

**EXCELLENT WOMEN:  
THE NOVELS OF BARBARA PYM AND ANITA BROOKNER**

**Elizabeth Susanna van Aswegen**

**B.A. (Bibl.), M.A.**

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## CHAPTER ONE

"A thesis *must* be long. The object, you see, is to bore and stupefy the examiners to such an extent that they will have to accept it - only if a thesis is short enough to be read all the way through word for word is there any danger of failure."

Barbara Pym: *Less than Angels*

Professor Mainwaring had taught his students always to make carbon copies, use inverted commas round certain technical terms and, best of all, that thanks can never be too fulsome.

Barbara Pym: *A Very Private Eye*



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1 INTRODUCTION

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 a devastating publishing eclipse of 16 years. Her diary, published posthumously in 1984, contains a poignant entry early in 1963:

"24 March 1963. To receive a bitter blow on an early Spring evening (such as that Cape don't want to publish *An Unsuitable Attachment* - but it might be that someone doesn't love you any more) - is it worse than on an Autumn or Winter evening? Smell of bonfire (the burning of rose prunings etc), a last hyacinth in the house, forsythia about to burst, a black and white cat on the sofa, a small fire burning in the grate, books and Sunday papers and the remains of tea" (Pym, 1984d:215).

That same year saw the publication of the Bishop of Woolwich's controversial *Honest to God*, while Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* sold 60,000 copies on the first day of publication. This was therefore hardly a compatible publishing climate for Barbara Pym's infinitely milder comedies of manners.

Barbara Pym had been corresponding with Philip Larkin since 1961, when he had intended to review her next novel (the ill-fated *An Unsuitable Attachment*, rejected by Cape). 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 to be the most underrated of the past 75 years. Only one author was mentioned twice; both Pym's mentor, the poet Philip Larkin, and

Lord David Cecil, writer and critic, and formerly Goldsmith Professor of English Literature at Oxford, chose Pym as one of the most underrated novelists of the twentieth century. Although Pym had never stopped writing during her arid publishing years, this critical acclaim stimulated renewed interest in her work, and in 1977 *Quartet in Autumn* was short-listed for Britain's most prestigious literary award, the Booker Prize.

Lord David Cecil commented that Barbara Pym's "unpretentious, subtle, accomplished novels . . . are for me the finest examples of high comedy to have appeared in England during the past 75 years",<sup>1</sup> while Philip Larkin noted:

"Their narratives . . . [are] . . . recounted by a protagonist who tempers an ironic perception of life's absurdities with a keen awareness of its ability to bruise . . . What stays longest with the reader, once the amusement, the satire, the alert ear and the exact eye have all been acknowledged? Partly it is the underlying loneliness of life, the sense of *vulnerant omnes*, whatever one thinks of when turning out the light in bed . . . [Her books] are miniatures, perhaps, but will not diminish" (Larkin, 1977:260).

Barbara Pym's comic touch has been compared with that of Jane Austen; like Austen she is a miniaturist and gentle satirist; as well as dealing with the limited English world of parish jumble sales, garden fêtes, lectures at learned societies and decorous dinner parties (Jane Austen's "small, square two inches of ivory"), she uses the twin techniques of wit and irony, and with acerbic penetration, warmth and gentle humour, reveals the ordinariness and

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1 In the *Sunday Times*, quoted on the blurb of *Quartet in Autumn*.

eccentricities of daily life and the human frailties inherent in the lives of ordinary people.

In her characterisation, too, she is reminiscent of Jane Austen, or "Jane Austen let loose in Cranford" as Jilly Cooper has described her novels. But her characterisation goes deeper than humorous depictions of comic clergymen and pothering anthropologists; in *A Glass of Blessings*, for example, which Larkin has designated "the subtlest of her books" (1977:260), the heroine, Wilmet Forsyth, is reminiscent of Jane Austen's *Emma*. This novel, like *Emma*, is a story of self-deception, and the problem of the heroine is to undeceive herself. Edgar Johnson's comments on Jane Austen (Johnson, 1945:388) could largely be applied to Pym's gently ironic portraiture of the human condition:

"She watched with an interest almost entirely spectatorial. Her tendency is toward a mild and sympathetic amusement deepening at times to intellectual scorn and disapprobation. Towards her audience her attitude is the assumption that it consists of people like herself; that they will enjoy the spectacle of life and the revelation of folly, and enjoy it all the more if their absurdities are no more than hinted at by a subtle and completely conscious intelligence. She and they will be equals smiling at a delicately delightful comedy. With just a dash of enjoyable acerbity, sanity of vision and witty insight are offered for their own sakes, and observation of the social scene becomes its own sufficient reward. Observation itself thus grows into critical observation, judgement into critical judgement."

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

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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. She has been compared by reviewers to writers as diverse as the Brontës and Henry James; however, her novels also approach those of Jane Austen in acute portraiture, dialogue and succinct authorial comment. Polished, subtle and supremely ironic in style, her view of life is also infinitely bleaker than that of Barbara Pym, with the latter's "virtue of enduring . . . , the unpretentious adherence to the Church of England, the absence of self-pity, the scrupulousness of one's relations with others, the small blameless comforts" (Larkin, 1977:260). Brookner's thesis is essentially the fable of the hare and the tortoise. The heroine of *Hotel du Lac*, a writer of light romantic fiction, explains:

'People love [that story], 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 . . . 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 . . .'

(Brookner, 1985b:27-28).

Like that of Jane Austen, her portraiture of minor characters is mercilessly acute, brittle and funny. She goes further than Pym in painting an unsettling picture of the "loneliness of the long-distance runner", the achiever who, despite academic and professional excellence, is unsuccessful at social and personal relationships.

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The title of this thesis, "Excellent Women", is derived from the title of Barbara Pym's second published novel; the charismatic and languid clergymen, the hapless anthropologists in need of a woman's care (or more pragmatically, a competent indexer or proof-reader of their scholarly tomes), thus depicting the central characters of her novels:

"Excellent women whom one respects and esteems".

In Brookner's novels the "excellent women" are the tortoises, the losers who risk all but gain nothing in the game of love. Pym's "excellent women" are rather undistinguished hares, some of whom are committed to future husbands by the end of the novels, others who prefer to cherish pale curates or bleakly opt for selfish and lonely lives.

Similarities and correspondences between these two writers have been noted by critics and reviewers *en passant* only; for example the American novelist Anne Tyler, having claimed Barbara Pym as a favourite writer in a *New York Times* poll in December 1982 (Shapiro, 1983:29), has made the most pertinent and lengthy comparison. In her review of *Hotel du Lac* (Tyler, 1985:1) she notes:

"In fact, Anita Brookner has . . . been compared with Pym - less because of style, one supposes, than because of her cast of players. Her central character is invariably a mild-mannered English spinster, pleasant to look at, if not very striking, and impeccably dressed. She is so correct, so self-controlled and punctilious, that we are surprised to learn how young she is - not yet out of her 30's. Not too old to look up in a quick, alert, veiled way whenever an unattached man wanders past.

"But what she sees when she looks at the man - well, till now, that's where she differed from most of the women in Pym's books. Pym's heroine would generally see someone appealing but comically flawed (as all men are, she would reflect with a smile). Miss Brookner's always saw a rescuer. Pym's heroine would be rueful, self-mocking. Miss Brookner's was seriously hopeful, and seriously cast down when her hopes failed to materialize."

Exhaustive research has revealed two very recent dissertations<sup>1</sup> on the novels of Barbara Pym, with the first monographic appraisals of her work appearing as late as 1986.<sup>2</sup> There has been no full-length appraisal of the work of Anita Brookner, and no comparison of the novels of Pym and Brookner, other than passing comments in book reviews, has appeared, largely, it is supposed, owing to the recent emergence (and prolific output) of Brookner as a novelist of stature.

The posthumous appearance of Barbara Pym's autobiography in 1984 in the form of her edited diaries, as well as the publication of two previously unpublished novels (*Crampton Hodnet* and *An Academic Question*) in 1985 and 1986 respectively, yields further topical and uncharted scholastic territory, while the paucity of substantial criticism on these authors (literature searches have yielded mostly book reviews) further supports the feasibility of this study. In addition, Barbara Pym's canonisation after her renaissance in 1977, as well as the critical acclaim accorded Anita Brookner in her rapid ascent to the stature

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1 Fisichelli (1984) and Heberlein (1984).

2 Benet (1986) and Long (1986).

of a cult novelist,<sup>1</sup> would appear to make a detailed comparison both timely and topical.

Given the interesting publishing history of both writers, this thesis will therefore undertake a full account of the critical consensus regarding the novels, extricated from the plethora of book reviews, an in-depth comparative analysis of the themes of eighteen novels, an examination of both protagonists and peripheral characters in the novels, as well as a consideration of the writers as participants in the established tradition of "high comedy" and the novel of manners, which will include an analysis of their wit and irony. As both writers make extensive use of literary allusions and analogies in the fabric of their writing, this aspect will form a substantial element in the analysis of themes and style. A tentative hypothesis is that Anita Brookner has appropriated the novel of manners of Jane Austen and Henry James as a vehicle for more melancholy reflections. Whereas Pym's novels are rueful but comic reflections of life's slings and arrows, Brookner's works are more acute psychological perceptions, melancholic musings on "what behaviour most becomes a woman". This thesis will therefore critically assess both Pym and Brookner as "modern miniaturists" of the twentieth century.

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1 Brookner made a personal appearance at New York's Three Lives Bookstore early in 1985, from which fans had to be turned away (Barbato, 1985:31).



## CHAPTER TWO

The position of the unmarried woman - unless, of course, she is somebody's mistress, is of no interest whatsoever to the readers of modern fiction.

Barbara Pym: *A Very Private Eye*

I really still wonder if my books will ever be acceptable again when I read the reviews in the Sundays. I think it might be nice to be famous and sought after when one is rather old and ga-ga - not in one's forties and fifties, or perhaps fame when you're very young is good, if the years after aren't too much of a let-down.

Barbara Pym: *A Very Private Eye*

Tea with Lord David Cecil . . . He said that Anthony Powell and I were the only novelists he would buy without reading first.

Barbara Pym: *A Very Private Eye*



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2            A SURVEY OF CRITICISM: BARBARA PYM

2.1          Introduction

No attempt at an evaluation of the current critical acclaim enjoyed by the novels of Barbara Pym is possible without examining the lacuna of 1963 - 1977. Her early work enjoyed a modest but devoted following. The invidious situation of the unpublished novelist, and the effects of this enforced hiatus on Pym's writing, are best described by her literary executor and co-editor of the posthumous diaries, Hazel Holt:

"The effect of the so-called Swinging Sixties made Barbara's novels seem unacceptable, especially to a publishing house like Cape which was beginning to specialise in what were then called 'contemporary' novels and whose list, as Barbara wryly remarked, consisted mainly of 'men and Americans'. In 1963 they rejected her novel *An Unsuitable Attachment*. 'Of course,' she wrote to Philip Larkin, 'it may be that this book is much worse than my others, though they didn't say so.' She would have been, as she always had been, willing to make any revisions her publisher thought necessary, but no one made any such suggestions.

"The unexpectedness and finality of this blow (since in that particular literary climate no other publisher would take it) severely damaged her self-confidence. She felt that it was her failure as a writer that was the reason for the rejection rather than that the times were unpropitious for her kind of novel, and for a while she mistrusted her own talents as well as her critical judgement" (Pym, 1984d:213).

In this study only two reviews have been traced prior to 1977, the year of Pym's resurrection as a cult novelist. The only recourse has been to the aforementioned diaries, published posthumously in 1984 as *A Very Private Eye: The Diaries, Letters and Notebooks of Barbara Pym*, which yield snippets of information with regard to Pym's early literary prognosis.

The entry for 4 September 1933, while Barbara was an undergraduate at Oxford, foreshadows *Crampton Hodnet* (published posthumously in 1985): "Reading Gertrude Trevelyan's novel *Hothouse*. I desperately want to write an Oxford novel - but I must see first that my emotions are simmered down fairly well" (Pym, 1984d:25). Perhaps *Crampton Hodnet* could be regarded as an early prototype of the "campus novel"; debatable though this may be, we have in this entry some evidence of a critical faculty at work, the notion of "emotion recollected in tranquillity". Apparent spontaneity, therefore, is the result of a process of reflection and revision, and the neoclassic characteristics of wit and decorum, rather than romantic excess, are intrinsic to Pym's writing.

## 2.2 The early novels

Barbara Pym's first published novel was *Some Tame Gazelle*, and the diary entry for 1 September 1934 reads as follows: "Sometime in July I began writing a story about Hilary and me as spinsters of fiftyish . . . So I am going on with it and one day it may become a book" (Pym, 1984d:44). However, dejection was to set in soon; at the end of 1935 Pym writes: "Today I had two stories rejected by the *London Mercury*, so that I only need my novel back from Gollancz to complete everything . . . I want Liebe but I would be satisfied if

my novel could be published", and on 2 January 1936 she notes glumly: "My novel came back from Gollancz with a polite note" (Pym, 1984d:55-56). At last, in August 1936, a more cheerful and propitious entry reads: "Last Monday I had a letter from Jonathan Cape - saying that he was interested in my novel *Some Tame Gazelle* and thought he might be able to offer to publish it if I would make some alterations. They are quite minor ones . . ." (Pym, 1984d:60), and a few days later, in a letter to Henry Harvey, an Oxford flame, and the prototype of Archdeacon Hoccleve in *Some Tame Gazelle*, she writes: "I am greatly cheered by this, but only vaguely hopeful. Why should Jonathan Cape want to publish my novel, when Macmillan and Methuen didn't? (I don't count Chatto and Gollancz as nobody but a fool would have published it in its early form.) And anyway, I'm only twenty-three. But all the same I shall probably cry if Cape don't take it" (Pym, 1984d:60).

The war intervened, and publication of *Some Tame Gazelle* was shelved. However, in 1938 a number of drafts of unpublished novels emerged. In a letter to Jock (Robert Liddell, an old Oxford friend) she wrote in 1940:

"You are so nice wishing good things for my poor novels. I do not see much prospect of getting them published just now, though I believe they are the kind of novels some people might like to read at a time like this . . . I am now getting into shape the novel I have been writing during this last year, and which I have had to lay aside because I have been so busy [provisionally entitled *Crampton Hodnet*]. It is about North Oxford and has some bits as good as anything I ever did . . . I have also done nearly half of a novel about the war. There is a nice vicar's wife called Jane, her daughter Flora . . . And there is always my poor *Tame Gazelle*" (Pym, 1984d:100).

More despondency followed in 1942: "I have written a story called 'Goodbye, Balkan Capital' which I have sent to *Penguin New Writing*, but three weeks have passed and I have heard nothing. Shall I ever succeed - I begin to doubt it sometimes and now is a hopeless time to try" (Pym, 1984d:106).

### 2.3 The early published novels

In 1946, after the war, and subsequent to her discharge from the WRNS, Pym joined the International African Institute as Assistant Editor of the journal *Africa*. Her colleague at the Institute, and life-long friend, Hazel Holt, points out that the anthropologists, linguists and librarians she encountered there furnished profuse comic potential for her novels:

"She created a comic world around them, embroidering the few facts she knew about the various authors and reviewers into a splendid fantasy so that it was often difficult to remember what was real and what was not. ('I couldn't ask W. if his mother was better because I couldn't remember if we'd invented her.')

She was quick to pick out the ridiculous phrase (anthropological and, especially, linguistic studies are very rich in these) thereby making what would have been a tedious task of proof-reading or editing a constant delight to those who worked with her" (Pym, 1984d:183).

