read; that would teach me not to be so foolish (EW:223).

Harriet is inappositely given to flinging "the last remnants of her classical education" at visitors and curates; the latter, with their "Third Class in Theology", are often perplexed as to her implications:

'Oh, Mr Donne, I'm not quite as stupid as you think! I used to know some Latin. *Ah quotiens illum doluit properare Calypso*,' she retorted, flinging at him triumphantly the last remnants of her classical education.

Can she be hinting at me to go? he wondered, but then decided that she had probably long ago forgotten the meaning of the line (STG:15).<sup>1</sup>

Pym's characters frequently espouse the trivial, rather than the sublime, and it is this quality which makes them, in Brothers' analysis, "anti-characters":

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1 Pym's ironic jibe at men's supposed intellectual superiority, once again.

"If the distinguishing mark of a character, as Forster has suggested, is that he is 'tirelessly occupied with human relationships' and his life reflects little of the daily activities that people invest their lives in, Pym's characters are anti-characters" (Brothers, 1984:74).

Pym's characters are ruled by trivia, and it frequently extends to their selection of literature. Archdeacon Hocceve might spout obscure poetry to the bafflement of his parishioners, but he keeps a cache of thrillers for his own private consumption.

Unlike Brookner, Pym appreciates the solace of literary pabulum.<sup>1</sup> Mildred, having received the news of Allegra Gray's defection, finds solace in the parish magazine serial:

After I had washed up I went gratefully to my bed and lay under the eiderdown with a hot-water-bottle. I had finished my library book, and thought how odd it was that although I had the great novelists and poets well represented on my shelves, none of their work seemed to attract me. It would be a good opportunity to read some of the things I was always meaning to read, like *In Memoriam* or *The Brothers Karamazov*, but in the end I was reduced to reading the serial in the parish magazine, and pondering over the illustrations, one of which showed a square-jawed young clergyman in conversation with a pretty young woman, as it might be Julian and Mrs Gray, except that Julian wasn't square-jawed. The caption under the picture said, 'I'm sure Mrs Goodrich didn't mean to hurt your feelings about the jumble sale.' I finished the episode with a feeling of dissatisfaction. There was some just cause or impediment which prevented the clergyman from marrying

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1 Brookner's view of literary pabulum is more acerbic, cf.

"Helen read a novel a day, preferring those that she had read before . . . These had to do with maidens in the nineteenth century, taking posts as governesses and losing their hearts to the rakish son who was also the black sheep of the family" (SL:111).

the girl, some mysterious reason why Mrs Goodrich should have snubbed her at the jumble sale, but we should have to wait until next month before we could know any more about it (EW:201).

Mildred's prosaic reading matter simultaneously provides a parallel with the realities of life, which, Pym intimates, are not always sublime:

I suddenly felt very tired and thought how all over England, and perhaps, indeed, anywhere where there was a church and a group of workers, these little frictions were going on. Somebody else decorating the pulpit when another had always done it, somebody's gift of flowers being relegated to an obscure window, somebody's cleaning of the brasses being criticized when she had done them for over thirty years . . . And now Lady Farmer's lilies on the floor and peonies on the altar, an unheard-of thing! (EW:190).

Catherine, musing on life and love after the departure of her lover, Tom, is sanguine, rather than despairing, but does not look to literature for solace:

The only real book of devotion she had, suitably enough from her headmistress, told her that we are strangers and pilgrims here and must endure the heart's banishment, and she felt that she knew that anyway (LA:135).

Mildred, grieved by the departure of Rocky, finds consolation in the mundanely utilitarian:

It must not be poetry that I read that night, but a devotional or even a cookery book. Perhaps the last was best for my mood, and I chose an old one of recipes and miscellaneous household hints. I read about the care of aspidistras and how to wash lace and black woollen stockings, and I learned that a package or envelope sealed with white of an egg cannot be steamed open. Though what use that knowledge would ever be to me I could not imagine (EW:159).

Even literary affectations are deflated by the trivial, as when Archdeacon Hoccleve, in his role of superior spiritual mentor, sets the cat among the pigeons:

'These humble people remind me of Gray's *Elegy*,' he said affectedly with his head on one side.

Neither Belinda nor Agatha had heard his conversation with Harriet, so that they listened with respectful interest while he quoted the appropriate verse. Nor were they in a hurry to be gone, as Harriet had been, and so they did not say 'Oh quite' when he had finished but enlarged intelligently on the charming theme. Agatha was reminded of *Piers Plowman*, Belinda of the poetry of Crabbe, which she could not remember very exactly, but she felt she had to be reminded of something out of self-defence, for Agatha had got a First and knew all about *Piers Plowman*. Indeed, she seemed about to quote from it and would probably have done so had not the Archdeacon suddenly been reminded of Wordsworth and some suitable lines in *The Excursion*. Then he began to read from *The Prelude*. Belinda thought Agatha looked rather bored and fidgety, but she herself was delighted and lived happily in the past until the entry of Mr Donne brought her back into the present.

'Your sister brought me some delicious plums this afternoon,' he said, addressing Belinda, 'and some homemade cake and jelly. I'm afraid I'm getting quite spoilt' (STG:63).

The Archdeacon is quickly reduced to his petulant self by the curate's gift, and his literary role model as consoler at the deathbed and succourer of the workhouse poor is swiftly abandoned.

Pym's allusions are often subtly interwoven in her texts, but to the observant and literate reader they lose none of their ironic impact. Belinda's "heart like a singing bird" (STG:50) is occasioned by a negligible incident (her absolution in the cauliflower cheese incident), rather than by the ecstasies of love chronicled in Rossetti's poem. Leonora likes to think of her life as "ealm of mind, all

passion spent, or, more rarely, as emotion recollected in tranquillity" (SDD:16); in fact passion and emotion have been totally missing from her self-sufficient, self-indulgent life. Incongruity, one of the hallmarks of comedy, is thus occasioned by inapposite allusion.

Casting an eye over the *curricula vitae* of Pym's critics and reviewers, one notes a high degree of interest in and work on the Metaphysical poets. Pym's heroines display a metaphysical propensity for amalgamating disparate modes of experience with perplexing and comic results. The prosaic Harriet dispenses with Archdeacon Hoccleve's pretentious citation of Johnson's criticism of Gray's *Elegy*<sup>1</sup> with the cryptic comment, "Oh, yes, like the Apes of Brazil" (STG:52-53), leaving the Archdeacon puzzling, with some irony, that Belinda might recognise this Elizabethan-sounding quotation, as "She often wasted her time reading things that nobody else would dream of reading". Harriet is delighted to put the Archdeacon in his place: "That's not a quotation, that's natural history" (STG:76), while Belinda muses:

'I think the minds of the metaphysical poets must have worked something like that,' said Belinda thoughtfully. 'Donne and Abraham Cowley, perhaps' (STG:76).

The ingenious surprise of the metaphysical conceit is apparent in the image of a beer advertisement as a sign of spiritual (and no doubt spirituous) comfort:

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1 "Sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo".

'Look,' she called to Penelope, 'such a strange illuminated sign - BANCO DI SANTO SPIRITO,' she spelled out.

'Bank of the Holy Spirit?' said Penelope. 'Is it a real bank or something to do with the Vatican? It reminds one of those great red signs you sometimes see in London - TAKE COURAGE - have you ever noticed them?'

'Yes,' said Ianthe. 'I believe it's a kind of beer - but how many people must have been strengthened and comforted by seeing that message shining out into the night' (UA:153).

In marked contrast, Anita Brookner's style is inflationary, and therefore approaches tragedy. Christopher Fry, like many other critics, has commented on the essential relationship between tragedy and comedy, and his view that "in *tragedy* every moment is eternity; in *comedy* eternity is a moment" (Fry, 1981:17) is not inapposite as a statement of the essential disparities between the styles of Pym and Brookner. Pym "mocks the pretentiousness of tragedy but proclaims the dignity of the quotidian" (Brothers, 1984:77). Brookner underscores her ironies with sedulous literary parallels, and many casual allusions invest her mild heroines with tragic grandeur. Edith Hope, in her first letter to lover David in *Hotel du Lac*, appears to assume the status of magus with "A cold coming I had of it" (HL:10), while her latest potboiler is invested with the tragedy of Cleopatra's fate: *Beneath the Visiting Moon*. However, Brookner's latest novel is more quirkily witty, much in the manner of Pym. American reviewers commonly characterise Pym's novels as "canny" and "droll"; these are apposite adjectives, and apply equally to Brookner's more acerbic heroine and witty literary analogy in *A Misalliance*:

'Mousie would like it very much if you would come to dinner one evening . . .'