The diary entries for 1946-1948 are few and slight. Changed circumstances (the nursing and death of her mother), a new life and career in London, and the revision of *Some Tame Gazelle* left little time for personal confidences.

In November 1949, she noted that Cape's readers, Daniel George and William Plomer, were both in agreement over *Some Tame Gazelle*, and in May 1950, was able to write to her old friend Henry Harvey in Gottingen: "Here is my book . . . published today - with the author's compliments. I don't know if it will amuse you but hope that perhaps it may" (Pym, 1984d:187).

As noted previously, reviews of Pym's early novels are scant. Hazel Holt, however, notes in her introduction to the diaries of 1948 to 1963 that *Some Tame Gazelle* enjoyed "a general critical success":

"'Delightfully amusing,' wrote one critic in *The Guardian*, 'but no more to be described than a delicious taste or smell'" (Pym, 1984d:184).

*Excellent Women*, generally regarded as the most popular of her novels and archetypal of her genre, was published in 1952, was a Book Society Choice, and was subsequently serialised in the BBC's *Woman's Hour*. *Jane and Prudence* (1953), *Less than Angels* (1955), *A Glass of Blessings* (1958) and *No Fond Return of Love* (1961) followed. According to Holt, they were "praised by the critics, enjoyed a modest financial success and delighted an ever-growing circle of admirers and enthusiasts" (Pym, 1984d:184).

However, we learn from a letter that "[Jock] liked *Jane and Prudence* very much. But the Americans and Continentals most definitely *don't* and now I am feeling a little bruised! In answer to my enquiries Cape tells me that 8 [sic] Americans and 10 [sic] Continental publishers saw and 'declined' (that seems to

be the word) *Excellent Women* and they are still plodding on with *J & P*. So humble yourself, Miss Pym, and do not give yourself airs" (Pym, 1984d:191).

In an early review in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 1953, a scant 16 lines are devoted to *Jane and Prudence*, with the anonymous reviewer somewhat damning the novel with faint praise:

"Some incidents occur; they are not easy to recall after one has closed the book. A former Oxford don, Jane is highly literate, as indeed her creator evidently is. For Miss Pym writes well, and this chronicle of her heroine's doings is really very small beer indeed to have come from a brewery in which Oxford, a taste for Jane's Austen, and an observant eye have all played their parts" (Anon., 1953:625).

This oblique reference to Jane Austen - it is not clear whether the reviewer is referring to the heroine's adoption of the literary role model of Emma Woodhouse, or whether he is comparing Pym's talents to Austen's - was to be the first of many comparisons between Barbara Pym and Jane Austen.

*A Glass of Blessings* was published on 14 April 1958. A disgruntled entry in the diary reads: "Only 3 [sic] reviews up to 29 April, none wholly good. My humour deserts me when I am dealing with romance, I am tone-deaf to dialogue, am moderately amusing. Reviewers all women. Young?" (Pym, 1984d:199).

The publication in 1961 of *No Fond Return of Love* led to a life-long correspondence with the poet Philip Larkin, later responsible for Pym's literary renaissance. In her first letter to Larkin she wrote:

"Thank you very much for your letter. I was very pleased and flattered to think that you should have had the idea of writing an essay on my books and am grateful to you for telling me about it, even though it was too late to do it. Perhaps, if you still feel like doing it, I could let you know when my next is ready - (so far only four chapters written). It will be my seventh which seems a significant number.

"N.F.R.L. [sic] . . . has had a better reception than I thought it would have, and your letter certainly encourages me to go on" (Pym, 1984d:201).

Subsequent letters to Philip Larkin indicate that no substantial criticism of the novels had appeared. In a reply to his enquiry she wrote:

"No - nobody has ever written about the 'art' of my books - sometimes they have been well reviewed - other times not at all. *Excellent Women* was best received - *A Glass of Blessings* worst!" (Pym, 1984d:204). Larkin was subsequently to designate *A Glass of Blessings* as the subtlest of her novels.

To a friend Bob (Robert Smith, who was later to write the first piece of substantial Pym criticism), she complained of not selling sufficient copies of *No Fond Return of Love* (1962) to warrant publication in paperback: "How nice of you to want my new novel - a few people do, I think, though not really enough" (Pym, 1984d:207). Late in 1962 she received an auspicious letter from Lady David Cecil, wife of another subsequent mentor, complimenting her on *No Fond Return of Love*.

The ill-fated *An Unsuitable Attachment* was despatched to Cape early in 1963. Pym's letter to Larkin is premonitory:

"I sent my novel to Cape last week but don't know yet what they think of it. I feel it can hardly come up to *Catch 22* or *The Passion Flower Hotel* for selling qualities but I hope they will realise that it is necessary for a good publisher's list to have something milder" (Pym, 1984d:210).

The response of the publishers to the novel has already been noted. In 1968 Pym completed *The Sweet Dove Died*; in spite of its more *risqué* theme it was rejected by various publishers. "Not the kind of novel", wrote one, "to which people are turning" (Pym, 1984d:213).

#### 2.4 Critical acclaim

In October 1971 Robert Smith published the first substantial critical appreciation of her work. In an article with the rather twee title "How Pleasant to Know Miss Pym", he demonstrated that Pym novels were something more than simply "books for bad days" (1971:67).

Her *mundus muliebris*, the detailed observation of the minutiae of middle-class daily life honed by the needle of wit, constitutes the Pym novel. Although the world she depicts is a closed one - "unsuspected by those who do not penetrate the mysteries of Bloomsbury or the Inns of Court" (Smith, 1971:64) - the themes are universal:

". . . love thwarted or satisfied (even fashionable homosexuality is here, just under the surface in one of the books); worldly ambition, nearly always academic ambition, and the complications which ensue; the challenge of the daily routine - and Miss Pym was first in the field in the pre-occupation with the kitchen sink, over which her female characters so often come into their own" (Smith, 1971:64).

Her delineation of character, too, is exact. Pym's most notable creation is that of a new kind of heroine, the "excellent women" who people most of her novels, and whose dreariness is mitigated by wit. Female characters are foils to the caricatured race of men, "bearably selfish, charmingly abstracted, unconsciously demanding, always calling for, and usually receiving from some woman somewhere, devotion and service" (Smith, 1971:65).

The form and style of the novels conform to classical proportions and are "well-bred": some 70,000 words in length, twenty to twenty-five chapters.<sup>1</sup> An arresting phrase or idea is reserved for the beginning and end of each (Smith, 1971:66). This puts one in mind of Jane Austen once more, and Smith does in fact comment on the resemblance:

". . . when an assessment of Miss Pym is to be embarked upon, a greater name is usually invoked (sometimes apologetically, but apparently irresistibly) - that of Jane Austen. Can Miss Pym be claimed as the Jane Austen of our times? In some ways, of course, this seems presumptuous, but in other ways it is too modest since, though her canvas is small, her range and scope are considerably

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1 Pym therefore appears to strive for eighteenth-century "correctness", and is sedulous in her observation of the demands of stylistic decorum.

wider than those of Jane Austen . . . Her works are miniatures, exquisitely, nearly perfectly, done. But beyond this, it is her wit and her sense of the ridiculous which make her books both delicious and distinguished. Above all, they must be ranked as comic novels, but the comedy is realistic and demonstrates again and again the happiness and merriment which can be found in the trivia of the daily round - that 'purchase of a sponge-cake' about which Jane Austen felt it proper to write to Cassandra" (Smith, 1971:63-68).

Barbara Pym's attempts to publish *An Unsuitable Attachment* proved fruitless; publisher after publisher rejected it. Despite the general gloom engendered by countless rejection slips, Pym's wit is still apparent in this letter to Philip Larkin:

"Since I last wrote I have sent my book to Longmans, where I had an introduction, but they have decided not to publish it, and say what one had suspected, that 'novels like *An Unsuitable Attachment*, despite their qualities, are getting increasingly difficult to sell', though they did say it was 'most excellently written'. And of course the more one looks at the books now being published, not to mention the stirring events of this year [the Profumo scandal], the less likely it seems that anyone, except a very select few, would want to read a novel by me. I could almost offer my services to Dr Stephen Ward as a ghost writer, for he is a Canon's son and surely I could write about his *early* years if not the later ones" (Pym, 1984d:217).

In 1964 she thanked Philip Larkin for having spoken of her to John Betjeman (a kind reviewer). Larkin had admitted in a previous letter to liking Faustina, the cat in *An Unsuitable Attachment*. By that time she had made a start on the

autobiographical *The Sweet Dove Died*. The BBC serialised *No Fond Return of Love* in October 1966, which prompted her to make the dreary round of publishers with *An Unsuitable Attachment* once more. The publishing houses to which she had submitted *The Sweet Dove Died* returned the manuscript of *An Unsuitable Attachment* with letters of regret, contending that its publication was a risky commercial venture.

Jonathan Cape negotiated limited library editions of her published novels with Chivers of Bath, and this offered some small consolation - "the name of Barbara Pym not totally sunk in oblivion" (Pym, 1984d:235). She was briefly encouraged by the publishing house of Peter Davis, who, though not willing to publish *The Sweet Dove Died*, called it "very accomplished", a "minor tour de force" (Pym, 1984d:259). Less kind comments were "decadent", "clever-clever", and "obsessed with trivia" (Pym, 1984d:259-260).

#### 2.5 "The novelist most touted by one's most literate friends"

In January 1977 the *Times Literary Supplement* published a list, selected by eminent literary figures, of the most underrated writers of the century. Barbara Pym was the only living author to be named by two people, Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil. "Partly because of the publicity, partly because the literary climate had gradually changed and partly because there had always been a strong band of faithful readers, her books were, virtually overnight, in demand again" (Pym, 1984d:291).

The diary entries from 1977 until her death from cancer in 1980 clearly reveal Pym's meteoric rise from relative obscurity to a novelist of cult proportions. Macmillan published *Quartet in Autumn* (1977), and *The Sweet Dove Died* (1978). *A Few Green Leaves* and the ill-starred *An Unsuitable Attachment* were published posthumously, as were the early *Crampton Hodnet* and Pym's misguided attempt at trendiness, *An Academic Question*. It was with considerable gratification that Pym could report: "I am being taught . . . in an American university!" (Pym, 1984d:291).

The euphoria is apparent from a scan of the diaries and letters of 1977 until her death. Despite this sudden limelight, her quirky sense of humour did not desert her, as may be seen from the following letter to Larkin: "Caroline Moorehead from *The Times* has asked if she can come and see me. Hilary says we must clean the windows! Do you have a window cleaner in Hull?" (Pym, 1984d:297). Her sense of "the trivial round, the common task" never deserted her.

She met Lord David Cecil on 19 May 1977; an indication of his estimation is discerned in the diary entry for that day: "He told me he had been inspired to write after reading Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians* (just as I had been inspired by *Crome Yellow*). He said that Anthony Powell and I were the only novelists he would buy without reading first" (Pym, 1984d:300).

The reviews of *Quartet in Autumn* were by and large favourable. The day after publication she wrote to Philip Larkin: "I had a marvellous day - lovely weather and plenty of drink and even a telegram from James Wright in Macmillan. And of course the day before, articles in *Times* and *Guardian* by

those clever young women. Caroline Moorehead told me how hard it was to find writers to write about these days so perhaps I have been a godsend to somebody! Actually the *Guardian* article is even better, I think. And surely those photographs show that slightly mad jolly fun face? . . . Two good reviews so far" (Pym, 1984d:305).

In a letter to her earliest critic, Robert Smith, she wrote:

"Things go well, still, with more good reviews of *Quartet*. The only less favourable ones have been in the *Sunday Telegraph* - not bad but the woman obviously didn't like BP type novels - and the *New Statesman* - again not bad, but the reviewer thought my novels must have had mainly Oxbridge readers . . . *TLS* has been very favourable, also (surprisingly) *Financial Times*. And a very nice thing - I had a letter from the Editor of the *Church Times* saying that although they didn't now normally have space for novel reviews he was going to review mine in November . . . if only because I had given so many splendid free commercials for the *Church Times*" (Pym, 1984d:307).

It might be pointed out here that *Quartet in Autumn* was a departure in theme and mood from her previous novels - a move that was not appreciated by all Pym aficionados. About the reception of *The Sweet Dove Died* she was doubtful - "I expect people will find the *SD* totally different from *Quartet* and I daresay it will not be liked, but you can't win, really, because quite a lot of people don't like *Quartet* at all because it isn't light and funny like some of my earlier ones" (Pym, 1984d:313). Despite this pessimism the new novel was "gratifyingly well received" and reached third place in the *Sunday Times* list of best sellers.

To her surprise and gratification, Pym was made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in October 1978. Early in 1978 Penguin issued her early novels in paperback. By now the Americans had acquired a taste for Pym, and her novels were published by Dutton in the United States. Despite "super American reviews for *E.W.* and *Quartet in Autumn*, including a long one in the *New Yorker* from John Updike" (Pym, 1984d:324), she was assailed by doubts: "I daresay the Americans won't like that book [*The Sweet Dove Died*], perhaps Leonora could only be credible in England?" (Pym, 1984d:324). She was invited to lecture in the United States in 1979, but by that time was too ill to accept. However, one of her last entries in the diary retains the droll perception which characterises her novels:

"As I am not feeling well at the moment . . . I find myself reflecting on the mystery of life and death and the way we all pass through this world in a kind of procession. The whole business as inexplicable and mysterious as the John Le Carré serial, *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, which we are all finding so baffling" (Pym, 1984d:331).

## 2.6 Criticism: 1977 to date

Given Pym's fallow years, and the circumstances of her re-entry into the literary world, a mere chronological survey of the very substantial number of reviews of Barbara Pym's novels after her canonisation in 1977 is unlikely to be as fruitful as examining the reviews and criticism of each novel in her considerable oeuvre. It should be borne in mind that Pym's novels were published in America only after 1977, a considerable period after the appearance of the

early novels in Britain. This study therefore undertakes to survey the critical field with regard to each novel.

### 2.6.1 *Some Tame Gazelle*

Michael Gorra (1983:18), in a review entitled "Restraint is the Point", comments on the complete control of the novel: "*Some Tame Gazelle* is a completely controlled and realized consideration, of the themes to which this unusually consistent writer returned in her nine succeeding novels . . . This novel has all the quiet skill, the tough, reasonable wit and, above all, the calm integrity of Barbara Pym's best work."

She shares with Jane Austen the theme of self-recognition and self-knowledge, thereby nullifying any possible accusations of complacency. "Compression" and "delicacy" are key characteristics of Pym's style, and momentous realisations are deftly woven into the seemingly uneventful surface of the narrative.

Michiko Kakutani calls this novel "lovely" and "muted" (1983a). Like Gorra, he notes that the style is assured and does not read like an apprentice work. "The author's voice is already steady and quietly assured, deft in its manipulation of irony and social detail. And the themes that would animate the author's later work - the perils of love and the tendency of 'excellent women' to form 'unsuitable attachments' - are also delineated in full" (Kakutani, 1983a:19).

Kakutani selects a musical metaphor and is loath to abandon it: "Though modest in scale and ambition, the novels are all perfectly tuned in timbre and pitch, and like a fine harpsichord, afford the reader delicate pleasures that resonate insidiously in the mind" (1983a:19).