'Oh, I don't think so,' said Blanche. 'I am not sophisticated enough to be able to tolerate such a civilized

arrangement. I might make an injudicious remark or start raving on about Henry James.'

'I think we have heard of Henry James, you know, although of course I rely on your good taste not to embarrass Mousie.'

'You would be very unwise to count on my good taste,' said Blanche. 'I am trying to get rid of it. I plan to become dangerous and subversive. Do not look to me to be Millie Theale. A silly girl, I always thought. She should have bought that rotter outright. What else is money for?' (M:72-73).

Both novelists' predilection for allusive style extends to occasional appropriation. Jane Austen is the most prevalent Pym source, while Brookner hearkens to Henry James for supremely fictive dialogue. An episode in *Less than Angels* is the closest Pym gets to overt acknowledgement of her literary predecessor, simultaneously appropriating Austen's somewhat sententious didacticism:

While Delia and Felicity had been trained for careers, Elaine had been the one to stay at home. She might, if she had come upon them, have copied out Anne Elliot's words, especially as she was the same age as Miss Austen's heroine. 'We certainly do not forget you so soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always business of some sort or other to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impression.' But Elaine was not much of a reader; she would have said she had no time, which was perhaps just as well, even if she missed the consolation and pain of coming upon her feelings expressed for her in such moving words (LA:182-183).

*An Unsuitable Attachment* possibly illustrates Pym's artistic indebtedness to Jane Austen best. The novel opens with speculation about the new unmarried neighbour, which is reminiscent of the opening of *Pride and Prejudice*, while Sophia's conversation with Rupert at the end of the novel: "A single man

probably inspires wider and wilder speculation than a single woman,' Sophia admitted" (UA:247), and Pym's bland statement of Rupert's social obligations: "The day comes in the life of every single man living alone when he must give a dinner party, however unpretentious, and that day had now arrived for Rupert Stonebird" (UA:118), also recall Austen. Ianthe and John's reconciliation at the end of the novel is unadulterated Austen:

And when the money had been handed over and refused and handed over again, there were other things to be talked about, misunderstandings to be cleared up, and - at last - mutual love to be declared and brought out into the open (UA:218).

Brookner does not entirely disassociate herself from Jane Austen's influence, as her robust opening lines and pithy conclusions reveal. Edith good-naturedly acquiesces in the role of the Pusey's captive audience:

Murmuring disclaimers, Edith sank into her wicker chair, and asked them what they had done that day. And was rewarded by happy expressions, and a great deal of delightfully inconsequential information (HL:89).

However, it is not difficult to discern close similarities between Brookner's fraught and dismal endings and those of Henry James. The last lines of *Washington Square*,<sup>1</sup> for example, eloquently mirror Brookner's unhappy women, abandoned to devote their lives to academe or novel writing:

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1 F.R. Leavis's comments in *The Great Tradition*, viz. "*Washington Square* is a 'tale of silent suffering' that very obviously recalls *Eugénie Grandet* - to say which doesn't mean that it isn't a very original and very characteristic creation, fine in a way that is beyond Balzac" are interesting in this regard (Leavis, 1973:139).

Catherine, meanwhile, in the parlour, picking up her morsel of fancy-work, had seated herself with it again - for life, as it were (James, 1965:174).

Like James's narrative in *Washington Square*, Brookner's often gathers momentum towards the climax:

Our story has hitherto moved with very short steps, but as it approaches its termination it must take a long stride (James, 1965:156).

However, it is in her exposition of subtle states of consciousness, in dialogue, and in moral stance that Brookner's work most closely parallels James's, as the conversation between Edith Hope and Mr Neville demonstrates:

'... The union between us would be one of shared interests, of truthful discourse. Of companionship. To me, now, these are the important things. And for you they should be important. Think, Edith.<sup>1</sup> Have you not, at some time in your well-behaved life, desired vindication? Are you not tired of being polite to rude people?'

'You will be able to entertain your friends, of course. And you will find that they treat you quite differently. This comes back to what I was saying before. You will find that you can behave as badly as you like. As badly as everybody else likes, too. That is the way of the world. And you will be respected for it. People will at last feel comfortable with you' (HL:167).

Brookner includes an allusion to Congreve, the supreme exponent of the Restoration comedy of manners, in this Jamesian conversation. The fact that some critics consider *The Way of the World* a study of the battle between good and evil, rather than simply a mirror of the follies of the period, would appear

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1 An ironic echo of Edith's father.

to substantiate Brookner's moral vision that the "ways of the worldly" reap greater rewards than virtue, which is its own reward.

Literary allusions apart, Pym's comic art is primarily dependent on diminishment and rueful bathos. Any grandiose or tragic pretensions are deflated, sometimes with imagery of great pathos. There is constant reiteration by Pym's characters of the trivial, rather than the momentous, as constituting the fabric or essence of life, and this is a repetitive theme and source of diminutive imagery in Pym's work:

Perhaps it is sadder to have loved somebody 'unworthy', and the end of it is the death of such a very little thing, like a child's coffin, she thought confusedly (NFRL:54).

Unlike Brookner's, Pym's "excellent women" do not assume the roles of tragic heroines. Life's incipient tragedies are assuaged by "the trivial round, the common task", as Catherine, one of Pym's most balanced heroines, muses:

The small things of life were often so much bigger than the great things, she decided, wondering how many writers and philosophers had said this before her, the trivial pleasures like cooking, one's home, little poems especially sad ones, solitary walks, funny things seen and overheard (L.A:101).

Pym's exact eye constantly deflates images which might be construed as conventionally romantic:

'One goes on living in the hope of seeing another spring,' Daphne said with a rush of emotion. 'And isn't that a patch of violets?' She pointed to a twist of purple on the ground, no rare spring flower or even the humblest violet

but the discarded wrapping of a chocolate bar, as Tom was quick to point out (FGL:9-10).<sup>1</sup>

Philip Larkin (1977:260) contends that the reader of Pym's novels is "always on the edge of smiling", and certainly her wry ironies and sense of the ridiculous deflect any trace of mawkishness. The reader may be appalled by Marcia's inexorable and lonely fate, but her manic preoccupation with milk bottles precludes tragic stature.<sup>2</sup> Pym's heroines are stoic and sanguine. Mildred robustly and succinctly dispenses with emotional excess after Rocky's departure by a bland statement which would be unthinkable in Brookner's novels:

The effects of shock and grief are too well known to need description and I stood at the window for a long time. At last I did make a cup of tea but I could not eat anything. There seemed to be a great weight inside me and after sitting down for a while I thought I would go into the church and try to find a little consolation there (EW:155).

Although Brookner's controlled prose precludes wallowing in emotion, her heroines certainly do not dispense with shock or grief as tersely.

This "edge of smiling" is particularly pertinent in Pym's marvellous comic dialogue. She is much given to italics, and this questionable stylistic tool, with its rather old-fashioned Victorian connotations of melodrama, imbues much of her writing with its wry and ironic tone. When Dulcie enters the cloakroom of a learned institution to wash her hands, she finds the basin filled with flowers,

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1 Pym uses a similar image, possibly owing to poor editing, in *An Academic Question*.

2 The same might be said of the disgruntled Norman, who vents his spleen in surreptitiously kicking cars.

and her mild remonstrances are countered by a triumphant italicised riposte, which satirises, in a sentence, the complacency of the do-gooder:

'I'm taking them to an *invalid*,' said the woman, her voice rising on what sounded to Dulcie like a note of triumph.

'An *invalid*,' Dulcie repeated. 'I *am* sorry. If only I'd realized . . .' Another distressing picture was added to her day but somehow it was less disturbing than the beggar in the street, Aylwin Forbes's face in the crowd or Viola lying on the grass in her red canvas shoes. She saw the invalid as a brave, tight-lipped person, without pathos, sitting up tidily in bed, doing good to others by her example. The kind of person to make a visiting clergyman feel small - really *he* was the one to benefit from the visit, not she . . . Dulcie could hear the voice flowing from the pulpit (NFRL:42).

A fantastic imagination, giving vent to a positive surfeit of wild images, is tempered by a keen sense of the ridiculous. Pym can never be accused of making mountains out of molehills; her technique is generally the opposite,<sup>1</sup> and she can dispose of a character or incident in a devastating line or even word:

'I shall never understand women,' said Dr Parnell complacently (STG:151);

She liked to think of herself as a straightforward sort of person. 'People always know where they are with me,' she would say rather smugly; it never occurred to her that people might not always want to know such things (NFRL:150).

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<sup>1</sup> Although she does, on occasion, take a trivial incident to absurdly comic lengths, as in the episode of the cauliflower cheese in *Some Tame Gazelle*, and Miss Clovis's dismissal from the learned society on account of her inability to make tea in *Less than Angels*.

Any incident or character assuming grandiose stature is gently but firmly brought down to earth. Men accorded exaggerated tragic stature by gullible women are often the subject of mild derision:

' . . . Quite a *libertine*, I believe.'

Dulcie's first impulse was to burst out laughing at the use of such an old-fashioned word, permissible, surely, only in the English synopsis of an Italian opera. The Duke in *Rigoletto* might have been so described, she thought (NFRL:86);

'Yes, it seems right that he should have an unusual background,' said Dulcie. 'He's such a rare person.'

'A rare person?' echoed Miss Randall. 'A rather good-looking man who has made a mess of his marriage, by all accounts - I shouldn't have thought that was rare at all' (NFRL:257);

'Then Piers is unhappy?' said Sybil thoughtfully. 'No more than many people of his age, I imagine. And it will pass, you know' (GB:130).<sup>1</sup>

Leonora Eyre is a character with a predilection for italicised speech; ironically, her rival Ned outdoes her in both conversational mode and self-interest:

'Believe me, Jimmie, I do.' Ned was suddenly gentle, there were even tears in his eyes. It would have taken the most cynically dispassionate observer to discern any hint of complacency in his tone when he added, 'Life is cruel and we do terrible things to each other' (SDD:145).

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1 Pym's wider cast of characters and less interior narrative style diversify point of view in her novels. Brookner's perspectives are limited to the heroine, and of course to the omniscient reader, by her insistent ironies.

Brookner's forte is the grimace, rather than the rueful smile:

Kitty breathed conscientiously as she got out of the car, as people will when they think it is going to do them good. Pauline, who was aware of the existence of the nuclear power plant twenty-five miles distant, smiled wryly to herself but said nothing. Years of living with her mother had made her adept at keeping bad news to herself (P:84).

Her wit is more pithy, more astringent, more aphoristic than Pym's, and infinitely less charitable:

The dog was very old, and did not seem particularly viable (P:82);

'Life is not a nightclub, Patrick' (M:128);

Like many blameless women, she loved a disreputable man (M:23);

'I simply do not know anyone who has a lifestyle. What does it mean? It implies that everything you own was bought at exactly the same time, about five years ago at the most . . .' (HL:26-27).

However, Brookner's restraining wit is evident in a scene which is inherently emotional. On a spur of the moment decision, aggrieved by "the totality of his mouse-like seemliness", Edith jilts Geoffrey on their wedding day, and the scene is described in witty, episodic snatches, which recall Pym's beguilement by the ordinary and everyday, while capturing at once the movement of the car, Edith's relief and the horror of the wedding guests:

As the car proceeded smoothly past the Registry Office, Edith saw, as if in a still photograph, Penelope and Geoffrey, staring, their mouths open in horror. Then the scene became slightly more animated, as the crowd began to straggle down the steps, reminding her of a sequence in some early masterpiece of the cinema, now preserved as archive material. She felt like a spectator at some epic occurrence, was prepared for shots to ring out, fatalities to occur. But soon, amazingly soon, she had left them all behind, and as if to signal her escape the sun came out and blazed hectically, and with the full heat of a late false summer behind it, over Sloane Square. And then they were proceeding at a steady and stately pace through the park; Edith opened the window and breathed with ecstasy the fresher air, giving delighted attention to the little boys playing football, and the heavy girls thumping up and down on horseback, and the tourists peering at their maps and, presumably, asking the way to Harrods (HL:130).

Brookner's *penchant* for flowing and stylish descriptions of interiors permits her, on occasion, to indulge in a bathetic joke at her own expense, much in the manner of Pym:

'I must be getting back to the Rooms,' were the first words she had consciously heard him say, and she was struck by their mystery. She turned the amazing sentence over in her mind, conjuring up vistas of courtyards with fountains trickling and silent servants in gauze trousers bringing sherbet. Or possibly large divans in whitewashed houses shuttered against the heat of the afternoon, a dreaming, glowing idleness inspired by Delacroix. Or of grave merchants, with clicking amber beads, in coffee houses below pavement level. Opium dens. Turkish baths. A tiled hamman, its walls bright with coins of light reflected from the water. Peace.

'What do you do?' she enquired, her eyes wide with this vision, gazing off into the middle distance.

'I am an auctioneer,' he replied. And then there had been a brief silence (HL:56-57).<sup>1</sup>

1 Drabble-like dialogue, reminiscent of *The Waterfall*, a novel which combines interiorising with a deft manipulation of perspective and time.

Brookner's description of the lucky people, the hares, is infinitely more cutting and less altruistic than Pym's. Critics as early as Dryden have suggested a distinction between real satire and the humorous representation of folly. Satire involves a more serious moral tone, and therefore anger, while the humorous representation of foolishness is ridiculous and comic, rather than satiric.

Kernan (1973), employing the psychoanalytical critical approach, raises some pertinent issues which pertain to Brookner's work. He defines satire as the "combination of an irrational emotion, hostility, normally repressed, and of a certain flashy, brilliant play of rationality" (1973:129). The dominance, rather than the intensity of the attack, characterises satire:

"It is not the intensity of the attack which identifies satire and distinguishes it from other literary kinds, which nearly always contain some amount of aggression, but its dominance, its persistent refusal to be bled off into tragedy's compassionate awareness of the inevitability of error and suffering, or comedy's joyous sense that life always finally outwits folly" (Kernan, 1973:118).

Wit, stylisation, truth and moral responsibility are primary requirements of satire, and verbal overkill is disallowed:

"To be true satire, verbal aggression must . . . be artfully managed, witty, indirect. To this requirement of a high degree of stylization in the attack, we must also add the further traditional requirements: that satire speak true, not lie about what it attacks; and that it be morally responsible, not an expression of mere ill will or personal animus. In practice these requirements have all worked toward the same end, the creation of an art of satire which controls

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and shapes the energy of aggression in a socially acceptable way" (Kernan, 1973:118).

"Unrelieved and earnest denunciation may have an undeniable power, as in the curse or the sermon, but true satire seems to require a certain amount of cleverness, of indirection, of unexpected and shocking juxtaposition in the single details and in the arrangement of the whole" (Kernan, 1973:122). Satire is thus both oblique and humorous.

Barbara Brothers has correctly disavowed Pym's claims to true satire:

"Though her portrayal of life focuses on its mundaneness and on her characters' self-deceptions and self-pretensions, Pym's is not the pen of a satirist. She depicts her characters' psychic landscapes with the compassionate understanding of a humanist and celebrates their successes in being individuals despite the pressures of an impersonal society which would make them into nothing more than spinsters, clergymen, or clergymen's wives" (1984:79).

Pym is more condoning of the ways of the world; even in *Quartet in Autumn*, her bleakest novel, and an indictment of modern society and its mindless dereliction of duty, there is compassionate comprehension, rather than blame or anger.

Pym is content to describe characters of whom she is mildly contemptuous without malice, e.g. the fluffy blonde Marjorie Williton, Aylwin Forbes's estranged wife, quickly summed up by Duleie as mutton dressed as lamb, is seen as "some kind of fancy cake or pastry" . . . the kind of thing one might start

and not be able to finish" (NFRL:227). In keeping with her more stringent moral tone, Brookner describes her peripheral characters with a macabre Dickensian gusto, frequently verging on a diatribe:

Somewhere across this busy but emptying city were the Demuths, whom she must reach. For some reason she imagined them as a monstrous couple, overweight and bad tempered, tiresome as children, illogical, suspicious, unattractive, the sort of people one would rather avoid. She imagined them corroded by money yet tight-fisted, balked by their ignorance, raging, finding fault. She saw them as gross capitalists, figures from the Weimar republic, wearing ill-judged jewellery (M:131).