The emotional restraint of the novel is a merciful relief from the "noisy passions and hectic demands of self-fulfillment" of the characters of contemporary fiction. Other adjectives which characterise the novel are "palpable" and "real", "tidy" and "class-conscious", and it is ultimately a novel of propriety and good taste. From Kakutani's appraisal it would appear that neoclassic notions of decorum (viz. "propriety" and "good taste") are the hallmarks of Pym's narrative style.

The remaining reviews are brief. *Publishers Weekly* calls Pym's earlier work "subtly witty", and feels that Pym fans will find this "diverting tale" only mildly amusing. Clerics and "excellent women" have become Pym trademarks. "While this is not Pym at her sophisticated best, it marked an auspicious debut - and thus is an ironic post mortem for a writer no longer obscure" (Bannon, 1983b:55-56).<sup>1</sup>

*Booklist* finds the novel "thoroughly Pymesque", "exquisitely charming", and comments on the novel's circumscribed world (Hooper, 1983:1166).

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1 As has been noted earlier, none of Barbara Pym's novels appeared in America before 1977, and several of the early novels were issued there for the first time after her death in 1980 - hence this somewhat chronologically cryptic review of Pym's first novel.

The *New Yorker* paraphrases, but does not characterise, and concedes that Barbara Pym is different ("only a Barbara Pym heroine could think such thoughts, as readers of her nine other novels . . . have come to appreciate" (Anon., 1983d:112).

Mary Ellen Quinn (1983:1383) observes that the novel's interest lies in Pym's close observation of her characters and their ordinary lives, while Pamela Marsh (1983:B9/1) uses adjectives like "shrewd", "mocking", "affectionate", "quiet", and "witty" to describe Pym's depiction of the "Jane Austen-like" lives of her characters. The novel reiterates one of Pym's favourite themes, that of unrequited love which has nothing to do with sex, and which flourishes only when it is hopeless.

The critical consensus regarding Pym's first novel therefore seems to be that it is a restrained, deft, witty depiction of the unremarkable lives of unremarkable characters - "slightly dotty", the *New Yorker* admits. It is reminiscent of Jane Austen because of its narrow confines, but more importantly because of the growing self-awareness and recognition which come to its protagonists.

### 2.6.2 *Excellent Women*

Of *Excellent Women*, first published in 1952, Barbara Bannon (1978a:80) comments: ". . . an early novel from a fine writer . . . Pym's singular world is a lonely, bittersweet familiar place. She travels it with rueful wit, views the human landscape with a wise, sharp, compassionate eye." The solitary ones are

the observers of life, rather than the protagonists, but their very solitude is comforting.

*Booklist* comments that Pym's novels deserve wide attention from American readers. Of *Excellent Women*: "There is an old-fashioned manner to Pym's writing that is neither quaint nor stuffy. With understated passion, she comprehends the wrestlings of desire and emotion within individuals" (Anon., 1978a:355).

Polly Brodie is less lenient, preferring the infinitely more sombre *Quartet in Autumn*, which she terms "an impressive novel". Although Mildred's emotional awakening is drawn with insight, "the other characters are colorless, and the gray uneventfulness of the life portrayed infects the style" (Brodie, 1978:2135).

Isa Kapp (1983) finds *Excellent Women* Pym's most benign novel, a "compound of marinating self-deprecation and salty accuracy . . . to counteract her mild manners" (1983:237). She indicates that Pym's wane in fortunes during the 'sixties was due to her admirable restraint: "Barbara Pym is not much attracted to chaos, whether linguistic or emotional, and nurtures instead an implausible fascination for everything that is orderly and habitual" (1983:237). Kapp also points out that women like Mildred (the "excellent women" of the title) are dignified anachronisms, and therefore almost unimaginable in America. However, ". . . the real upshot of the matter is that Barbara Pym sees woman's place from a very strange perspective: to her, this is really a woman's world, and men are the weaker sex" (Kapp, 1983:238). The radius in which these characters move is startlingly narrow, and there is more *not* happening in them than actually happening.

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Rosalind Wade (1978:46) intimates that a study of Pym's novels underlines the insidious and catastrophic change in social conditions in England; at the same time *Excellent Women* emerges as one of the most brilliant comedy novels of the century.

John Updike, not unexpectedly, is less amused. Pym's world is "wanly Christian" (1979:116); like Kapp, he comments on the almost total absence of action. "It would be hard to imagine a more timid world than that of 'Excellent Women,' or a novel wherein closer to nothing happens" (1979:117). He too remarks upon the resemblance to Jane Austen: "Miss Pym has been compared to Jane Austen, yet there is a virile country health in the Austen novels, and some vivid marital prospects for her blooming heroines" (1979:117). An unfair jibe, surely, as most of Pym's heroines are paired off as surely as are Jane Austen's, and with the same nagging doubt as the reader is often left with in Austen's novels. As Jane, Margaret Drabble's heroine in *The Waterfall*, remarks:

How I dislike Jane Austen. How deeply I deplore her desperate wit. Her moral tone dismays me: my heart goes out to the vulgarity of those little card parties that Mrs Phillips gave at Meryton, to that squalid rowdy hole at Portsmouth where Fanny Price used to live, to Lydia at fifteen gaily flashing her wedding ring through the carriage window, to Frank Churchill, above all to Frank Churchill, lying and deceiving and proffering embarrassing extravagant gifts. Emma got what she deserved, in marrying Mr Knightley. What can it have been like, in bed with Mr Knightley? Sorrow awaited that woman: she would have done better to steal Frank Churchill, if she could (Drabble, 1980:57-58).

Mildred, of *Excellent Women*, wins the upright but dour Everard Bone!

However, "Mildred Lathbury is one of the last . . . of the great narrating English virgins, and though she tells us she is 'not at all like Jane Eyre,' her tale has some of the power of, say, the portion of 'Bleak House' narrated by Esther Summerson - the power, that is, of virtue, with its artistic complement of perfect moral pitch and crystalline discriminations" (Updike, 1979:118).

Given Updike's own novels, it is not surprising that he should conclude by noting that Barbara Pym offers us characters with strikingly modest sex drives, and "'Excellent Women,' arriving on these shores in a heyday of sexual hype, is a startling reminder that solitude may be chosen, and that a lively, full novel can be constructed entirely within the precincts of that regressive virtue, feminine patience" (1979:119). Although Barbara Pym enthused about "super American reviews . . . including a long one . . . from John Updike" (Pym, 1984d:324), Updike's review is curiously uneven, concluding as it does with this trite piece of doggerel:

Pym and Lem,<sup>1</sup>  
Lem and Pym -  
There's little love  
In her or him.  
Out on a limb  
With Pym and Lem  
One hugs oneself  
Instead of them.

A.L. Rowse reiterates the contention of Updike, that the excesses of the 'sixties have made the saturated reader of contemporary fiction appreciate the subtleties

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1 Stanislaw Lem, the Polish writer of a thriller, *The Chain of Chance*, reviewed by Updike in the same article.

and finesse of Barbara Pym, and his assessment of Pym is sufficiently important to be quoted at length:

"That is one of the advantages of a subtle writer where everything is toned down as against the appalling crudity and obviousness, the outrageous barrage (with its law of diminishing returns) of so much contemporary literature, if literature it can be called, as Miss Pym would say.

"The Kitchen Sink School, the squalor of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, the brash climb up to *Room at the Top*, the trash-bins in which Samuel Beckett's people end their *Happy Days*; the alcoholism and drugs, the murders and incest, of the Butcher's Shop School; the obsessive tedium of a Henry Miller.

"Does it never strike these writers that exaggeration, piling it on - always trying to go one worse - has a diminishing effect aesthetically, one simply ceases to react or care?

"Whereas the *piano* effects of Miss Pym's crisp comedy register; one cares for *her* characters and what happens to them, they are so real and truthfully rendered. Her books are a distillation of life; and if in water-colour, well, what better than the best English water-colours?" (Rowse, 1977:732).

Anne Duchêne postulates that of all Pym's works, *Excellent Women* is still the most felicitous (1977:1096), and concedes that Miss Pym has always been an expert in loneliness and in High Anglican Comedy (whatever that might entail). Irony enriches her novels.

As cited in the introduction to this study, Lord David Cecil considered *Excellent Women* and *A Glass of Blessings* "the finest examples of high comedy to have appeared in England during the past 75 years"; however, Victoria Glendinning (1978:8) argues that the mildness of *Excellent Women* prevents it from being "high comedy". Glendinning finds Mildred (the "excellent woman") an anomaly; she is at once dim yet also observant and critical. The irony in the novel "is not the steel jab of feminism, merely a mild, fine irony toward the ways of the world" (Glendinning, 1978:8). Glendinning also finds the later *Quartet in Autumn* a finer book, but acknowledges that it is in the ironic exploration of "the experience of not having" that Pym's art and originality lie. Although Philip Larkin has pointed out that Pym's men are grotesquely insensitive, stingy and selfish (1977:260), her heroines possibly lack the gutsy raunchiness associated with much current feminist writing.

Karl Miller (1978:24) points out that Mildred, initially faltering and fragile, evolves as shrewd, cool, self-possessed and stylish. The parallel with Jane Austen is also analysed in considerable detail:

"Women like Mildred have been important to the England which has insulted them, which calls them, using the words that Lawrence used of Jane Austen, 'narrow-gutted spinsters.'"

Miller points out that Pym's novels (notably *Excellent Women* and *Quartet in Autumn*) could be thought to have originated in themes and initiatives of two hundred years ago, when an interest in victims arose. What is meant by the frequent comparisons with Jane Austen is that Pym is a novelist of manners

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"who writes about marriage and marriageability with the unromantic eye of a noticing, 'positive' spinster" (Miller, 1978:24). He continues:

"There is a current reading of Jane Austen which holds that she is moved by the romantic attitudes with which she finds fault, and of Miss Pym, too, it can be claimed that she is both unromantic and romantic" (Miller, 1978:24).

Miller likens *Excellent Women* to *Mansfield Park*: like Fanny who is exposed to the blandishments of the Crawfords, but is justly rewarded in marriage and material goods, so Mildred, initially beguiled by the glamorous but feckless Napiers, eventually too gets her man. The novel also warrants comparison with the Gothic novels of the Brontës:

"At the same time, there is more than a touch of the Gothic novel in *Excellent Women*: the grand names conferred on Everard and on Rockingham Napier suggest the Cavalier strain which is evident there, the heroine's faltering and venturing are Gothic acts and words; and Everard is the hostile male of the genre who grows into her lover and savior. He is Mildred's Rochester, just as the pseudo-orphan Allegra Gray is her vampire" (Miller, 1978:24).

Lotus Snow, in an article entitled "The Trivial Round, the Common Task: Barbara Pym's Novels", concentrates on the minutiae which comprise Pym's world, and which assume monumental stature. Mildred is one of Pym's many "excellent women"; Pym's men are largely characters for women's unrequited love. They consist of clergymen, anthropologists, dandies, and homosexuals.

"Like her anthropologists, whom she gently mocks for their nimbus of esoteric detachment, Miss Pym scrupulously notes and records the behavior of 'ordinary people, people who have no claim to fame whatsoever.' . . . [She] distances her characters . . . but treats them with a warm compassion and an irony that is always gentle . . . A specialist in loneliness, Miss Pym chronicles with poignant comedy the drama of minutiae: 'the trivial round, the common task'" (Snow, 1980:92).

The diverse reviews of *Excellent Women* focus on character - that of the "excellent women" and their undeserving men, leavened by Pym's muted but sure ironic touch. Kapp (1983:240) warns that although Pym does write mainly about spinsters of both sexes who are timid, reserved and unenterprising, she is never trivial, never lacking in suspense. She extends the omnipresent Austen comparison:

"Much more than a comedy of manners, it is a drama of disposition, willpower, and ethics, a closer relation of E.M. Forster and Henry James than of those busier and giddier novelists with whom this writer is usually linked: Angela Thirkell, Anthony Powell, and Iris Murdoch. Miss Pym does not sermonize us in quite the way that Jane Austen did" (Kapp, 1983:240).

According to Barbara Brothers, Pym's art is subversive, as her gentle ironies mock the romantic paradigm. Hers is not the pen of the satirist, for it is too compassionate (1984:79).

2.6.3. *Jane and Prudence*

There are relatively few reviews of Pym's third novel, *Jane and Prudence*, other than criticism contained in the more comprehensive articles discussed earlier. The shorter reviews all coincide with the release of the novel in the United States. Barbara Bannon of *Publishers Weekly* (1981b:59) calls it "a gentle, folksy story where attention is focused on the manners and morals of a quiet English country town". There are no "vigorous characters or lively plot", and Jane's matchmaking attempts provide the only mild surprise in the novel. No grist to the mill of the feminists here either, for "we can be amused by the quaint, unliberated ideas of Pym's women about themselves and the menfolk they rather patronizingly try to manage" (Bannon, 1981b:59). Bannon appears to ignore the fact that *Jane and Prudence* was first published in the early 'fifties, long before the more strident of the feminists got under way.

D.P Donavin (1981b:179) attempts a paraphrase, nearly always impossible in the case of a Pym novel, and concedes that this is a beguiling novel which will enchant American readers. "Pym's appealing characters carry this modest plot beautifully, with charm and wit" (Donavin, 1981b:179).

Judith Sutton (1981:2154) calls the novel one of Pym's most delightful, for "Pym's understated sense of humor is particularly in evidence here and her readers will find themselves charmed and amused".

Pym makes Jane more than merely a clown in this very funny novel; she gives her a sense of humour and makes her a heroine (Anon., 1981e:188).

The most perceptive piece of criticism comes from Anatole Broyard (1982:27). Jane is a typical example of what he calls *The Woman Who Overflows Her Situation* (his capitals). "This woman, this archetype, this unsung heroine of the ordinary life, is always reaching for a further reference, always trying, in E.M. Forster's sense, to connect the low and the high, the near and the far, the everyday and the eternal."

Jane, with her confounding quotations, is somewhat like a searchlight, rather than the dim halo which a proper vicar's wife should be. In this novel, too, the diminished stature of men is a recurrent theme. Pym treats her male characters with affection, although she sees them as being blinded by complacency. Broyard elegantly epitomises the essence of Pym's irony in his concluding comments:

"To call Jane a fine example of Miss Pym's irony is not enough, because every serious writer, good or bad, is ironical these days. What is so pleasing about Miss Pym's irony is the fact that, like Miss Doggett's clothes, it is specially fitted; it is exactly Jane's shape and nobody else's. It is cozy and opposed to cosmic irony, warm, not cold, sweet rather than bitter. It is not a grandiose defeat but an incorrigible enthusiasm running through life like a dog chasing a bird."<sup>1</sup>

In her overview of the novels, Lotus Snow comments on the intelligent heroine, as typified by Jane, as well as the "less excellent women"; women more desirous of being loved than they are capable of loving (Snow, 1980:83-87). The

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1 Brooker's irony would appear to be radically different.

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excessively handsome Fabian Driver falls into what Snow terms the category of the dandies; the dandies in Pym's novels do not fall in love with excellent women. In the case of Fabian Driver, Miss Morrow, who eventually stoops to low cunning to ensnare him, is too sharp to fall into this latter category.

*Jane and Prudence*, therefore, becomes a vehicle, albeit a deft and light one, for Pym's views on men, and what are commonly perceived as "men's needs". This too is stressed by Brothers (1984:62).

Isa Kapp notes that Jane is not a typical Pym heroine, "having been saved by marriage from too much tidiness and self-absorption, and by poetry from parochialism" (1983:238). The novel is "full of natural hilarity, toned up with that singularly British resistance to dolours and depressions" (Kapp, 1983:238).