As in Pym's novels, expectations are frequently and comically foiled, and the Demuths do not live up to Blanche's distorted picture. Edith Hope's comic conception of Mme de Bonneuil is another pertinent example:

I had her down as a Belgian confectioner's widow, but the boy carrying my bags nodded vestigially and murmured 'Madame la Comtesse' as she rocked past. So much for the novelist's famed powers, etc (HL:11).

Brookner's comic observations of characters are frequently encompassed in a drily Jamesian stream of consciousness style, which manages to include Austen-like authorial comment. Edith's assessment of the Puseys encompasses pages of ironic speculation and moral judgement:

They imposed their past as deliberately as they did their present, and to both of these one was expected, in some curious way, to pay homage. They required no information at all; once they had assured themselves that Edith was alone, they had requisitioned her, and this was not only a kindness but a convenience, proof, to Edith's mind, of sophisticated thinking (HL:54-55).

In assessing both writers' allegiance to the tradition of the novel of manners, one might note that their sophisticated allusory style finds a precursor in Jane Austen's satire and parody of the Gothic novel in *Northanger Abbey*, and their use of the myopic heroine offers tangible comparisons. Brookner's parallels are more assiduous, ironic and philosophical, however, and her heroine in *Hotel du Lac* is disconsolately left to believe in the truth of her less laudatory literary creations. Although there are traces of Austen in Brookner's writing as has been demonstrated, she most resembles Henry James in her masterful juxtaposition of innocence and experience encapsulated in intense and psychologically complex works. Predators and victims, innocence and betrayal, psychologising and moralising are all hallmarks of Henry James, although the lucid Brookner never falls prey to James's later clotted and tortuous style.

Although Pym abandons manners for melancholy in *Quartet in Autumn*, and to a lesser extent in *A Few Green Leaves* with its undercurrent of *timor mortis conturbat me*, she never approaches Brookner's introspective and philosophic profundity. *A Start in Life*, *Providence*, *Hotel du Lac* and *A Misalliance* all employ the vehicle of the novel of manners, and although emotional interiorising predominates, the hallmarks of this genre - sophisticated wit, repartee, comic characters - are prevalent. *Family and Friends* is the novel which leaves the reader most detached, and the term "high comedy" could therefore be appositely applied to this novel, which is very much a Brooknerian stylistic exercise. However, *Look at Me* approaches *Wuthering Heights* in tone; hectic passion is rigorously controlled by tight construction, and Brookner's sophistication and acumen in the control of chronological and narrative problems are reminiscent of both Brontë and James. Brookner's essay into the realms of the

psychological novel and her interior style elicit greater involvement and empathy from the reader.

Sheila Hale has condensed the essence of this aspect of Brookner's work well:

"The unnerving thing about meeting Dr Brookner . . . is that one knows her already too intimately. She is one of the few mature 'narcissistic' novelists to have portrayed her inner life so vividly. I would quail at the prospect of interviewing Tolstoy or Flaubert, but if *Anna Karenina* or *Madame Bovary* were autobiographies I would run a mile. Of course Anita Brookner's novels are not crudely autobiographical: they are far more devastatingly self-analytical than any straight-forward autobiography. Discreet to a fault in her relationships with other people, the woman at their centre has revealed herself to her readers with an obsessive honesty which is not rendered less painful by her wit and intelligence" (Hale, 1984:98).



#### CHAPTER EIGHT

I like to read about people who have done nothing spectacular, who aren't beautiful and lucky, who try to behave well in the limited field of activity they command, but who can see, in the little autumnal moments of vision, that the so called "big" experiences of life are going to miss them; and I like to read about such things presented not with self-pity or despair or romanticism, but with realistic firmness and even humour. This is in fact what the critics call the moral tone of the book.

Philip Larkin.



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8 CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION

Joseph Epstein (1986:39), a staunch Anglophile, in a paean to Barbara Pym and Philip Larkin, has mourned the demise of England's impressive cultural tradition:

"There are still English writers whom one cares about: Kingsley Amis, who has had the misfortune of never being able to top his first book, *Lucky Jim*; Anthony Powell, whose productivity does not slacken even as he enters his eighties; John Wain and Anita Brookner, and a few others. But the sense of a strong literary culture, of a tradition sturdy enough to ride out lean times, this in England seems to be - to adapt a title from a Philip Larkin poem about the sad passing of an older England - 'Going, Going.'"

In the same article he notes that the work of both Barbara Pym and Philip Larkin goes against the grain of much mainstream contemporary American writing. The literary antonym of Philip Larkin is Allen Ginsberg, and that of Barbara Pym is Erica Jong (1986:39).

In an article entitled "Sex and the Single Novel", Epstein (1983:172) humorously enumerates some of the excesses of current American fiction:

"Your chronicler, who has been reading a good deal of contemporary fiction of late, must admit to being a bit tired. He has been out whoring with the boys. He hasn't, you understand, been doing any of the actual fornicating himself. Mostly he waits at the curb in the car, and when the boys - and a few of the girls - come down they tell him all about it. That nice Johnny Updike, for example, no matter how heavy the passion he's describing, he always has time

to throw in a few ornate metaphors. John Irving, who is in such marvellous physical shape, why he can topple the baby sitter and come back home and do his wife. Robert Stone, now there's a strange guy for you, why in his last novel he made it with a nun. And Bern Malamud - I mean, for God's sake, who would have thought it! - Bern in his last novel but one went at it hammer and tongs with a kid in her early twenties; and then in his last novel, damned if he didn't boff a chimpanzee. These contemporary novelists, man, they sure know how to live."

It is difficult to find the American equivalents of Pym and Brookner in order to elaborate on Mr Epstein's list. It is difficult to conceive of the new wave of American female writers, of the order of Lisa Alther, say, as approaching the themes and style of either. The closest equivalent is possibly Alison Lurie, incidentally a writer much admired by Anthony Powell. Although her work is essentially centred around explorations of modern American marriage, her latest novel, the Pulitzer prize-winning *Foreign Affairs*, a witty, perceptive, Jamesian study of English life as experienced by visiting Americans, approaches the work of Pym and Brookner in theme and character.

Even British writing is moving towards the excesses which Epstein deprecates, and Pym and Brookner are clearly light-years removed from the excesses of much fêted current literati like Iain Banks and Martin Amis. The fact that both *A Misalliance* and even the critically slated *An Academic Question* reached the top ten fiction bestseller list in Great Britain during 1986, testifies to a reader market still appreciative of a civilised, fastidious tradition of English writing. Although counter-arguments could be raised to the effect that excess is a fitting metaphor for contemporary *angst*, Brookner incontrovertibly

demonstrates that psychological turmoil can be effectively contained within the English tradition of sophisticated decorum.

In her writing, Brookner does not disavow the truth, and it is this unflinching quality, combined with her consummate polished style, which makes her work infinitely more lacking in agape, and infinitely less charitable than Pym's. Brookner's judgements are more felling; for her there are no consolations, indeed, no middle-way. She appears to embrace happiness as a *sine qua non* for the human condition; in her disavowal of this, one suspects that Pym evinces more maturity. Anita Brookner herself has admitted that her novels purvey hopelessness, and do not allow for amelioration (Haffenden, 1985:73). Antony Beevor has written of her work:

"The similarity of plot and dénouement has not detracted from the fascination of these novels . . . With its subtle, dark humour<sup>1</sup> Anita Brookner's prose is like a graceful trireme with an underwater ram. There can be little doubt that she is one of the great writers of contemporary English fiction" (in Haffenden, 1985:58).

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1 Cf. Haffenden (1985:68):

"Is the wit and humour in your books a conscious stratagem to make certain truths more palatable?"

"No, nothing conscious like that. It comes from a lot of reading. Here is the connection between art history - or history, if you like - and fiction: it's the energy of the eighteenth century I admire. If you have a cause, you have to propound it with energy. My 'cause' is to tell a story or perhaps to cast a moral puzzle. I see these novels as extraordinary accidents, and I couldn't account for them more than I already have done. I certainly haven't modelled them on anybody or anything."

Brookner's themes, although similar to Pym's, encompass a more disturbing vision which is not assuaged by the everyday, the mundane or the familiar. Pym's unflinching Christianity precludes tragedy, and love, for Pym, whether it is romantic love, or the more Christian or universal precept of "love thy neighbour", is the element generally lacking in Brookner's bleaker vision. Her heroines' refusal to settle for half-measures; the absence of mercy and the succour of "the trivial round, the common task" - the elements of Keble's *New every morning is the love*, make Brookner's work more excruciating, if less poignant, than that of Pym. Brookner is a self-avowed moralist:

"The morality of novels - in which judgements are meted out - very much recommends itself to me. I am always reading novelists like Trollope whose moral standards are clear within the framework of the novel: the bad are seen through, which is not the case in real life and everyday intercourse. It affects me bitterly - I despair of it - that hypocrisies can be entertained and impudent behaviour preferred, betrayals laughed off and promises broken: I can't bear that" (Haffenden, 1985:59-60),

and is unable to tolerate or condone "the ways of the worldly". Pym's option of Christian forbearance is disregarded as an alternative:

The trivial round, the common task  
Will furnish all we need to ask,  
Room to deny ourselves, a road  
To bring us daily nearer God.

It is fitting to conclude with the final appraisal of Hazel Holt, Pym's literary

executor and co-editor of her diaries, who writes of Pym's illness and death in 1980 (Pym, 1984d:292):

"Throughout her illness she had maintained a cheerful stoicism, very down-to-earth and practical, never self-pitying. She was sustained, certainly, by her strong faith and still able, as she had been throughout her life, to draw comfort from small pleasures and ironies, and this is, perhaps, the greatest gift she has bequeathed to all who read her."



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9            ABSTRACT

From 1950, until her death in 1980, Barbara Pym published ten novels. The social climate of the 'sixties and early 'seventies was not receptive to her subtle literary style, and her writing suffered an eclipse of 16 years. A renaissance in her fortunes came in January 1977, when the *Times Literary Supplement* asked a selection of critics to say which writers they considered the most underrated of the twentieth century; both Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil selected Pym as one of the most underrated novelists of this century.

This critical acclaim stimulated renewed interest in her work, and *Quartet in Autumn* was nominated for the Booker Prize in 1977. Her renaissance in 1977 led to her canonisation in the literary world, and several previously unpublished novels, as well as her edited diaries and notebooks, appeared after her death in 1980.

Anita Brookner published her first novel, *A Start in Life*, in 1981, and has published a critically acclaimed novel every year since then. In 1984 she won the Booker Prize for *Hotel du Lac*. With the publication of her second novel, *Providence*, reviewers mooted tentative parallels with the work of Barbara Pym. Similarities and correspondences between these two writers have been noted by critics and reviewers *en passant* only, and while an oeuvre of Pym criticism has gradually emerged, there has been no full-length appraisal of the work of Anita Brookner, and no comparison, other than passing comments in book reviews, of the novels of Pym and Brookner to date. It is surmised that this is due to the recent emergence (and prolific output) of Brookner as a novelist of stature. Pym's posthumous novels yield further topical and uncharted scholastic territory,

and her canonisation, as well as the critical acclaim accorded Anita Brookner in her rapid ascent to the stature of a cult novelist, makes a detailed comparison both timely and topical.

A comprehensive survey of Pym criticism reveals that the bulk of criticism of her work stems from 1977, the year of her literary resurrection. Criticism takes the form of book reviews of varying length and academic rigour in literary and popular journals; however, the last three years have seen the gradual emergence of traditional and more substantial critical treatises on her novels. Her themes are loneliness and the perils of love, usually unrequited, unsuitable or hopeless, chronicled comically and wittily in the early novels, but more sombrely in her later ones. Pym is the persistent observer, and the vices which are satirised are mild ones. Her novels are peopled chiefly by women, the so-called "excellent women" of the title of her second novel, while her men are generally absurd characters of diminished stature. Wit, irony, compression and delicacy are the chief characteristics of her style, while her use of literary allusions and intratextual manoeuvring demands a fair amount of mental agility and erudition from her readers. Although Pym has been compared to diverse writers (chiefly to Jane Austen), this study is limited to Brookner - Pym parallels.

Anita Brookner's publishing career has been infinitely happier than that of Barbara Pym. Critical opinion is confined to reviews and interviews, and the latter have added considerably to an appreciation of her fictional craft. Brookner's major theme lies in her contention that the world is not won by virtue; the fable of the hare and the tortoise is a fallacy, as explicitly expounded in *Hotel du Lac*. Other themes which link her with Pym are those

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of filial duty, and the failure of literature to provide adequate role models for life. In her examination of unrequited love, she evinces a bleaker perspicacity than Pym. Her heroines, like Pym's, are single women, but although they are successful in their careers, they are obtuse when confronted by the ways of the world. Critics are unanimous that Brookner is a fine and witty stylist, but accuse her of mawkishness in her repetitive handling of similarly bleak fictional situations. She transcends the writing of Barbara Pym in that her forte lies in the depiction of melancholy modes of existence which go beyond Pym's milder comedies of manners.

A detailed thematic analysis of Pym's twelve novels reveals two important issues: the theme of romantic love is developed to include the Christian concept of "love thy neighbour" in the later novels, and Pym's themes are an integral part of her exploration of character. The early novels amusingly contemplate love and marriage, unsuitable attachments and men's love as opposed to women's, with quirky high spirits which take comfort in, and are appeased by, the safe and familiar. *Excellent Women* is a transitional novel; while still depicting with good humour "unsuitable attachments", it explores more trenchantly the theme of loneliness in the lives of those forced to live life vicariously.

Intrinsic to several heroines' lives is the theme of filial duty, although this is intimated, rather than explored in depth. Most Pym heroines fancy a decorous literary role model, which is tentatively but ironically broached by nomenclatural whimsy. Greater psychological insight and a more plangent tone characterise the later novels, and a theme which is broached superficially in the early novels, and which culminates in *Quartet in Autumn* and *A Few Green Leaves*, is

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that of the changing face of Britain and the incontrovertible erosion of culture and middle-class values. The advent of maturity through the loss of illusions is a theme which Pym shares with Jane Austen, but Pym's heroines are generally less myopic than Brookner's. Pym intimates that love is a universal need, and the characters in her later novels who deny this, either through senile dementia or hedonistic self-absorption, are depicted with compassionate pathos, or, in the case of *The Sweet Dove Died*, with cool and detached wit.

A detailed thematic analysis of Anita Brookner's six novels reveals that as in the work of Pym, character and theme are inextricably intertwined. Brookner's heroines, in their unmitigated quest for love, are more single-minded than most of Pym's, who find alternative options and compensations when love eludes them, or settle for attachments which are second best. Love and marriage are the only options for Brookner's heroines, and the solitary woman is seen as an object of pity. Brookner's novels are littered with ruined expectations and unrequited love; in a Brookner novel, innocence is routed by experience, trust by prurient self-interest.

Brookner intimates that literary role models do not provide a blueprint for life, and that the lessons taught by literature are misleading. Although her heroines are adept at explicating recondite literary texts, they are dyslectic in analysing their own predicaments, and therefore irony in Brookner's novels is omnipresent and insistent. Obedience to filial duty is a barrier to happiness which is explored in considerable detail, while adherence to "the trivial round, the common task" which occupies Pym's heroines, gives little solace to Brookner's women. Brookner imposes her themes insistently from the outset, and although

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her moral tone is more overt than Pym's, her deft literary craftsmanship and pervasive irony preclude didacticism.

Although the close reader finds constant nuances of Pym in the writing of Brookner, the latter's novels are on a more ambitious emotional and literary scale. Pym does not admit despair, while Brookner does not allow charity, and Brookner's avowal of human need seldom goes beyond the self. In her novels there are no happy endings, no redemption.

In addition to similarities between the protagonists, there is also substantial correlation between the authors' peripheral characters. "Peripheral" must be used with caution, however, as these characters often contribute substantially to the illumination of the central theme or themes, as well as to the stories and plots. A major difference is in the size of the writers' respective casts, and Brookner's list, in keeping with her more interior style, is more circumspect.

There is a vast preponderance of clergy in Pym's novels, and Pym's clergymen, as befits their traditional comic character, are generally static characters, and the recipients of the ministrations of the excellent women. They are characterised by mannerisms, preoccupations and obsessions. While Anita Brookner does not number clergymen among her characters, her male characters with Christian leanings are the complacent recipients of women's adoration as well as of their cooking.

Both writers have a vast cast of academics, and Pym is particularly given to detailing the machinations of anthropologists. In addition to providing comedy, anthropology also becomes a metaphor for detachment, observation, classification

and categorisation. Some of her most malicious creations are librarians, who are averse to both books and borrowers. Her jibes at academe are countless; while they are frequently intrinsic to the plot, her funniest scenes concern academic ambition and pretensions.

Brookner, having spent most of her working life as an academic, reserves her most potent wit for academe.