Both Brothers and Kapp remark on how women's romantic notions are formed by literature. Jane, with her often wildly inappropriate quotations from the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, and her romantic notions about living in a country parish borrowed from Trollope's novels, is possibly one of Pym's most vital and engaging heroines.

*Jane and Prudence* is a different novel about the sexes, not so much about the excellent women with no great expectations of romantic love, but about those who discover that their princes are frogs after all.

#### 2.6.4. *Less than Angels*

Pym's next novel, *Less than Angels*, has as its milieu the academic world of the anthropologists - the world in which Barbara Pym spent the greater part of her professional working life.

Barbara Bannon calls Pym's novels "lapidary reconstructions [a felicitous phrase] of English middle-class life". Pym is "top-drawer" in this novel, in which "a gaggle of anthropologists are observed in their natural habitat, a London research center where their idiosyncratic tribal rites of mating and manipulating provoke amusement and wonder. The spokespersons for Pym's wry evaluations of spinsters and bachelors - Catherine Oliphant, a writer, and her housemate, pottering anthropologist, Tom Mallow - are strangely real" (Bannon, 1980b:43).

W.B. Hooper says that the novel is not Pym's best, yet "with typically shrewd satire, an intricate plot, and characters so apparently ordinary that their very ordinariness is attractive, Pym depicts the amorous adventures of a circle of acquaintances - anthropologists, for the most part - that includes spinsters, private eccentrics, and young men and women in need of pairing up. *Less than Angels* is in no way dated; its continued freshness is to be marvelled at" (1981:615).

In a more perspicacious review, David Kubal (1981:462-463) emphasises, as other critics have done, the innate ability of Pym's women to cope, thus making them infinitely superior to the weaker race of men.

*Less than Angels*, feels Kubal, may be Pym's best novel, for it is a "more richly humorous and generous book than the ones she wrote immediately before her death" (1981:462). The novels Kubal refers to are *Quartet in Autumn* and *The Sweet Dove Died*; both sombre, and sophisticated and brittle, they marked a departure from her accustomed style.

*Less than Angels* "offers the prospect of a number of compensating pleasures, some moderate, others rather exotic, designed to allay the discontents of a highly civilized life" (Kubal, 1981:462). In all Pym's novels, moderate compensations are extremely important in making life bearable. (Marcia, in *Quartet in Autumn*, lacks these, and goes under.) Indeed, Catherine Oliphant, the independent character of *Less than Angels*, frequently reflects on this.

The novel becomes an interplay between men and women, security and independence:

"Striking a balance between the needs of pleasure and of autonomy constitutes the spiritual adventure of the modern self. That Barbara Pym can imagine the achievement of such an effort, done with grace and humor, is itself a rare accomplishment in contemporary literature. It also should alert the reader to the fact that her comic novels of manners are informed by a subtle intelligence that is serious, germane, and, more than anything else, healthy" (Kubal, 1981:463).

Anna Shapiro (1983:30) comments that Catherine in *Less than Angels* is Barbara Pym's only worldly heroine. One might question this, as Leonora in *The Sweet*

*Dove Died*, although a very different creation, is certainly not one of the "excellent women".

A British reviewer has referred to Barbara Pym as "an anthropologist from the moon" (Shapiro, 1983:30). *Less than Angels* marks a departure from the world of clerics to a dissection of the academic world of the anthropologist. Although anthropologists surface in *Excellent Women*, *Less than Angels* is "a novel about anthropologists at various stages of their careers" (Snow, 1980:89).

According to Burkhart (1983:51), the scientific detachment of the anthropologist is evident: "All her [Pym's] people observe one another, obsessively, dizzyingly, even the arch-observers, the anthropologists, themselves undergoing close scrutiny." Interesting as are the clever and ironic fusions of Africa and England, the influence of anthropology is more central to Pym's techniques, than to her themes (Burkhart, 1983:50). *Curiosity, observation and detachment* indicate the influence of Pym's career on her creative process.

Reviews of previous novels commented on Pym's excellent women and less excellent men, the limited scope of her world (the drama of minutiae), the influence of literature on the expectations of her heroines, her themes of loneliness without self-pity, her wit and droll sense of the ridiculous, and her parallels with Jane Austen. In *Less than Angels*, Pym broadens her scope with a more complex plot.

It is expedient at this point to mention Snow's analysis of what Henry James called "the revivalist impulse on the fond writer's part" - the habit of introducing characters from other novels to later novels - however briefly. Snow

points out that Pym's "revivalist impulse" is not fortuitous, for her employment of this technique provides a microcosm, "the social scene in which Miss Pym can train on her people her special lens of amused irony" (Snow, 1980:92).

It is this quality, central to her novels, which invokes parallels between Pym and Jane Austen, and which may also be seen in Brookner's infinitely graver view of a lonely world.

#### 2.6.5. *A Glass of Blessings*

Barbara Pym's next novel, *A Glass of Blessings*, appeared six years later. Although Philip Larkin (1977:260) designates the book as "the subtlest of her novels" - he does not elaborate why - other critics are not fully in accord. Rosalind Wade (1978:45) finds Mildred of *Excellent Women* a more agreeable heroine:

"It [*A Glass of Blessings*] has much of the same quiet charm as the earlier novel, yet lacks the sharp-edged humour and cohesion. The centre of interest is Wilmet Forsyth, a former WREN married to a war-time colleague and living a pampered life in the home of her widowed mother-in-law. Despite every advantage and opportunity, Wilmet fails to do anything with her time other than visiting, assembling colourful 'outfits' and attending the local church. Soon, she becomes mildly involved with a personable young man who seems destined to elude her; not surprisingly, as he is a homosexual, and her realisation of this provides the novel's strongest moment. Simultaneously, Wilmet is obliged to face setting up home alone with her unexciting husband, the enterprising

mother-in-law having decided to re-marry. Inevitably, as her impeccable taste and irresistible charm are conveyed through a personal narrative, Wilmet emerges a coy, self-centred woman - defects splendidly absent from the nobly self-effacing Mildred."

Similarly, Anne Duchêne argues that Wilmet does not wholly qualify as a Pym heroine, as "her life does not require her to be brave so much as merely lucid" (1977:1096).

Self-deception and vanity are Wilmet's only vices, and "everyone but Wilmet (a perfect dear, but terribly innocent) realizes that Piers is a homosexual, though everyone is also much too nice to say so" (Toomey, 1977:18). Isa Kapp (1983:240) concedes that Pym's vices are mild ones: vanity, irritability, indifference, and condescension. Like Larkin, she finds "subtlety" the keynote of Pym's novels; self-revelation is not confined solely to the heroine:

"In *A Glass of Blessings*, we are nearly at the end of the book before the full realization comes over us that Wilmet is more than a little vain as well as unbelievably blind . . . Barbara Pym arranges for us to see Wilmet's egocentricity and not like her less, but more, because we are privy to her weakness; and she arranges for her heroine to acknowledge it without becoming dismal" (Kapp, 1983:240).

Literary analogies have not escaped the critics either; according to Barbara Brothers (1984:69), Piers Longridge is the perfect romantic subject, "brilliant, but unsuccessful, a handsome man with a Byronic touch". Karl Miller (1978:24-25) compares *A Glass of Blessings* with *Northanger Abbey*. Pym's

novel, like Austen's, resembles the kind of novel it is laughing at as Wilmet, like Catherine of *Northanger Abbey*, lacks experience, and yields to "wild imaginings".

David Kubal (1980:438) takes the comparison with Austen's *Emma* further:

"Like Jane Austen's Emma, whom Miss Pym has in mind throughout the novel, Wilmet is not so much ill-used as unused; not so much tyrannized by her class, her bureaucratic husband, Rodney, and her mother-in-law, Sybil, as spoiled by them. A beautiful woman . . . Wilmet is childish, idle, and snobbish. She is also utterly unknown to herself, unable to imagine another life, and afraid to risk herself . . ."

Piers Longridge, the "sour, moody homosexual", is her Frank Churchill, but Kubal sees further correlations. Piers's lower-class lover is his Jane Fairfax, while Mary Beamish, a genteel doer of good deeds, is Wilmet's Harriet Smith.

It might be expedient at this point to examine the term *intertextuality*, introduced by Julia Kristeva, which is used "to signify the multiple ways in which any one literary text echoes, or is inescapably linked to, other texts, whether by open or covert citations and allusions, or by the assimilation of the features of an earlier text by a later text, or simply by participation in a common stock of literary codes and conventions" (Abrams, 1981:200).

Eagleton (1983:183), commenting on post-structuralist textual analysis, has similarly noted:

"All literary texts are woven of other literary texts, not in the conventional sense that they bear the traces of 'influence' but in the more radical sense that every word, phrase or segment is a reworking of other writings which precede or surround the individual work. There is no such thing as literary 'originality', no such thing as the 'first' literary work: all literature is 'intertextual'. A specific piece of writing thus has no clearly defined boundaries: it spills over constantly into the works clustered around it, generating a hundred different perspectives which dwindle to vanishing point."

Ben-Porat (1976:107-109) defines the literary allusion as "a device for the simultaneous activation of two texts", and explains that the "simultaneous activation of the two texts thus connected results in the formation of intertextual patterns whose nature cannot be predetermined . . . The more complex process of actualizing a literary allusion can be described as a movement starting with the recognition of the marker [an element or pattern belonging to another independent text] and ending with intertextual patterning".

The intertextual/intratextual contortions of the post-structuralists therefore generate textual explications which go beyond Eliot's pronouncement that "the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (Eliot, 1949:378).

However, the desperate digging for intraliterary allusions by Pym's critics and reviewers is not always convincing, and can be taken too far. Hooper (1980:1109) suffices by calling *A Glass of Blessings* "a splendid blend of humor

and compassion - a comedy of manners, but written with deep empathy for human foibles". Similarly, Henrietta Buckmaster (1980:137) compliments Pym on her artful subtlety. "The layers of this world are onion-thin; she takes them apart gently, with no malice, not even a mild contempt . . . she makes no judgment. But it is a relentless observation, nonetheless, and the delicacy with which it is done only adds to its irrepressible nature. Insights are light and oblique but flashingly brilliant."

Several critics have commented on Pym's depiction of the 'fifties as an era of remote and well-bred serenity - a pleasant contrast to the brashness and narcissism of our times, and Cynthia Propper Seton finds that much of Pym's charm lies in its remoteness from the horrors we are exposed to in the daily mass media:

"As Alice asked what is the use of a book without pictures and conversation, we may ask what is the use of a book without rape, incest, murder, battered wives, child abuse and racial strife. When we are looking for stimulants, do we really want to fuss about Indian tea or China tea when there are whisky and drugs? Barbara Pym's fine writing is characterized by understatement, by an irony that is always gentle, and by care in the choice of every word. She records the interactions of unexceptional people impelled by ordinary motives, both petty and kind, for whom responsibility, self-discipline and discretion are rules that are still in place . . . In spite of all the good things we've now won - sexual freedom, divorce, abortion, and Telling Everything - they are still secondary to, and less interesting than, the old values - responsibility, self-discipline, discretion" (Seton, 1980:5).

Kapp (1983:240) remarks on Pym's predilection for lacing "prosaic situations irrepressibly with stanzas of wonderful poetry". Pym's quotations (she is especially drawn to the seventeenth-century metaphysicals) are never random decorations; Herbert's lines are therefore both a suitable title and an apposite epigraph.

#### 2.6.6 *No Fond Return of Love*

According to Barbara Brothers (1984:65-66), *No Fond Return of Love*, Barbara Pym's wry tale about indexers and bibliographers who work "on the dustier fringes of the academic world", is a precursor of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*. Women are educated in the humanities and social sciences, an education which according to Millett is hardly more than an extension of the "accomplishments" women once cultivated in preparation for the marriage market. Pym's women frequently land husbands through indexing and proof-reading men's books, but Pym indicates that these inept men are not necessarily intellectually superior to such "excellent women".

Pym's wry comic eye, much given to observing the eccentricities of anthropologists, here turns to indexers and bibliographers. This merited a review in *The Indexer*, and Cecilia Gordon epitomises the pathos of these characters tottering about the dustier groves of academe:

"Anyone who has ever attended a week-end conference will also be delighted by the author's minute attention to details and precise observation of the physical discomforts, social awkwardness and small anxieties of a clutch of grown-up

academics thrust together in an empty girls' boarding school. Nothing very informative is said about indexing or compiling bibliographies but all will recognize stereotypes among the delegates and be all too familiar with the pattern of lectures. Too many of these are entitled "The problems of . . .". The conference is the meat of only the first two chapters but it is the catalyst that brings the characters together, stimulates their interest in each other, and subsequently leads to some strange entanglements and emotional relationships" (Gordon, 1980:109). This is reminiscent of the infinitely more jet-set academics of David Lodge's *Small World*.

Critics have once again pounced on Pym's *penchant* for trivia; like the anthropologist Tom in *Less than Angels*, who wistfully wonders whether the world will be a better place for his thesis, so Pym casts a mocking eye over the literary scholars, collating variant readings of obscure poets. (One is reminded here of the activities of the Talbert family in J.I.M. Stewart's Oxford quintet, *A Staircase in Surrey*, with their infinitely minute literary perusals.)

As Brothers (1984:75) notes:

"Scholarly niceties mean little not only to the non-academic world; they seem to be little more than a game to those of the inner circle, the need to publish producing the unearthing of subjects whose only value is that they can be the focus of a book since they have not been treated before. As Miss Foy, librarian for a university, remarks to Viola, who has done research for Aylwin on his project: 'You were lucky to find one so obscure that not even the Americans had "done" him . . . It's quite serious, this shortage of obscure poets'."

Charles Burkhart (1983:51) points out that Dulcie Mainwaring in *No Fond Return of Love* is another example of the arch-observer, the character who lives life vicariously. In this novel, more than in any other of Pym's novels, there are self-revelatory passages in which Pym the novelist assumes a Hitchcock-like intervention in the pattern of things.

Pym, explains Burkhart, like all novelists, used her background - her job, her friends and her lovers. She made her formal comedies both thoughtful and moving, hilarious and serene, and she is both the most and the least autobiographical of writers (1983:52).

Ann Tyler (1983:2) also comments on Pym, "in her unobtrusive, quirky way", dropping in on her own story; she is "the rarest of treasures" and reminds us of the "heartbreaking silliness of daily life".

"The reigning cliché about the late Barbara Pym", says Joseph Epstein in an article enticingly and allusively entitled "Sex and the Single Novel", "is that she is the Jane Austen of our age" (1983:185). With less acerbity than Updike, Epstein comments that one is as likely to find detailed descriptions of sex in Pym's novels as come across a character in Dante wearing a Sony Walkman! According to Epstein, Barbara Pym is death on "little smugnesses, falsely earned feelings of virtue". Like poetry, Pym plots do not paraphrase.

Anatole Broyard (1983:12) comments that a comparison between Pym and Jane Austen is not always just or useful, for "they are different in as many ways as they are similar. Barbara Pym is funnier and she works more on the fringes of

society". Duleie Mainwaring is similar to her creator, in that she sees through people without feeling superior to them, and Pym's irony is therefore mixed with agape.

In indicating correspondences between Austen and Pym, Anne Tyler (1983:1) points out that Austen is kinder to her men than Pym:

"Barbara Pym's plots, like Jane Austen's, often seem drawn from the daydreams of a refreshingly sensible and not obviously beautiful woman. In these daydreams the woman who finally bags her man is also by coincidence, refreshingly sensible and not obviously beautiful. There's an important distinction, though. With Jane Austen the man was well worth the trouble. With Barbara Pym half the point is the absurdity of any woman's making so much fuss over someone as vain and pretentious as, say, Aylwin Forbes, the so-called hero of *No Fond Return of Love*."

Other correspondences with literature are also noted by Tyler; for instance, there are constant allusions to the characters' awareness of themselves as inhabitants of a novel, thereby creating a milieu of fictionality.

Pamela Marsh (1982:15), although wary of comparisons with Jane Austen - "I try never to compare her to the incomparable Jane, contenting myself with merely hinting that those who relish J.A. will appreciate B.P." - concurs that Pym's world is as "limited" as that of Jane Austen:

"Pym's world is as limited (if 'limited' is the word) as Jane Austen's. It is the world of middle-aged, educated gentlewomen with intellectual leanings, content

to live alone, but not lonely, in villages or quiet London suburbs. They conceal a quiet sense of irony behind a conventional, often mousy, facade. Devoted to a certain kind of man in the public eye - a clergyman, an author, a lecturer - they are amused to find themselves involved in helping the object of their devotion with his work."

Pico Iyer (1985:286-291) feels that many of Pym's heroines are "as polite, well-meaning and earnest as Paddington Bear"; although Pym observes the rules of story-telling, and is assiduous in tying up the strands of her plot, her universe is "suffocatingly cosy", her books almost indistinguishable from one another, and her whole *oeuvre* "quite pleasant, but a little tiresome". However, the "transforming grace of Pym's measured compassion is that she brings to her sheltered characters the same strict wistfulness they bring to the world, yet treats their lackluster good nature no more kindly than does the world" (Iyer, 1985:290-291).

"From the deflationary title of *No Fond Return of Love* to its benevolent conclusion, Pym restricts herself to the narrow imaginative limits occupied by her unprepossessing heroine. Like the rest of Pym's fiction, this novel resembles nothing so much as a cramped, somewhat lonely little bed-sitter complete with floral wallpaper, well-made bed and pot of strong tea. Psychically, the weather always calls for mild drizzle; the menu generally offers up macaroni cheese, tomato soup and boiled potatoes, with Nescafé for pudding; the *dramatis personae* include nobody except timid scholars, spinsterish researchers and bachelor clergymen. And all the excellent women are, of course, themselves vicars - unrewarded consolers and confession-takers who choose to live vicariously" (Iyer, 1985:289).

According to Iyer, Pym remains "relentlessly unfashionable (though currently vogueish)", but he does concede that "her charm lies in her innocence of literary fashion, her willingness to sew together a series of shrewd observations into nothing more, nor less, than a solid, old-fashioned entertainment" (1985:289).

Pym's diaries, however, reveal herself not innocent of "literary fashion", but aware of her limitations and secure in her own capabilities. When she did attempt something more modern, like the abysmal *An Academic Question*, she was writing against the grain. She frequently reveals an admiration for Margaret Drabble:

"If only one could write about Margaret Drabble-like characters! But I suppose I couldn't have done, even when I was that age, so . . ." (Pym, 1984d:250),

and

"The enrichment of my own novels may be suggested by my reading of the two latest Margaret Drabble novels . . . She gives one almost *too much* - but I give too little - laziness and unwillingness to do 'research', which doesn't seem to fit my kind of novels" (Pym, 1984d:329).

Anne Tyler (1983:2) "places" *No Fond Return of Love*. Chronologically it falls in the middle of Pym's published works; its themes are more certain, and there are important statements "about the importance of the trivial in the scheme of things and about the relative goodness of unassuming, ordinary people - the loaves of 'bread' in a world inhabited by 'fancy cake or 'pastry" . . . the kind of thing one might start and not be able to finish".

### 2.6.7 *An Unsuitable Attachment*

Placing *An Unsuitable Attachment*, chronologically Barbara Pym's ill-fated seventh novel, presents difficulties, for it was only until after her death in 1980 that it was finally published. The history of its rejection by Cape and other publishers has already been remarked upon, and Anna Shapiro, in an article entitled "The Resurrection of Barbara Pym", cites a parallel between Pym and other now popular but once slighted writers:

"The most conspicuous quality of Barbara Pym's career has been its near invisibility. If you look for her in *Contemporary Authors* for 1963 you will find a blank between Pyne and Pryor, though Pym appears in the 'Permanent' edition of that reference work, with her 'avocational interests' listed as 'reading, domestic life, and cats.' That year, at age 50, she had six novels out, all well received and popular in their British library editions. Her seventh was universally rejected. Unlike the currently popular short story writer Breece D'J Pancake and John Kennedy Toole, the posthumously published author of *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Barbara Pym did not take her own life in her despair at being rejected. She did stop writing" (Shapiro, 1983:29).

In a euphoric review, Mary Cantwell cites a parallel with Jean Rhys:

"In some respects, the scenario resembles that of the decline, fall and splendid resurrection of Jean Rhys, but with an important difference. To open a novel by Jean Rhys is to stub your toe against an oak tree, so strong and dark was

her talent. Discovering Barbara Pym is akin to seeing an unsuspected butterfly dart out of a closet" (Cantwell, 1982:21).

Philip Larkin, Pym's mentor for much of her writing career, has outlined the circumstances of her rejection in his foreword to *An Unsuitable Attachment*. In the same preface he classifies the book among her early group of novels, rather than among the later, infinitely more brittle and sombre novels which emerged in the brief period after her rescue from obscurity in 1977, until her death three years later.

"*An Unsuitable Attachment*, now that it is finally before us, clearly belongs to Barbara Pym's first and principal group of novels by reason of its undiminished high spirits. For although the technique and properties of her last books were much the same, there was a sombreness about them indicative of the changes that had come to her and her world in fifteen years' enforced silence. Here the old confidence is restored . . ." (Pym, 1984c:7).

Larkin designates the novel as the most solidly "churchy" of her books, for "the reader is back among self-service lunches and parish bazaars and the innumerable tiny absurdities to be found there" (Pym, 1984c:7).

Larkin concedes that the novel has failings - the "unsuitable attachment" between Ianthe and the callow John Challow is not sufficiently central to the story; also it is a self-indulgent book, too full of echoes from previous Pym opera: ". . . the concluding chapters of *An Unsuitable Attachment* are a real *omnium gatherum*: Esther Clovis and Digby Fox from *Less than Angels*, Everard Bone from *Excellent Women*, Wilf Bason from *A Glass of Blessings*, and perhaps

most extravagantly of all an older but otherwise unchanged Harriet Bede (complete with curate) from *Some Tame Gazelle*. It is all rather like the finale of a musical comedy" (Pym, 1984c:9).

Yet, concludes Larkin, there is much in the novel to cherish: the cat Faustina, for one, and what Larkin calls "the occasional plangent sentence of the kind that gives her books their special quality".

Only four less than enthusiastic reviews of the novel have been traced. James Campbell (1982:25) concedes that the judgement of the publishers who rejected the novel may not have been at fault, "although like Philip Larkin I wish they had invited her out to lunch to tell her". Although Pym's "gently satirical touch is sure of itself for the first 50 or so pages", there are too many characters of equal weight. Characters become caricatures, the central "attachment" of the title is not developed sufficiently, and the sojourn in Italy is stretched out with no justification other than that of adding extra length to the novel.

Anne Duchêne (1982:214) accuses Larkin of cheating a little by putting the novel alongside the earlier novels because of its "undiminished high spirits":

"The 'high spirits' of all Pym's novels, after all, are applied to very acute studies in loneliness: a quite specialized form of loneliness, held stoutly at bay by all the stations of the Anglican calendar, and by all the small, determined pleasures of egocentric gentility."

The novel is "not a vintage Pym . . . rather, a corked one", but Duchêne remarks that the publishers' veto on the book, and Pym's subsequent retreat

into silence, "must have lost to us many more pleasures than the book itself happens to provide".

*The Christian Science Monitor* (B.A., 1982:17) typifies the novel as an "imperturbably droll comedy of romantic manners", but the dialogue of the ceaseless conversations "sometimes shows a dangerously high aphorism content". Finally D.P. Donavin (1982:1042), in conceding that *An Unsuitable Attachment* did not conform to the literary style of the 'sixties, also criticises the novel for its excessive wordiness. If not Pym's best, however, it is "still an engaging work of fiction".

An important piece of criticism emerges from Peter Kemp (1982:24), who sees the novel as standing firmly mid-way, chronologically as well as thematically, in Pym's oeuvre:

"Occasionally anticipating the more powerful later books, this novel constantly recapitulates the earlier . . . [and] . . . it is to her credit that she tries to enlarge the scope of her fiction by including such material [lanthe's kicking over the traces, albeit with a sensible court shoe, by choosing a lower-class, flashy husband]. The book's occasional hesitancy - like that of its heroine - is the hesitancy of transition, a not-quite-assured move towards something more demanding. After this, Barbara Pym's talent marvellously matured: into the poised, sharpened satire of *The Sweet Dove Died*, the elegiac bleakness of *Quartet in Autumn*, the open-eyed, almost euphoric stoicism of *A Few Green Leaves*. It was imperceptive of her publishers not to see these qualities emerging in this book."

Several critics also remark that Pym is giving a wry picture of London in transition, for the novel is set in a suburb which is hovering between gentrification (front doors painted in trendy colours and bay trees in tubs) and decline (West Indians taking over the neighbourhood). There is a delightful cameo of a vicar and a parishioner colliding with each other in their efforts to sit next to a black man, thus demonstrating their obedience to the injunction of brotherly love!

The *New Yorker* also classifies the novel among Pym's early works, commenting that the subsequent *Quartet in Autumn* caught many readers off guard with its "low-keyed, comic cunning" (Anon., 1982b:133).

"Witty" and "elegant" are adjectives frequently bandied about, in imitation of Edith Milton's review (1982:11), and Judith Sutton comments in *Library Journal* (1982b:1012) that "not quite so sharply focused as other of Pym's works, this is still a finely drawn and witty novel". Barbara A. Bannon in *Publishers Weekly* enthuses, "one of Pym's best". In the leisurely unfolding of the narrative, "Pym weaves a fine net of emotional cross-purposes"; there are "some wonderful cameo portraits among the characters", and for "those who thought there would be no more of Pym's wry comedies of manners, this novel will be a great satisfaction" (Bannon, 1982b:69).

In a substantial review, Valentine Cunningham fulminates against "publishing short-sightedness", and commends Pym for never making "easy fun":

"The rich relatives' horror over Ianthe's wish to marry an uncouth library assistant, the dithering and clucking of shoals of anxious spinsters, the pains of

coming down in the world from pink gin to pink paraffin, are all done with wry warmth, but also with a continual sense of impending horror" (Cunningham, 1982:32).

*Encounter* (Anon., 1982a:76) calls the novel "a wonderful book: hilarious, unexpected, touching and occasionally faintly disturbing. Anyone who has enjoyed Barbara Pym - plus any misguided soul who so far has not - is going to want to read it, and also to read Larkin's succinct and sympathetic introduction".

Once again there are the comparisons between Pym and Austen. According to Edith Milton (1982:11), both Barbara Pym and Bernice Rubens belong to "that honorable sorority of English novelists whose writing seems to compel from critics . . . murmurs about Jane Austen. This is no doubt because these novelists are women, they both have a crisp style, a mocking eye and a sharp focus upon the intimate details of social behavior. Above all it is because they are expected to know their place and not to slip from the exquisite quarters allotted to their talents into anything vast, like history and metaphysics, or anything chaotic, like fantasy and unbridled passion".

Similarly, Mary Cantwell (1982:21) describes Pym as a descendant of Jane Austen. Her manner is "amused, astringent", and in similar vein to Jane Austen, she is forever describing a group of people embarked on an expedition or an evening's entertainment. Like several other critics, she comments on Pym's cool, dispassionate, anthropologist's eye in observing the "natives".

A.N. Wilson, himself a writer of High Church novels of note, contends that Pym lacks Austen's malice, that she always "sees the pathos, as well as the absurdity, of her familiar cast of selfish librarians and anthropologists, ineffectual clergymen, food-conscious homosexuals and single ladies trying to keep up vestiges of the decorum which had marked their fathers' parsonages in genteeler days" (Wilson, 1982:22).

In a review of considerable length, Marilyn Butler (1982:16-17) unravels numerous correspondences between the characters and dialogue of the two writers, but concludes that Pym adopts the stance of the social anthropologist. She is adept at classification, and trying to "keep up" with Jane Austen, traps her into conventional plots and "a network of courtship rituals which by 1960 belong almost wholly to literature and not to real life".

The reader is unable to sympathise with Pym's female characters, because "her heroines so emphatically fall short of heroic stature, with their insistence on being led . . .". In feminist vein, Butler comments that Pym's novels are enjoyed mainly by "mature, literate men", and that most women find her charm "resistible". Butler propounds this sweeping statement with the bland certainty of an AMPS poll, but it is not clear from which accredited source Ms Butler ascertains her somewhat questionable contention.

*An Unsuitable Attachment*, then, is an important novel - important because it reaffirms Pym's status as a novelist of wit and perspicacity, and because it is a transitional novel, hinting darkly at Pym's later, bleaker books. The furore surrounding its publication, or rather non-publication, probably did much to

secure Pym's canonisation in the literary world, as is evinced by the current unearthing of posthumous Pym publications.

### 2.6.8 *Quartet in Autumn*

*Quartet in Autumn* is in fact Pym's eighth published novel, although chronologically it is her ninth. *The Sweet Dove Died* was started in 1963, finished in 1969, and by 1973 it had been rejected by 21 publishers! After Pym's renaissance in 1977, *Quartet in Autumn*, started in 1973, was accepted for publication; *The Sweet Dove Died* was finally published soon afterwards, in 1978.

The gloom engendered by the hiatus between *An Unsuitable Attachment* and the above-mentioned novels lends weight to Diana Benet's contention that Pym's novels display a development from the comic to the tragic, and from a feminine to a universal vision (1986:3). *Quartet in Autumn* is Pym's bleakest novel, and for many critics, her best. It even merited a review in *Novyi Mir*, a Russian literary periodical (Zlobina, 1983).

*Quartet in Autumn* is a study of old age in a world where dignity and the corresponding values of genteelism and well-bred courtesy are anachronisms. Several critics saw fit to review *Quartet in Autumn* alongside Margaret Drabble's *The Ice Age*, another fictionalised account of the demise of civilised values. Jill Neville's review (1977:118) elegantly epitomises the gist of this bleak new Pymland:

"It is a study, in pointillist detail, of a large and largely ignored section of the human race: those beings which we are all doomed to become . . . the old.

"The question Barbara Pym poses is this: what happens when distressed gentlewomen, relics of the Fifties, find themselves adrift in the lewd and hijacking seventies? The concept, like these genteel tea-brewers themselves, has become obsolescent. No matter how you have trained your ears to deafness you cannot fail to hear the obscenity on the park bench. Eyes which once modestly turned glassy to miss seeing 'Gentlemen Lift the Seat' in train lavatories are now confronted with 'Stuff the Jubilee' scrawled on every wall or so it seems to the denizens of Pymland . . .

"Letty and the rest of the quartet, who all happen to work together, are now as displaced as refugees in an England in which they were once so triumphantly 'chez eux'. Then as English as a Bath bun, they are now strangers in a strange land, infinitely more foreign, more ill-at-ease, more uncertain than the beaked, veiled ladies from the Gulf squatting on the floor at Harrods. Their concepts have vanished as definitively as an orderly bus queue."