Cleaning women are also important peripheral characters in the novels of both Pym and Brookner. Cleaning is not as much in evidence as gratuitous advice; clad in an amazing array of garments, these characters offer a reflection in microcosm of the themes of the novels, as well as being the stock comic characters of fiction.

Both Pym and Brookner make wide use of semiotic signifiers like food, clothes and interiors in their depiction of character. The comforting rituals of eating and drinking anchor Barbara Pym's novels firmly in the real world, and food, drink and their consumption frequently and amusingly offer insights into characters, illuminate the roles of men and women in the war of the sexes, and comment on human behaviour in general. Food is particularly pertinent in Pym's comic reflections on men's "needs", a prominent theme in the early novels, and the excellent women are seen as endless purveyors of fine victuals.

Food is less obtrusive but as important in the novels of Brookner. In addition to being a touchstone of character, it is also a symbol and prognosis of mood, and is thus important to Brookner's interior narrative mode. Brookner's female protagonists also cater assiduously and with destructive self-abandon to the

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gastronomic needs of their pusillanimous men, but Brookner invests food with multifarious qualities and significance, and creates narratives of horrendous expectation around social occasions involving eating.

Brookner's use of food in her fictional technique is more complex than Pym's. In Brookner's novels, not only is character illuminated by food and the imagery and occasions surrounding it, but moods are sustained and alienation, isolation and need are delineated.

Food is never a barometer of character alone, but an integral element of theme and style in both novelists. Above all, it anchors the novels comically, and sometimes traumatically, in reality.

Clothes are as important, and Barbara Pym is fond of contrasting her characters in terms of dress and appearance. She frequently imbues appearance and clothes with comic and ironic intent. Clothes and outward appearance often designate "suitability", but Pym wryly intimates that love does not conform to sartorial rules. Brookner is also fond of contrasting characters sartorially, and invests clothes with symbolic significance. Dress, like food, imbues her novels with tangible expectation.

Interiors are important in the novels of both writers. In Pym's novels, the interiors of houses are delineations of character, barometers of dissatisfaction, or touchstones of "suitability". Above all, houses are symbols of comfort and privacy. Brookner's heroines give the impression of occupying their domiciles in transit, and consequently make no impression on their bland surroundings. Brookner relentlessly describes interiors, creating mood as much as delineating

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character, and her interiors do not provide much in the form of peace, security or serenity. Warm, sombre, stifling interiors, ponderously furnished, reflect the interior landscape and foreign ambience of Brookner's characters.

Pym's intratextual manoeuvring is analysed, and her *penchant* for what Henry James called "the revivalist impulse on the fond writer's part" reinforces her theme of survival through "the trivial round, the common task". Brookner does not revive individual characters. Her heroines are cast in the same mould, which makes her plots somewhat predictable. As indicated by her revival of characters, Pym's perspective is also infinitely wider than that of Brookner, and to some extent Pym uses the device of the self-conscious or omniscient author-narrator. This device creates fictionality, which Brookner achieves by deft, retrospective structures, and in *Family and Friends*, by using the device of the photographer's lens as a method of estrangement.

Citations from the novels conclusively demonstrate Brookner's thematic and stylistic allegiance to and familiarity with the work of Barbara Pym. In addition to this symbiosis, the novels of both writers are dense with literary allusion, and predict the author's familiarity with the English literary tradition, although Brookner's scope is more catholic, as it encompasses the French tradition of Balzac, Flaubert, *et al.* Many of Pym's titles, culled from "the greater English poets", appositely reflect her themes, and both writers employ the myths of literature as controlling themes, although Pym's *modus operandi* appears more desultory in comparison with Brookner's. Pym's allusions frequently work, as does her comic irony, by deflation, and examples of this are prolific. Her allusions are often subtly interwoven in her texts, but to the observant and literate reader they lose none of their ironic impact. The

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influence of the seventeenth-century Metaphysical poets is particularly evident in her wit.

In marked contrast, Brookner's style is inflationary, and therefore approaches tragedy. Brookner underscores her ironies with sedulous literary parallels, and many casual allusions invest her mild heroines with tragic grandeur. Both novelists' predilection for allusive style extends to occasional appropriation; while Pym's literary allegiance is chiefly to Jane Austen, Brookner has echoes of Austen and Dickens, and in her exposition of subtle states of consciousness, in dialogue, and in moral stance, she is closest to Henry James.

Brookner's forte is the grimace, rather than "the edge of smiling" which Larkin discerns in Pym's novels. Her wit is more pithy, more astringent, more aphoristic and infinitely less charitable than Pym's. Pym is not a true satirist, for she is too compassionate, charitable and understanding. In keeping with her more stringent moral tone, Brookner frequently verges on a satirical diatribe, but this is kept in check by her fine wit.

Pym's generic vehicle is the comedy of manners, and although she forsakes manners for melancholy to some extent in the later novels, she never approaches Brookner's introspective and philosophic profundity. Although Brookner employs the vehicle of the novel of manners with its hallmarks of sophisticated wit, repartee and comic characters, in a novel like *Look at Me*, her essay into the realm of the psychological novel and her interior style elicit greater involvement and empathy from the reader than the more superficial genre of the comedy of manners generally allows.

The popularity of both writers' novels testifies to a reader market still appreciative of a civilised, fastidious tradition of English writing, and although counter-arguments could be raised to the effect that excess is a fitting metaphor for contemporary *angst*, Brookner incontrovertibly demonstrates that psychological turmoil can be effectively contained within the English tradition of sophisticated decorum.

Brookner is a self-avowed moralist, and in her writing does not disavow the truth. This unflinching quality, combined with her consummate polished style, makes her judgements more felling than those of Pym. She embraces happiness as a *sine qua non* for the human condition, and in her disavowal of this, Pym possibly evinces greater tolerance and maturity. Although Brookner's themes are similar to those of Pym, her heroines' refusal to settle for half-measures makes her work more exeruciating than that of Pym, with the latter's unflinching Christianity, agape, and comfort in the mundane and familiar.

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11 OPSOMMING

Van 1950 tot met haar dood in 1980 het tien romans van Barbara Pym verskyn. Die sosiale klimaat van die jare sestig en die vroeë jare sewentig was nie ontvanklik vir haar subtiele literêre styl nie, en 16 jaar lank het niks van haar verskyn nie. In Januarie 1977 het die geluk in haar guns gedraai toe die *Times Literary Supplement* 'n aantal kritici gevra het om te sê watter skrywers hulle as die mees onderskatte van die twintigste eeu beskou: Philip Larkin en Lord David Cecil het albei Pym as een van die mees onderskatte romanskrywers van hierdie eeu aangewys.

Hierdie lof van die kritici het hernieude belangstelling vir haar werk laat ontstaan, en *Quartet in Autumn* is in 1977 vir die Booker-prys benoem. Hierdie herontdekking van haar werk in 1977 het gelei tot haar kanoniserings in die literêre wêreld, en verskeie romans wat toe nog nie gepubliseer is nie, sowel as haar geredigeerde dagboeke en aantekeningboeke, het in 1980 ná haar dood verskyn.

Anita Brookner se eerste roman, *A Start in Life*, het in 1981 verskyn, en sedertdien het 'n krities hoog aangeskrewe roman jaarliks verskyn. In 1984 het sy die Booker-prys vir *Hotel du Lac* gewen. Met die verskyning van haar tweede roman, *Providence*, het resensente tentatief op ooreenkomste met die werk van Barbara Pym gewys. Eendershede en ooreenkomste tussen die twee skrywers is slegs terloops deur kritici en resensente uitgewys, en hoewel 'n oeuvre van Pym-kritiek geleidelik gegroei het, was daar tot dusver geen volledige waardering van die werk van Anita Brookner, en geen vergelyking, buiten terloopse opmerkings in boekresensies, van die romans van Pym en

Brookner nie. Daar word vermoed dat dit toe te skryf is aan die onlangse opkoms (en prolifieke produksie) van Brookner as 'n romanskrywer van formaat. Die romans van Pym wat ná haar dood verskyn het, bied 'n ruimer aktuele en ongekarteerde studiegebied, en haar ophemeling, sowel as die lof van die kritici wat Anita Brookner toegeswaai is in haar snelle uitstygting tot die posisie van 'n vereerde romanskrywer, maak 'n uitvoerige vergelyking tussen hulle tydige en aktueel.