Critics have pointed out that this gloomy picture of lonely old age set in an urban nightmare is mitigated by Pym's very funny vignettes: Letty, having contributed to the missionary cause for a lifetime, is disconcerted to find her rooming house taken over by exuberantly evangelical blacks. Her timid remonstrances about the disturbing noise to the genial Nigerian, Mr Olatunde, are serenely countered with his bland "Christianity is disturbing". Letty, having made her feeble stand, has nowhere to go, and Victoria Glendinning (1978:8), in her analysis of both Mildred (of *Excellent Women*) and Letty, comments that it

is "in the ironic exploration of the 'experience of not having' that Barbara Pym's art and originality lie".

*Quartet in Autumn* was hailed by a veritable plethora of reviews, and to cite each one would constitute a separate volume. It must suffice to conclude that with the exception of Karl Miller, who complains that *Quartet in Autumn* is "less lively . . . less hopeful, and the story . . . is not a rich one" (1978:25), no reviews are negative. The common critical consensus is that the bleakness of the disappointed lives of the pitiful quartet of characters is mitigated by Pym's compassion - a compassion which extends beyond the circumspect bounds of High Church Anglicanism.

Although one might question Jeremy Treglown's contention that the conclusion "is almost romantically optimistic" (1977:418), or might take to task the more gushing reviewers like Paul Bailey, who finds the novel "an exquisite, even magnificent, work of art" (1977:25), *Quartet in Autumn* is an important novel, a transitional novel in both theme and mood, and one whose tragic vision is securely balanced by what Bailey applauds, viz. that the "ghastly implications are kept in check by Barbara Pym's subtle appreciation of the comic aspects of her people's lives".

#### 2.6.9 *The Sweet Dove Died*

According to Lotus Snow (1980:83-93), Pym's heroines fall into two classes: the "excellent women", "who never tell their love, who devote themselves to the work of the parish, who make tea at moments of crisis in other people's lives",

and who, to quote the creed of these characters, "expect very little - nothing, almost", and the women whom men select not for "respect and esteem", but for loving, and who, one might add, are usually dreadful housekeepers incapable of even providing the solace of tea. Leonora Eyre, the "heroine" of *The Sweet Dove Died*, is, according to Snow, the finest example of a woman who loves only herself, and once again, as has been commented on in much of the former criticism, Pym's apt use of literary allusions is apparent:

"With her acute sensitivity to titles and to names, Miss Pym sounds the keynote of irony with the title, taken from one of Keats's minor poems . . . She strikes the ironic note more insistently by calling her heroine Leonora Eyre, a name evocative of the brave and loving heroines of the Leonora overtures and of the Brontë classic" (Snow, 1980:87).

Isa Kapp similarly comments on what she calls Pym's "streak of nomenclatural whimsy" (1983:242): "Thus the heroine whose matchmaking is as inept as that of Austen's Emma, is named Jane; or, having told us in *Excellent Women* that her heroine is plain, but not at all like Jane Eyre, Pym proceeds to endow her most elegant heroine, Leonora, with the last name of Eyre" (1983:242).

*The Sweet Dove Died*, along with *Quartet in Autumn*, was hailed by reviewers as heralding an infinitely more brittle and sophisticated Pym. Critics are generally divisive; there are those who prefer the sombre, yet compassionate *Quartet in Autumn* and those who find *Quartet in Autumn* too melancholy, too close to the bone, too much of a *memento mori* in the manner of Muriel Spark, and too far a departure from Pym's established bailiwick, and are consequently attracted to the considerably more stylish and acerbic comedy of manners of

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*The Sweet Dove Died*, with its consummate air of persiflage. Pym's piercing eye for social hypocrisies and manipulation, already prevalent in her earlier novels, is infinitely more polished and provocative in *The Sweet Dove Died*. Francis King points out that the difference between *Quartet* and *The Sweet Dove Died* "is like going out from a curtained sick-room into a sunlit garden" (1978:9).

Sophistication, then, is the keynote of the Pym of the 'seventies, an attribute articulated by Brodie (1979:754), and one which several critics apply equally to theme (it is Pym's one novel in which sexual encounters are minimally, but overtly, chronicled) as well as to style. Although Kapp finds wit much in evidence in the novel, she mourns Pym's departure from what she terms, in American fashion, "drollery":

"Though lightened by a mocking wit, *The Sweet Dove Died* hasn't the relaxed and artful waggery that slithers through the other novels. In those books where she deals with the mundane areas of life - seedy cafés, civil-service offices, parish functions - Miss Pym is irresistibly droll" (Kapp, 1983:241).

Martin Seymour-Smith claims that *The Sweet Dove Died* is Pym's best, and that it is "a psychologically impeccable and subtle record of a nasty but courageous woman's battle against self-rejection" (1981:325).

Barbara Bannon, writing in the book trade journal, *Publishers Weekly*, says that "Pym's extraordinary vision of an ordinary world wherein she details the intricacies of loneliness, the ditherings of hesitating souls, the comedies of errors, sexual and asexual, makes this a little masterpiece" (1979:66).

"Assured, stylish, and often very funny" is the pithy comment of the *Observer* (Anon., 1978b:21), while Walter Clemons of *Newsweek* notes: "This is a brilliant, perfect piece of work" (1979:92). In a perspicacious review, Clemons comments on Pym's new combination of the funny and the sensuous, her gain in boldness, "without losing her capacity for close hemstitching".

Susannah Clapp contends that plot is less important than "making the most of cosy moments and nasty little coincidences" (1978:757), and Anthony Thwaite (1978:25) is the only reviewer to comment on the extreme subtlety of Pym's art. Paraphrase makes Pym's plots appear as ephemeral as "candy floss", and Pym's art, though "fastidious", is never frail. Her characters are pinned as neatly as a lepidopterist's specimens, and her wit is as scrupulous as it is deadly. The manoeuvres of Pym's cast are "enervated but not enervating", and her writing evidences both astringency and sure control:

"The cool observation, the sardonic nuances, the style that dictates its own manner without quite becoming mannered, are all marks of this very original writer. If she is minor, she ought to be encouraged to bite some of the majors."

John Updike, possibly the most negative of Pym's critics up until this period, and not entirely enamoured of Pym's prissy cast of characters, did, however, become almost euphoric about *Quartet in Autumn*, calling it "a marvel of fictional harmonics, a beautifully calm and rounded passage in and out of four isolated individuals . . ." (1979:120). *The Sweet Dove Died*, however, sparked the most negative criticism of her novels. E. Butscher, in *Booklist*, although

conceding Pym's "marvelously [*sic*] direct style", feels that Leonora's (and the novel's) self-centred world "is simply too constricting to admit of much emotional interest on the reader's part" (1979:1275). Jeremy Treglown (1978:27) comments that touches of high comedy achieve moments of "brief but memorable resonance", that "it's the ironic control that gets the emotional saliva going", but what Barbara Pym ultimately does has been done before, by Jane Austen (an inflated comparison) and Elizabeth Bowen. (Treglown ultimately prefers *Quartet in Autumn* with its "charitable sortie into geriatric bedsitterdom".)

Infinitely more vituperative is Paul Ableman of the *Spectator*, who feels that it "would have been kinder to have left Barbara Pym undiscovered", as her reputation was "beginning to acquire at least the patina of affectionate nostalgia" (1978:26).

Ableman's chief objection is that the novel is lacking in substance, that there is "hardly enough . . . to fill a medium-length short story in a woman's magazine" (1978:26). The only touch of realism in the novel is Pym's depiction of class, although the middle classes hardly justify Pym's feeble attentions:

"The one topic dealt with by Miss Pym that has a counterpart in reality is class. So, although Sporus might have hesitated before trundling out a wheel upon which to break this paper butterfly, the chore is justified in the almost certainly vain hope of demonstrating that a devout tour of middle-class shrines does not a novel make" (1978:26).

Ableman is still more derisive about Pym's style, and in a parody, or rather

travesty of Pym's own style, fulminates against her "genteel clichés", "the prefabricated monotony of her prose", and the "deodorised narrative".

Both *Quartet in Autumn* and *The Sweet Dove Died* are important books in the Pym catalogue, not only because they appeared after so long a period of silence, but also because they herald a change of direction. Diana Benet contends that even in the earliest novels Pym realised the potential for tragedy in the lives of her characters, but it is only in the latter novels that Pym is in full possession of her powers:

"In these novels, Pym brings an extraordinary power to her depiction of the solitary existence, whether emotional isolation is the result of an egotistical choice . . . or a real inability to reach out to others . . . Though *The Sweet Dove Died* and *Quartet in Autumn* are tragic, and *A Few Green Leaves* is not, Pym's last three novels are about the failure to recognize the need for love" (Benet, 1986:118-119).

#### 2.6.10 *A Few Green Leaves*

Barbara Pym's final novel, *A Few Green Leaves*, was completed a few months before her death from cancer, and was published posthumously in 1980. Although critics were generally kind, falling back on her reputation as "a delicate, ironic miniaturist with a sympathetic insight into the comedy and pathos of the lives of unremarkable people" (Stewart, 1980:99), one senses a rather apologetic *de mortuis nihil nisi bonum* air prevailing in much of the criticism.

The action of the novel - although "action" seems too fraught a word - takes place in an Oxfordshire village, where Emma, a social anthropologist, observes the passing scene.

Several critics comment on the ubiquity of typical Pym characters: the "high proportion of permanent and temporary celibates". Peter Kemp stresses an important facet of Pym's art when he comments that, while Pym wryly chronicles the "genteel stoicism" of her characters, she never underestimates the financial, social, and emotional stresses they are weathering (1980:89).

As in former novels, Pym gives a portrait of a society that is changing, of village life altered by housing estates and their inhabitants who are now better dressed than the former gentry, who are now the only patrons of parish jumble sales. Paul Bailey points out that in *A Few Green Leaves* Pym also mocks contemporary jargon and vogue words:

"There are some splendid jokes at the expense of contemporary jargon. Graham finds Emma lacking 'bosom-wise', the horrible 'life-style' is shown to be meaningless; 'at this moment in time' is mocked, and 'gay' is sadly commented on. The best joke of all, however, involves 'hopefully'. Correctly, Miss Pym employs it on four occasions" (1980:29).

This is in similar vein to Rowse in "Austen Mini?", who takes Pym gently (but pedantically) to task for making free with English grammar:

"Miss Pym writes with the exquisite precision that is in keeping. As an old Oxford don, I can fault her only for omitting the accusative of the word 'who' - she doesn't say 'whom' when she ought. But that is current usage (or mis-usage), and I daresay 'whom' is going out (with much else). 'I wonder who we shall get as vicar?' - but one mustn't impute the grammar of the characters, any more than all the sentiments, to the author" (Rowse, 1977:733).

A.N. Wilson comments that *A Few Green Leaves* combines the best of both the early and late Pym manner, and gives the reader "a full and distinctive taste of what her novels are like" (Wilson, 1980:799):

"That taste is such a mild thing that it is almost impossible to describe . . . If one says that *A Few Green Leaves* is about a group of people living in a West Oxfordshire village, and that the two most exciting things which happen are a coffee morning and a Flower Festival, every Pym fan will go to their bookshop to buy it, unable to wait for the Public Library copy, and certain that they will want to read it half-a-dozen times . . ." (1980:799).

Sherrie Tuck (1980:2108) comments on Pym's literary skill and touching insight, and ". . . in addition to being delightful entertainment, Pym's work is a thoughtful reflection on the role of the novelist in society and a poignant meditation on the pilgrimage of life viewed in light of its destination, death". The novelist's role in society is a peripheral Pym concern, although the novelist, as omniscient observer, occasionally intrudes in some or other guise.

Death permeates the novel, though in a more subtle manner than in the bleak

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*Quartet in Autumn*, and several reviewers, most notably Peter Kemp in a review aptly entitled "Grave Comedy", comment on this:

"... [the book] is packed with calmly contemplated intimations of mortality. A village graveyard and a family mausoleum figure prominently in its narrative ... There is casual joking about an old-age pensioner who died during a charabanc sing-song. One of the novel's older ladies is teasingly brought to the point of what seems to be her death, and then reprieved; while the death of another is sprung upon the reader with sudden, cold effectiveness: 'the cat left her and sought the warmth of his basket, Miss Lickerish's lap having become strangely chilled'" (Kemp, 1980:89).

This episode recalls the poignancy of the dead cat's fur ball, the senile Marcia's link with the past in *Quartet in Autumn*, as well as an episode from *A Very Private Eye* in which Pym describes the death of her old cat to Philip Larkin:

"He just quietly expired on a copy of *The Times* on Saturday morning. When he became cold the fleas left his body - I suppose that was how one knew he had really gone. I'd never seen that happen before" (Pym, 1984d:286).

Much of the criticism once again centres around the well-worn comparisons with Jane Austen, prompting Eve Auchincloss (1981:9) to remark:

"Hearing one more English woman novelist compared to Jane Austen, the reader may feel like reaching for his gun."

Francis King, a sympathetic reviewer of earlier Pym novels, although conceding that Pym's pages are "irradiated with wit and fun", feels that the Austen/Pym claims are largely unsubstantiated:

"As a novelist, Barbara Pym has about the same importance as E.H. Young, Elizabeth Taylor<sup>1</sup> or Angela Thirkell - to all of whom she bears resemblances . . . and to say she had the wit and style of a 20th-century Jane Austen is about as accurate as to say that Dodie Smith had the wit and style of a 20th-century Congreve. Barbara Pym was a good novelist - which, God knows, is rare; but she was not an outstanding one" (King, 1980:21).

A.N. Wilson, however, in commenting that the novel does not consist of random sketches of village life, but is held together by the pervasive shadow of death, finds Austen an apt comparison:

"Piffling stuff, it may be thought; but Emily Eden and Charlotte M. Yonge would not have thought so; nor would Jane Austen or George Eliot" (Wilson, 1980:799).

One might add that the realism of the novels of Austen and Eliot and their deep human sympathy are hallmarks of Pym also; however, she lacks their rigorous moral judgement.

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1 However, during 1984, the British Book Marketing Council, in their contentious list of the thirteen best British novels of the twentieth century, included Elizabeth Taylor's *Angel*.

In one of the most far-sighted reviews, Nicholas Shrimpton of *The New Statesman* comments that Barbara Pym's social and geographical limitation has prompted comparisons with Jane Austen, and therefore: "A trip to London has the air of an exotic safari and the working-class locals, on their council estate, remain firmly beyond the imaginative horizon" (1980:17). Where Austen was a Romantic miniaturist, however, Pym is a 20th-century minimalist, and plot is pared to the bone. Pym has a sophisticated consciousness of uncertainty, and this makes her technique (the paucity of plot) peculiarly neutral:

"She rarely judges (irony for her consists less of saying one thing and meaning another than of saying nothing and meaning a lot) and scarcely seems even to shape her material. The consequence, paradoxically, is a vivid sense of how we live now."

This is an important aspect of Barbara Pym's art, and one which bears extensive analysis. Pym employs constant and consistent diminishment in her stylistic craft. Whereas trivial incidents are sometimes inflated to farcical proportions, her wit and comedy are as frequently dependent on ironic deflation.

#### 2.6.11 *Crampton Hodnet*

In January 1940, Barbara Pym wrote to her friend Robert Liddell as follows:

"I am now getting into shape the novel I have been writing during this last year, and which I have had to lay aside because I have been so busy [provisionally entitled *Crampton Hodnet*]. It is about North Oxford and has some

bits as good as anything I ever did. Mr Latimer's proposal to Miss Morrow, Mr Cleveland's elopement and its unfortunate end . . . I'm sure all these might be a comfort to somebody" (Pym, 1984d:100).

The war intervened, and *Crampton Hodnet* was laid aside, to make its appearance posthumously in 1985.

The appearance of a posthumous Pym was greeted with something approaching rapture by most critics and reviewers, and the general consensus was that *Crampton Hodnet* was a Pym prototype, lighter in spirit but less controlled than the later novels.

Diana Benet (1986:29), one of the dissenting voices, contends that the parallel plots of the novel "do not illustrate each other in a meaningful way". Pym does not make her "coddled curate", Latimer, entirely convincing. Other apparently prominent characters almost disappear from the plot, and Pym lacks the artistic control of the later novels:

"Writing about extramarital attractions later in *Excellent Women*, *A Few Green Leaves*, and (most notably) *A Glass of Blessings*, Pym exercised delightful tact in turning potential melodrama to comic account. But in *Crampton Hodnet*, she slips into the clichés inherent in the situation. Moreover, the novel fails to establish a clear tone, so that the pathos, for instance, of Francis acknowledging the end of his emotional manhood is almost entirely lost in the novel's uneasy mixture of attitudes. We long for more insight into Margaret as she refuses to hear and then hears unwillingly about her husband's romantic involvement, but she remains too vague to enlist our interest or sympathy.

Finally, not withstanding *Jessie Morrow*, *Miss Doggett*, and its good bits, the novel is not top-notch Pym. Had the author thoroughly revised the book herself, rather than storing it for forty years, *Crompton Hodnet* might have ranked as one of her artistically cohesive and entertaining communities. As it is, it does not come up to the high standard that Pym's other novels lead us to expect" (1986:32-33).

In a lengthy review in the *London Review of Books*, Nicholas Spice (1985:10) seizes on Pym's choice of the word "comfort" in her letter to Liddell. Spice finds Pym's use of the word "intriguing, and open to two possible interpretations. Either she thought herself to be writing a very different kind of novel from the one she wrote . . . , or she is using 'comfort' in a circumscribed and impoverished sense, having in mind, for example, the sort of comfort which comes from discovering that others are as badly-off as one believes oneself to be, or indeed worse-off (which is even better)".

According to Spice, the second interpretation accords with the novel's philosophy, "one which argues for acceptance over rebellion, limitation over release, loss-cutting over risk-taking, and resignation over hope . . . The chief casualty is not 'comfort' but 'love'" (1985:10). Pym therefore enunciates a theme which is prevalent in her later novels - the difficulty of reconciling romantic fantasy with reality. Although Spice's interpretation is congruent with what Combrink (1979:481) designates as "over-acceptance"<sup>1</sup> in the contemporary comic vision: ". . . the quality of redemption is totally missing, leaving the

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1 Cf. also Hellman (1978:91-92): "Acceptance of the world may mean acceptance of second best, that is, making do with something less than a total good than one is capable of imagining."

characters to face the world with an over-accepting attitude that hints forlornly at a fortitude born of hopelessness and lostness", it may be argued that his bleak prognosis does not quite accord with the novel's spirited sense of fun.

As indicated by most of the reviewers, *Crampton Hodnet* is about love, and the novel centres around three abortive love affairs that span an academic year in Oxford. The cast of characters is familiar, as Martha Duffy (1985:72) points out. The most obvious, Miss Doggett and Miss Morrow, are familiar to the reader from *Jane and Prudence*, but their "props and surroundings are familiar too: the excellent women 'full of good sense,' the pampered Anglican priests, the warmth of a musquash coat, the bedtime balm of Ovaltine, the ultimate taste test - does one take China tea or Indian?".

Duffy also points out that the Miss Morrow of *Crampton Hodnet* is a far meeker character, a gentler and more vulnerable person than the calculating character who lands Fabian Driver in *Jane and Prudence*. Francis King (1985:28) finds the key to the novel in the authorial comment which is put into the thoughts and words of the observant Miss Morrow.

Similarly, Paul Bailey (1985:22) comments that the Misses Doggett and Morrow are much more comic in *Crampton Hodnet*. In *Jane and Prudence* the comedy is tempered by irony. Most reviewers in fact comment disparagingly on the slightness of Pym's plot, although most agree that this is mitigated by her sharp characterisation and witty dialogue. Indeed, the anonymous reviewer in *Booklist* (J.B., 1985:1082) comments that the academic and ecclesiastical circles of North Oxford "provide Pym with the targets for her unique brand of social comedy, which veers alternately between gentle satire and outright farce".

Barbara Pym herself considered the novel too dated for later publication, but it is the exuberant humour and ridiculousness of many of the scenes and incidents which make this novel, in the words of one reviewer, a "period hoot". Pym's tale features trysts in a hothouse, a toolshed, the Bodleian Library, the British Museum, Fuller's Tea Shop and Lyons Corner House, and the prosaic nature of these romantic haunts is made even funnier and more ironical by the ubiquitous North Oxford spies (domineering spinsters, a librarian brow-beaten by his formidable mother, and a couple of pirouetting, foppish homosexuals).

Paul Bailey comments that the book is like a parody of the later novels, "a cheerful send-up of that same material she turned to melancholic purpose" (1985:22). Beneath this note of sprightly comedy, however, "the more plangent note Barbara Pym is adept at unostentatiously sounding reverberates beneath it all. 'There's something Chekhovian about North Oxford', one character maintains. Testifying to the truth of this are occasional glimpses of atrophied lives and reminders of time's wasting powers . . . It's [Pym's] ability to combine chilling moments like this with the enthralling oddities she rummages out from even the most ordinary-looking lives that makes Barbara Pym's work . . . distinctive and distinguished" (1985:22).

Several critics have commented on Pym's choice of title, not all favourably. Crampton was in fact Barbara Pym's mother's surname, and one of her own Christian names. The title refers to a non-existent parish invented by a curate to cover up an unchaperoned walk with Miss Morrow, and "it symbolizes all the guilty little deceptions, imposed by the malicious gossip of a claustrophobic society, that enables Barbara Pym to get so much fun out of her tiny dramas" (Trease, 1985:555). Not all reviewers find the title felicitous, and Miranda

Seymour "only wishes that the editors had relieved it of its hideous provisional title when they rescued the manuscript from undeserved obscurity in the Bodleian Library" (1985:720).

Several critics once again remark on the aptness of Pym's quotations from the Metaphysical poets, although comparisons with Jane Austen are more restrained. Paul Bailey comments that Pym is now being overpraised: "It is common practice to compare her with Jane Austen, whose art transcends the charming, the pleasingly ironic. The depth of understanding of the human heart displayed in 'Persuasion' was beyond Miss Pym's engaging powers, as it is beyond those of the majority of novelists. It's as well to remember that, in our anxiety to do this talented author belated justice" (1985:22).

Similarly, Francis King (1985:28) finds closer analogies with Ivy Compton-Burnett. He reminds us that the best critical study of Compton-Burnett was written by Robert Liddell, Pym's close friend, and one finds corroborating evidence for a possible analogy in Pym's 1940 letter to Liddell:

"The influence of Miss Compton-Burnett is very powerful once it takes a hold, isn't it? For a time there seems to be no point in writing any other way, indeed, there seems not to be any other way, but I have found that it passes . . . and I have now got back to my own way, such as it is" (Pym, 1984d:100).

In conclusion, Nicholas Spice comments that the "English idyll" is over, that Britain may not be "unalterably the nicest of all possible modern states to live in" (1985:10). The "constrained and pallid" world of Barbara Pym is past, and one of the consequences will be "a change in the kind of stories we tell, in the

varieties of our fiction. In the place of the comedy of manners, that speciality of the English fictional tradition . . . we should expect to see develop a literature of protest and political parable". Although Pym did not ever succumb to a literature of protest and political parable, the change in British mores and lifestyles, and the erosion of traditional and genteel values did not escape her, as is seen in her later novels.

#### 2.6.12 *An Academic Question*

A further posthumous Pym novel, *An Academic Question*, was published in 1986. As only three reviews have been traced to date, the overview of the critical opinion must of necessity be brief.

In 1970 Barbara Pym wrote to Robert Smith, her early mentor, and the writer of the article "How Pleasant to Know Miss Pym". In this letter she mentions having started an "academic" novel. This was to be *An Academic Question*, which was never published in her lifetime (Pym, 1984d:253).

Tim Satchell (1986:4), in a brief note in *Books and Bookmen*, very briefly refers to the novel as a "worthy final edition to the Pym canon".

Cathy Knox (1986:35) reiterates the fashionable, and by this time hackneyed, comparison with Jane Austen - Pym is like Austen as she was rediscovered after years of obscurity. Although "the bare bones of plot poke crudely through the scanty flesh of the novel . . . the language is simple and quite beautiful".

Much of the action of the novel is fashionably 'seventies; nonetheless there is much that is vintage Barbara Pym: ". . . when the library goes up in flames [after a student riot], they're thrown into such a tizz they have to have tea instantly" (1986:35).

Finally, A.S. Byatt (1986:862) feels that Pym's attempt to write something "sharp" and "swinging" was a mistake, as the result is "thin and unappealing". In denigrating fashion she writes of the "exiguous anthropological plot . . . and . . . even more exiguous adulterous plot". However, in the character of Dolly, the usual Pym eccentric spinster, Pym "produces an innocent vision of the transience of human life that is Pym at her best". Byatt comments on Pym's "more unworthy undercurrents, tiny snap judgments, vaguely addressed to the mockery of nuances of social style, petty about pettiness". Pym's central characteristics are malice and narcissistic self-pity, "since the reader's generous sympathy for the unperceived virtue or agony is usually required for the excellent woman, the sharp observer whose need for love goes unrequited and unremarked".

Pym cuts her characters down to size; her deceptive mildness does not make her less ruthless. Her stoic and ironic view of life is part of the contemporary English "aimlessness and gloom". Pym belongs to the world of Dorothy Sayers, Angela Thirkell and Stanley Middleton (who is less charming, but more poetic and wiser). She lacks Muriel Spark's metaphysical wit, and Fay Weldon's mad logical rigour and tolerant detachment, and although she appears gentler than Spark or Weldon she is "also infinitely less generous, humane and imaginative".

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"Good relaxing reading is a matter of personal choice, *pace* Queenie Leavis. I'd rather have cloth-of-gold wedding dresses, quotations from *Urne Buriall* and tigerish passion in crime writers acquitted of murder than brown frocks, knitted socks in clerical grey and cauliflower cheese" (Byatt, 1986:862).

## 2.7 The critical consensus

From the preceding plethora of criticism, the following may be regarded as a taut résumé of critical opinion from the early 1950's to date.

### 2.7.1 The scope of the critical oeuvre

The early Pym novels elicited little criticism - that which prevails is low-key but fairly positive. The bulk of criticism of her work stems from 1977, when she was hailed by two leading literary figures as the most underrated writer of the century. Her literary resurrection and subsequent canonisation have been compared with that of another neglected figure, Jean Rhys, although the writers are, of course, vastly different in theme and style. Subsequent to her renaissance, her novels were published with enormous success in America; this possibly aided in Pym's emergence as a cult novelist, or "the novelist most touted by one's most literate friends". The bulk of literary criticism is in the form of book reviews of varying length and academic rigour in literary and popular periodicals; however, since 1984 there has been a gradual emergence of traditional and more substantial critical work on her novels.

### 2.7.2 Barbara Pym's themes

The themes of Barbara Pym's novels are limited, and are treated with laconic British reserve. She chronicles the perils of love - love which is unrequited, unsuitable or hopeless. Loneliness, or the experience of lacking, rather than loss, is mitigated by moderate compensations for making life bearable - a cup of tea, a drop of gin. Her later novels sound a more sombre note - although the drama of minutiae is not lacking, the chillier shadow of death makes *Quartet in Autumn* and *A Few Green Leaves* infinitely more bleak than the high spirited *Crampton Hodnet* and *Jane and Prudence*, or the self-deprecating *Excellent Women*.

Pym is the anthropologist, the insistent observer, and her characters live life vicariously. The vices which are satirised are mild ones - vanity, irritability, indifference and condescension, and many of her characters grow subtly in self-awareness and self-recognition.

Within her self-imposed limits, Pym also portrays a society in transition; there is subtle progression from the cosy gentility of the 'fifties to the moral degradation and indifference of the 'seventies.

### 2.7.3 Barbara Pym's characters

Pym's novels are peopled chiefly by women, the "excellent women", for whom love remains an elusive or makeshift affair, and the less excellent women - the

schemers who are physically attractive, but morally bankrupt, and who, sometimes only temporarily, ensnare the hapless men. Pym's men are absurd creatures of diminished stature: dandles blinded by complacency, well-meaning, mild but ineffectual clergymen, smug homosexuals obsessed with food, Fabergé eggs, or housekeeping, and Pym's gentle irony lies in the absurdity of women being beguiled by such feeble creatures.

Authorial comment is sometimes introduced by a "strong" character, for example Miss Morrow in *Crompton Hodnet*, or Jane, in *Jane and Prudence*. At other times Barbara Pym employs a Hitchcock-like observer - herself (in the guise of an anonymous "novelist"), or one of her minor characters, who muses and comments in the background.

#### 2.7.4 Barbara Pym's style

Barbara Pym delineates her meagre plots and tepid characters with quiet skill, tough, reasonable wit, calm integrity, compression, and delicacy. She is too compassionate and affectionate to be truly satirical,<sup>1</sup> but is deft in her manipulation of irony and social detail. Her novels are characterised by emotional restraint, propriety and good taste, but this does not obscure her relentless observation, and her later novels, especially *The Sweet Dove Died*, evince a shrewd sophistication.

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1 "Comic novels find garlic and sapphires in the mud, satiric ones find mostly garlic and blame it for not being sapphire, or comic novels are more forgiving and cheerful than satiric ones" (Hall, J., 1963, *The Tragic Comedians*, quoted in Combrink (1979:120).

Her slightness of plot indicates that her irony is the irony of omission, rather than the irony of saying one thing and implying another, and although she falls prey to what is called the "revivalist impulse" of reviving and uniting characters from past novels, this is functional in creating her social microcosm.

Although Pym has a mocking eye, her style is crisp, her irony fine and mild. In writing her comedies of manners, her style never becomes mannered, owing to her rueful, self-deprecating and droll approach. Antonia Byatt, however, finds Pym's mildness deceptive, as she ruthlessly cuts her characters down to size, and her "targets are safely in the past, in a bourgeois world which may then have been cramped and painful but now has the discreet charm of a peepshow" (1986:862).

Diana Benet avers that the moral vision of Pym's finest novels, *Quartet in Autumn* and *The Sweet Dove Died*, underlies and develops from the comedies:

"The comedies are very fine novels, and perhaps their greatest strength is the exclusion by satiric humor and irony of sentimentality in the treatment of the subject most capable of evoking latent mawkishness [love]. Our laughter protects characters like Belinda Bede or Rupert Stonebird from an excessive pathos they do not deserve and the dignity of all efforts, however zany or misguided, to satisfy their needs to love and be loved" (Benet, 1986:163).

Pym's deprecating wit, and her tone of wry irony, provide a sense of balance in their counteraction to the world's cruelties and despondencies.

### 2.7.5 Barbara Pym and literature

Pym postulates the notion that women's education does not fit them for the world they live in, and that women's unrealistic, romantic notions of love are formed by literature. Much of her nomenclature is derived from the great English novelists, and this is frequently done with ironic intent. Her use of character names is reminiscent of the Gothic novel, and of the Byronic hero, and like Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, parodies the notions satirised. Her characters are much given to timely and untimely quotations, both appropriate and inappropriate, especially from the Metaphysical poets, while her clergymen beleaguer their bewildered parishioners with obscure quotations and baffling rhetorical questions.