Uit 'n omvattende beskouing van Pym-kritiek blyk dit dat die meeste kritiek oor haar werk uit 1977 kom, die jaar van haar literêre herontdekking. Die kritiek is in die vorm van boekresensies van verskeie lengtes en akademiese gestrengheid in literêre en populêre tydskrifte, maar die laaste drie jaar was daar 'n geleidelike opkoms van tradisionele en meer diepgaande kritiese beskouinge oor haar romans. Haar temas is eensaamheid en die gevare van die liefde, dikwels onbeantwoord, ongepas of hopeloos, wat in haar vroeë romans komies en geestig weergegee word, maar somberder in haar later romans. Pym is die volhardende waarnemer, en die euwels wat gesatiriseer word, is gering. Die karakters in haar romans is meesal vroue, die sogenaamde "excellent women" van die titel van haar tweede roman, terwyl haar mans gewoonlik absurde personasies van mindere gestalte is. Geestigheid, ironie, bondigheid en delikaatheid is die belangrikste kenmerke van haar styl, terwyl haar gebruik van literêre toespeelings en haar intratekstuele maneuvres 'n aansienlike mate van verstandelike ratsheid en belesenheid van haar lesers verg. Hoewel Pym al met verskeie skrywers vergelyk is (veral met Jane Austen), is hierdie studie beperk tot ooreenkomste tussen Brookner en Pym.

Anita Brookner het dit met die publikasie van haar boeke oneindig gelukkiger getref as Barbara Pym. Kritiese beskouinge is beperk tot resensies en onderhoude, en laasgenoemde het aansienlik bygedra tot 'n waardering van haar skryfkuns. Brookner se hooftema bestaan in haar beskouing dat die wêreld nie deur deug verwerf word nie; die fabel van die haas en die skilpad is onsin, soos uitdruklik verkondig in *Hotel du Lac*. Ander temas wat haar met Pym verbind, is dié van kinders se plig teenoor hul ouers, en die onvermoë van die letterkunde om toereikende rol-modelle vir die lewe te bied. In haar ondersoek van onbeantwoorde liefde openbaar sy 'n droewer skerpsinnigheid as Pym. Haar heldinne, soos Pym s'n, is enkelvroue, maar hoewel hulle suksesvol is in hul loopbane, is hulle bot wanneer hulle voor die weë van die wêreld te staan kom. Kritici is dit eens dat Brookner 'n voortreflike en skerpsinnige stilis is, maar beskuldig haar van soetlike sentimentaliteit in haar herhaalde hantering van fiktiewe situasies wat altyd ewe skraal is. Sy oortref Barbara Pym daarin dat sy uitblink in die uitbeelding van melancholiese bestaanswyses wat verder strek as Pym se goediger sede-blyspele.

'n Gedetailleerde tematieke analise van Pym se twaalf romans bring twee belangrike temas aan die lig: die tema van romantiese liefde word in haar latere romans so uitgebou dat dit die Christelike begrip "jy moet jou naaste liefhê" omvat, en Pym se temas is 'n integrerende deel van haar verkenning van karakter. Die vroeë romans bestaan in amuserende beskouings oor die liefde en die huwelik, ongepaste verhoudings, en mans se liefde in teenstelling met dié van vroue. Dit word gekenmerk deur 'n eiesoortige opgewektheid wat troos en bevrediging vind in die veilige en bekende. *Excellent Women* is 'n oorgangsroman; terwyl dit steeds "ongepaste verhoudings" goedaardig beskryf, verken

dit meer deurtastend die tema van eensaamheid in die bestaan van diegene wat gedwing word om hul geluk in dié van ander te soek.

Wesenlik van verskeie heldinne se lewe is die tema van die kind se plig teenoor die ouer, hoewel dit net te kenne gegee en nie diepgaande verken word nie. Die meeste Pym-heldinne stel hulle 'n betaamlike literêre rol-model voor, wat tentatief maar ironies deur 'n speelse naamgewing gesuggereer word. Groter sielkundige insig en 'n meer volgehoue toon kenmerk die latere romans, en 'n tema wat in die vroeë romans slegs oppervlakkig aangeroeer word en in *Quartet in Autumn* en *A Few Green Leaves* kulmineer, is die veranderende beeld van Brittanje en die onbetwisbare aftakeling van kultuur en middestand-waardes. Die vordering tot rypheid deur die verlies van illusies is 'n tema wat Pym met Jane Austen gemeen het, maar Pym se heldinne is oor die algemeen minder stiksienig as Brookner s'n. Pym impliseer dat die liefde 'n universele drang is, en die persoonasies in haar latere romans wat dit ontken, of vanweë seniele swaksinnigheid of vanweë hedonistiese self-ingenomenheid, word uitgebeeld met simpatieke patos, of, in die geval van *The Sweet Dove Died*, met koele en onbevange gevatheid.

'n Gedetailleerde tematiese analise van Anita Brookner se ses romans openbaar dat, soos in die werk van Pym, karakter en tema onlosmaaklik vervleg is. Brookner se heldinne is in hul ongestilde soeke na liefde meer doelgerig as die meeste van Pym s'n, wat alternatiewe opsies en kompensasies vind wanneer die liefde hulle ontwyk, of tevrede is met naasbeste verhoudings.

Liefde en die huwelik is al opsie vir Brookner se heldinne, en die enkelvrou word gesien as 'n voorwerp van bejammering. Brookner se romans wemel van

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verpletterde verwagtinge en onbeantwoorde liefde; in 'n Brookner-roman word onskuld deur ervaring oorweldig, vertrouwe deur wulpse eiebelang.

Brookner gee te kenne dat literêre rol-modelle nie 'n patroon vir die lewe bied nie en dat die lesse wat deur die letterkunde geleer word, misleidend is. Hoewel haar heldinne bedrewe is in die uitleg van diepsinnige literêre tekste, is hulle disleksies wanneer dit by die ontleding van hul eie haglike situasies kom, en daarom is die ironie in Brookner se romans alomteenwoordig en aandringend. Die nakoming van die kind se plig teenoor die ouer is 'n belemmering van geluk waarop uitvoerig ingegaan word, terwyl verankertheid aan "the trivial round, the common task" wat Pym se heldinne in beslag neem, min troos bied aan Brookner se vroue. Brookner se temas laat hulle uit die staanspoor sterk geld, en hoewel haar morele toon openliker as Pym s'n is, laat haar behendige literêre vakmanskap en deurlopende ironie haar nie in didaktiek verval nie. Hoewel die noukeurige leser telkemale nuanses van Pym in Brookner se werk vind, is laasgenoemde se romans op 'n meer ambisieuse emosionele en literêre skaal. Pym erken nie wanhoop nie, terwyl Brookner nie van menseliefde wil weet nie, en Brookner se bekentenis van menslike behoefte strek selde verder as die eie ek. In haar romans is daar geen gelukkige einde, geen bevryding nie.

Benewens dié ooreenkomste tussen die twee skrywers is daar ook 'n wesenlike korrelasie tussen hulle randfigure. Die woord "randfiguur" moet egter omsigtig gebruik word, aangesien dié personasies dikwels wesenlik bydra tot die verheldering van die sentrale tema of temas, sowel as tot die verhale en intriges. 'n Belangrike verskil geld die aantal personasies in die boeke van die onderskeie skrywers; Brookner se lys is geringer, wat strook met die innerlikheid van haar styl.

In Pym se romans is geestelikes verreweg in die meerderheid, en getrou aan die komiese aard waarmee hulle tradisioneel beklee word, is hulle statiese figure wat deur voortreflike vroue versorg word. Hulle word gekenmerk deur hebbelikhede, vooroordele en obsessies. Terwyl Anita Brookner nie geestelikes in haar boeke opneem nie, laat haar manlike personasies met Christelike neigings hulle op inskiklike wyse die bewondering, en kookvernuf, van vroue welgeval.

Albei skrywers sluit baie akademiëci by hul personasies in, en veral Pym is geneig om die doenighede van antropoloë uitvoerig weer te gee. Enersyds sorg dit vir die lagwekkende, andersyds word die antropologie die sinnebeeld van onbevangeheid, waarneming, klassifikasie en kategorisering. Sommige van haar geniepsigste skeppinge is bibliotekarisse wat afkerig is van boeke sowel as gebruikers. Sy spot dikwels met die akademiese wêreld; terwyl akademiëci dikwels 'n wesenlike deel van die intrige is, het haar snaakste tonele met akademiese ambisie en pretensie te doen.

Brookner, wat vir die grootste deel van haar lewe 'n akademiëcus was, steek veral met die akademiese wêreld die draak.

Skropvroue is ook belangrike randfigure in die romans van sowel Pym as Brookner. Hulle maak nie so baie aan die kant nie as wat hulle ongevraag raad uitdeel. Geklee in 'n bonte mengelmoes van klere, bied hulle 'n weerspieëling in die klein van die temas van die romans, terwyl hulle terselfdertyd die geïkoneerde komiese rolle van fiksie speel.

Pym en Brookner maak in hul uitbeelding van karakter albei ruim gebruik van semiotiese aanduidinge soos klere en interieurs. Die troostende rituele van eet en drink laat Barbara Pym se romans stewig in die werklike wêreld wortel, en kos, drank en die genieting daarvan verskaf dikwels en op vermaaklike wyse 'n insig in karakters, belig die rolle van mans en vroue in die oorlog van die geslagte en lewer kommentaar op menslike gedrag in die algemeen. Kos is veral van belang in Pym se komiese refleksies op mans se "behoefes", 'n prominente tema in die vroeë romans; en die voortreflike vroue word gesien as eindelose verskaffers van fyn lewensmiddele.

In Brookner se romans is kos nie so opvallend nie, maar net so belangrik. Dit is nie net 'n toetssteen van karakter nie, maar ook 'n simbool en prognose van stemming, en dit is belangrik vir Brookner se innerlike verhaaltrant. Haar vroulike personasies beywer hulle ook met vernietigende selfversaking om in die gastronomiese behoeftes van hul kleinhartige mans te voorsien, maar Brookner beklee kos met veelsoortige hoedanighede en betekenis en skep verhale van aaklige verwagting romdom sosiale geleenthede wat 'n etery afgee.

Brookner se gebruik van kos in haar fiksie-tegniek is verwickelder as Pym s'n. In Brookner se romans word nie net karakter uitgebeeld deur kos en die verbeeldingswêreld en geleenthede wat dit omgee nie, maar stemmings word in stand gehou en vervreemding, isolasie en behoefte uitgebeeld.

Kos is by albei skrywers nooit net 'n waardemeter van karakter nie, maar 'n integreerende element van tema en styl. Bowenal veranker dit die romans komies en soms traumaties in die werklikheid.

Klere is net so belangrik, en Barbara Pym hou daarvan om haar karakters te kontrasteer in terme van kleredrag en voorkoms. Sy deurdrenk voorkoms en klere dikwels met komiese en ironiese opset. Klere en uiterlike voorkoms dui dikwels "gepastheid" aan, maar Pym gee wrang te kenne dat die liefde nie aan kleredragvoorskrifte hou nie. Brookner hou ook daarvan om karakters aan die hand van hul kleredrag te kontrasteer, en sy beklee klere met simboliese betekenis. Kleredrag, net soos kos, deurdrenk haar romans met tasbare verwagting.

Interieurs is belangrik in die romans van albei skrywers. In Pym se romans dien die interieurs van huise om karakter uit te beeld, die graad van onvergenoegdheid aan te dui of "gepastheid" te toets. Bowenal is huise simbole van gerief en privaathed. Brookner se heldinne wek die indruk dat hulle maar net tydelik in hul woonplekke vertoef, en hulle maak gevolglik geen indruk op hul kleurlose omgewing nie. Brookner beskryf interieurs genadeloos en skep ewe seer stemming as wat sy karakter uitbeeld. Haar interieurs bied nie bra vrede, veiligheid of rustigheid nie. Warm, somber, bedompige interieurs, swaar gemeubileer, reflekteer die innerlike landskap en die vreemdsoortigheid van Brookner se personasies.

Pym se intratekstuele maneuvres word geanaliseer en haar neiging tot wat Henry James "the revivalist impulse on the fond writer's part" genoem het, sit krag by haar tema van oorlewing deur "the trivial round, the common task". Brookner laat nie individuele personasies herleef nie. Haar heldinne is op dieselfde lees geskoei, wat haar intriges ietwat voorspelbaar maak. Pym se perspektief is, soos deur die herlewing van karakters aangedui word, ook oneindig wyer as dié van Brookner, en tot sekere hoogte gebruik sy die tegniek

van die selfbewuste of alwetende skrywer-verteller. Daardeur skep sy fiksjonaliteit, wat Brookner verkry deur behendige retrospektiewe strukture en, in *Family and Friends*, deur die fotograaf se lens as metode van vervreemding te gebruik.

Aanhalings uit die romans lewer afdoende bewys van Brookner se tematiese en stilistiese trou aan en vertrouetheid met die werk van Barbara Pym. Benewens hierdie simbiose is die romans van albei skrywers oorvol literêre toespelinge en getuig hulle van die skrywers se vertrouetheid met die Engelse literêre tradisie, hoewel Brookner se bestek omvattender is, aangesien dit die Franse tradisie van Balzac, Flaubert en andere insluit. Baie van Pym se titels, ontleen aan "die groter Engelse digters", weerspieël haar temas treffend, en albei skrywers gebruik die mites van die literatuur as oorheersende temas, hoewel Pym se *modus operandi* meer lukraak lyk as dié van Brookner. Pym se toespelings, soos ook haar komiese ironie, werk dikwels deflasie in die hand. Daar is talle voorbeelde daarvan. Haar toespelings is dikwels subtiel in haar teks verweef, maar vir die oplettende en kundige leser verloor hulle niks van hul ironiese trefkrag nie. Die invloed van die sewentiende-eeuse metafisiese digters blyk veral uit haar gevatheid.

In skerpe kontras is Brookner se styl inflasionêr, en dit raak daarom aan die tragiese. Brookner beklemtoon haar ironie met opsetlike literêre parallele, en talle terloopse toespelings bekleed haar effense heldinne met tragiese grootsheid. In hul voorliefde vir toespelings eien albei skrywers hulle soms iets van iemand anders toe; terwyl Pym veral op Jane Austen steun, kan by Brookner weerklanke van Austen en Dickens waargeneem word, en in haar uitbeelding van

subtiële toestande van bewustheid, in dialoog en in morele standpunte is sy die naaste aan Henry James.

Brookner se sterk punt is die grynslag eerder as die "edge of smiling" wat Larkin in Pym se romans gewaar. Haar gevatheid is pittiger, skerper, meer aforisties en het oneindig minder deernis as Pym s'n. Pym is geen ware satirikus nie, want sy is te barmhartig, welwillend en begrypend. Soos by haar skerper morele toon pas, neig Brookner dikwels tot 'n satiriese smaadrede, maar dit word in bedwang gehou deur haar fyn geestigheid.

Pym se medium is gewoonlik die sede-blyspel, en hoewel sy in haar latere romans tot die melancholiese neig, kom sy nooit naby Brookner se introspektiewe en filosofiese diepsinnigheid nie. Hoewel Brookner die sede-roman met sy kenmerkende gesofistikeerde geestigheid, gevatheid en komiese karakters in 'n roman soos *Look at Me* as medium gebruik, ontlok haar betreding van die wêreld van die sielkundige roman en haar innerlike styl groter betrokkenheid en empatie aan die leser as wat die oppervlakkiger genre van die sede-blyspel gewoonlik meebring.

Die gewildheid van beide skrywers getuig van die bestaan van 'n leserspubliek wat nog 'n beskaafde, kieskeurige tradisie van Engelse skryfkuns kan waardeer, en hoewel teengewerp kan word dat oormaat 'n gepaste metafoor vir tydgenootlike Angst is, toon Brookner onweerlegbaar dat psigologiese woelinge heel goed binne die Engelse tradisie van gesofistikeerde fatsoen bedwing kan word.

Brookner is 'n self-erkende sedepreker en probeer in haar skryfwerk nie daarvan wegstroom nie. Dié bestendige hoedanigheid, gepaard met haar

onberispelik versorgde styl, verleen aan haar oordele groter trefkrag as aan dié van Pym. Sy aanvaar geluk as *sine qua non* van die mensestaat, en in haar loëning daarvan toon Pym moontlik groter verdraagsaamheid en rypheid. Hoewel Brookner se temas baie soos dié van Pym is, maak haar heldinne se weiering om met minder as die beste genoë te neem haar werk meer pynigend as die van Pym, met laasgenoemde se onwankelbare Christenskap, agape en berusting in die alledaagse en bekende.