Pym's literary allusions demand a certain amount of mental agility and erudition from her readers.

### 2.7.6 Comparisons with Jane Austen and other novelists

Comparisons with Jane Austen have been pervasive. Pym, like Austen, writes about a circumscribed, middle-class world; her characters, much in the manner of Austen's, are forever setting out on jaunts to parties and entertainments. The development of her characters in self-recognition is reminiscent of Austen too, but Pym lacks Austen's malice and didactic manner. Some far-fetched comparisons have been mooted with George Eliot and the Brontës, and although comparisons have been made with major authors such as Muriel Spark, Ivy Compton-Burnett and Elizabeth Bowen, many critics feel that Pym is more

closely affiliated to the likes of Angela Thirkell, Charlotte M. Yonge, and Elizabeth Taylor.

### 2.7.7 Barbara Pym's stature as a novelist

In conclusion, there are those critics who contend that Barbara Pym is a "major" novelist. It is generally agreed that critical assessment of her powers has been somewhat too generous, and the consensus among British critics seems to be that she is an excellent minor novelist with a deservedly devoted following of readers. The latest reviews are among the most negative, viz. that of A.S. Byatt:

"Why, therefore, this sudden blossoming of critical attention to Pym's oeuvre? It is easy enough to understand why she has a devoted following of readers - she has the ability to create a comfortable little world in which they can relax, locate themselves with ease, confirm their prejudices and enjoy their own superiority. But why the PhD dissertations, the academic conferences, *La Narrativa di Barbara Pym*, 'Text and Subtext in the Novels of Barbara Pym' etc?" (Byatt, 1986:862).

Byatt contends that Pym is the protégé of "fogies of various ages, all of whom feel a nostalgia for memorable manners and habits of small folk in the days of England's greatness". A new literary development has been the taboo on mocking "women, blacks, gays or any other disadvantaged group". Barbara Pym is therefore a "safe" author for critical esteem, in which "the new philistinism and

the old thus unite to produce an academic field in which Pym can be seen as meriting the same kind of attention as Murdoch or Lessing or Spark".

Both extremes are possibly incorrect - the gushing critics, or Byatt, writing with infinitely more overt malice than Pym was capable of. Barbara Pym is certainly one of the more memorable writers of the twentieth century, and her quirky wit and oblique vision (much in the manner of her oft-quoted Metaphysical poets), have an irresistible appeal to the literate English reader.



### CHAPTER THREE

Angela Carter and I sat together late one afternoon and I looked around at the 1930s wooden horse which had come from a round-about, the piles of magazines, the coffee cups, and the framed print of the Martini horseman. We discussed a notable lady novelist and Miss Carter grew more testy than she had at any mention of the Divine Marquise [de Sade]. "I can't do with her," she said. "Her books are all about preparing elaborate meals for men, or standing looking sadly out of the window as she scrapes the uneaten food into the tidy bin when they fail to turn up. I'd like to slap her little bottom for her."

John Mortimer: *In Character*



### 3 A SURVEY OF CRITICISM: ANITA BROOKNER

#### 3.1 Introduction

The publishing history of Anita Brookner is an infinitely happier one than that of Barbara Pym. Eminent as an art historian and critic, Anita Brookner is the author of several definitive works on artists and art history, viz. *Watteau* (1971), *The Genius of the Future: Studies in French Art Criticism* (1971), *Greuze: The Rise and Fall of an Eighteenth-Century Phenomenon* (1972), and *Jacques-Louis David* (1980). She is presently Reader in the History of Art at the Courtauld Institute, and in 1968 was the first woman to be appointed to the Chair of Slade Professor of Art at Cambridge.

She made her debut as a novelist in 1981, with the highly praised *A Start in Life*. Since then she has published an acclaimed novel each autumn: *Providence* (1982), *Look at Me* (1983), *Hotel du Lac* (1984), which was awarded the Booker McConnell Prize, *Family and Friends* (1985), and *A Misalliance* (1986).

Before assessing the critical appraisal of Anita Brookner's novels, it might be useful to gain some insight into why an apparently successful academic should turn her hand to novel writing. Indeed, Brookner's own pronouncements shed some light on the recurrent themes of her novels. One of the less flattering critical contentions is that she is engaged in writing and rewriting the same novel, so recurrent and pervasive are her themes.

In an interview with John Haffenden (1985:60), in reply to his statement that she has been extraordinarily successful in her professional career as academic, Brookner answered:

"I dispute that. Success is what other people say you are, and I don't feel it."

Paramount in her diaries is Barbara Pym's acute disappointment at not being published, rather than any grandiose speculations about the incentive to write. In numerous interviews, Anita Brookner has intimated that her entrée into the world of the novelist was instigated by boredom and an attempt at self-analysis, as the following extracts reveal:

"Like Edith Wharton, whom she resembles in other ways, Anita Brookner is a born novelist who did not begin writing fiction until she had reached middle age. The reason for this is that it never occurred to her. 'There were no secret notebooks, not a scrap, not a sentence.' [This is in marked contrast to Barbara Pym's notebooks and drafts.] She embarked on *A Start in Life* four years ago in the summer vacation, impelled by 'boredom and the wish to review my life, which seemed to be drifting in predictable channels. I saw it as a little exercise in self-analysis. What is interesting about self-analysis is that it leads nowhere. It is an art-form in itself'" (Hale, 1984:98).

In an interview with Michael Barber (1983a:27), the following emerges:

"Up until a few years ago it had never crossed her mind that she might write a novel. And in trying to account for this leap in the dark, she was uncharacteristically vague. 'Intense boredom, I think. Desire to try something new.

There aren't many chances for taking a risk in art history. It was a pastime. A summer exercise.

"I was unhappy. I wanted to do something with it. I didn't want to languish. So I thought I'd set myself a little bit of homework, if you like."

In reply to John Haffenden's question whether, like the heroine of *Look at Me*, Brookner regards novel writing as a penitential activity, the answer was:

"Yes, it gives me a headache. The reason why I've written novels is penitential and possibly useful. I started writing because of a terrible feeling of powerlessness: I felt I was drifting and obscure, and I rebelled against that. I didn't see what I could do to change my condition. I wanted to control rather than be controlled, to ordain rather than be ordained, and to relegate rather than be relegated" (Haffenden, 1985:59).

As Barbara Pym's diaries and notebooks reveal, she made extensive use of trivial incidents from her own life, scenes witnessed in the streets and shops of London, for example, and incorporated these little cameos and vignettes into her writing. Her relationship with a younger man, for instance, is reflected in the relationship between Leonora and James in *The Sweet Dove Died*. Brookner's novels appear more starkly autobiographical, in essence, if not in detail. In reply to Haffenden's question: "But would it be true to say that your novels speak of your own condition?", Brookner's reply was:

"The particulars are all invented, but they speak of states of mind which forced me to do something about those states of mind. In that sense they are very impure novels, and that gives me a lingering feeling of unpleasantness . . . *Hotel du Lac* is the least impure; it's invention pure and simple" (Haffenden, 1985:59).

While Barbara Pym certainly used the anthropologists, librarians and card-indexers culled from her career as assistant editor of *Africa*, these are less autobiographically intrusive than Brookner's introspective and short-sighted heroines - academics, novelists and librarians. In her early twenties Barbara Pym was able to write with astonishing verisimilitude about herself and her sister as spinsters in their fifties, and Pym's "excellent women" in their dowdy "good" dresses, preferably of blue wool, bolstered by their resolute Christian forbearance and resilience, seem somewhat removed from Brookner's impeccably dressed and unenviably gloomy protagonists.

Like her heroines, Anita Brookner had a claustrophobic upbringing, and this is reflected in most of her novels: the self-absorbed parents of *A Start in Life*, the French-English parentage of the heroine of *Providence*, the European-émigré family of *Family and Friends*, the daughters caring for ill and dying parents in several of the novels.

Of Polish-Jewish extraction, Anita Brookner was born in London "to a family of such surpassing eccentricity that with the passing of the years I honestly think most of them were mad. Each and every one of them was imprisoned in a role that he or she would not have chosen, and was dying to escape from. It became very tense at times" (Barber, 1983a:27).

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Brookner, however, denies that her parents and grandparents were prototypes of the characters in *A Start in Life* and *Providence*:

"No, they were nothing like; I couldn't do that to them. You have to believe me. My parents were just as bizarre but not quite so fetching. They were rigorous and complicated people . . . I have used certain situations; not characters but situations, situations out of time, taken from twenty years ago, and nothing that could possibly have reverberations today" (Haffenden, 1985:65-66).

Unlike Barbara Pym, who, especially after her rejection by Cape, worked on draft after draft of her novels, Brookner writes easily, during the summer vacations - "no drafts, no fetishes, no false starts; there simply isn't the *time*" - on to an ancient black typewriter in her office at the Courtauld Institute. She writes as though the novels had been "encoded in the unconscious". The process of writing is "painful rather than difficult. You never know what you will learn until you start writing. Then you discover truths you didn't know existed. These books are accidents of the unconscious. It's like dredging, really, seeing if you can keep it going" (Hale, 1984:98).

A superficial, but ironic correspondence between the publishing history of Pym and Brookner is that it was the publishing firm of Jonathan Cape which rejected Barbara Pym's ill-fated seventh novel, after publishing the previous six. In several of her letters and diary entries Barbara Pym refers snidely to Tom Maschler, who joined Cape in 1960 as senior editor. Brookner's *A Start in Life* was turned down by three publishers before Cape accepted it, and it emerges

from interviews that she has given that she is fiercely loyal to Cape and to her editor there.

### 3.2 Criticism to date

No full-length critical appraisal of Anita Brookner's novels has appeared yet, and therefore the assessment of her work is once again culled from reviews in literary and popular journals.

#### 3.2.1 *A Start in Life*

Critical appraisal of *A Start in Life* was largely favourable. Ruth Weiss, the only child of eccentric and self-absorbed parents, is manipulated by them and trapped by her own irresolution. Thomas Lavoie (1981:574), in outlining Ruth's life "ruined by literature", as well as by filial duty - Ruth ultimately realises that life does not obey the injunctions of romantic literature - comments that Ruth becomes a prisoner to Balzac's character, "allowing the failures of Eugénie's love to become her own". The novel is "well-realized", and "takes a wry if rather forlorn look at unrequited love". (Although not noted by critics, one already discerns correspondences between the themes of Pym and Brookner here.) Lavoie calls the novel a "sensitive, readable book for the discerning reader of fiction".

Most of the reviews paraphrase the plot, and call attention to Brookner's crisp and flawless style. Michael Barber (1983c:18) calls attention to Brookner's

arresting opening line: "Dr Weiss, at forty, knew that her life had been ruined by literature", but does not comment on the resemblance to Jane Austen's vivid and memorable openings. Barber calls the novel "a sad retrospective, all the more moving for being couched in cool, dispassionate sentences that are models of classical restraint".

Barbara A. Bannon (1981a:64), in *Publishers Weekly*, calls Ruth Weiss "a buttoned-up, 40-ish spinster professor of literature" (shades of Barbara Pym, once more, except that Pym's heroines are less academic), and comments on the theme which pervades all Brookner's subsequent novels, viz. "the world is not won by virtue". She comments that this is "a first novel of remarkable sensitivity and poignancy flecked with gentle humor".

Annie Gottlieb (1981:14) terms the novel "ironic", and provides a competent résumé:

"Its English heroine, Ruth Weiss, is a 40-year-old academic whose timid attempts to seize life are overwhelmed by her aging yet childish parents and by the weight of European culture they impose upon her. In her childhood world, youth was the anachronism. Her parents and the books that surrounded her embodied the vitality of the past, the perverse appeal of decay (the chilling portrait of Ruth's deliquescent mother is right out of Christina Stead). The wisdom and folly of the past seem to mock her efforts toward a new beginning; what's the use, it's all been done. An omniscient weary narrator watches with pity and irony as Ruth tries to fuel her brief rebellion with literature. Balzac

was right, she decides, Dickens was wrong; the bad have a good time, the virtuous are wallflowers at the ball."

The novel, then (for those who are at ease in the hyperliterate atmosphere of English novels), is a "precise and haunting little performance".

Caroline Moorehead, too, comments on Brookner's tempering of pathos with common sense:

"There is an attractive sure-footedness about Anita Brookner's style, her easy control over her material. *A Start in Life* could be depressing; it is not. The inescapable ensnarement of Ruth is too funny, too sharply drawn to be lowering; the cool, common sense touch keeps it well on the side of entertainment" (1981:22). This emotional holding-at-bay is certainly a characteristic shared with Barbara Pym.

Geoffrey Trease succinctly observes that there is "shrewd observation, verbal economy and dry understatement in this short, elegant work" (1981:566).

Not all critics are equally enamoured of Brookner's craftsmanship, which Nicholas Shrimpton (1981:21) calls "almost too sedulous". D.P. Donavin, although finding Brookner's characters "compellingly drawn", enigmatically states that "there is more promised than delivered by this first novel" (1981a:1010).

Several critics find the themes of "a life ruined by literature" and the confines of filial duty cumbersome and an unsatisfactory equation. *Harpers Magazine* calls the novel "a comparatively charming [one] . . . burdened with a

life-versus-literature theme, which climaxes in a kind of paean to amorality" (Anon., 1981a:98). Hermione Lee (1981:28) similarly feels that the novel's great success lies in Brookner's characters: "[Ruth] is meant to embody a conflict between the lessons of Balzac - 'the supreme effectiveness of bad behaviour,' the rewards of opportunism and self-interest - and the disappointing returns from duty and natural affections. But, though the end of the novel arrives at an almost Balzacian bleakness, I didn't feel this idea had been fully realised. What stands out are the wry, witty vignettes of the underbelly of middle-class London life."

Anne Duchêne (1981:595) states that it is "misleading of the author to seem to blame literature for the festering resentments of filial dutifulness"; *A Start in Life* is a small, astringent *Bildungsroman*, "with a wobble in the central thesis". This, however, is unimportant, "given the confidence of the telling":

"As well as the arm's length of wit, there is a great deal of precision and perception, including several minor characters . . . in the end, the author pulls her punches, gently." *A Start in Life* is an "assured and articulate debut".

John Naughton (1981:717) concedes that the novel is about family life and what it does to our lives. He calls the novel "intensely serious and self-conscious, and [it] teeters dangerously on the brink of pretentiousness":

"Being a literary don by trade, she [Ruth Weiss] tends to see things in recondite lights. At some times, for example, it seems to her that her life has been ruined by literature. Personally, I am more inclined to the view that it

was ruined by her parents, a pair of old frauds who admirably exemplify Wilde's view of relatives as ghastly people who have no idea of how to live nor of when to die. Dr Weiss is an expert on Balzac, from whom she draws the message that it is better to be a bad winner than a good loser in life. The impact of her parents seems to me to make her into the worst of both - a bad loser. But whatever conclusion is to be drawn from the whole sorry story, it has to be said that Ms Brookner's efforts to capture the thought processes of her serious, rather desiccated heroine result sometimes in prose which reads like the transcript of Dr George Steiner talking to himself. It is not a pretty sound."

The critical consensus appears to be that *A Start in Life* is a novel of meticulous style, written in impeccable prose. Mawkishness is held at arm's length by an astringent wit and wry irony. Brookner is adept at creating a quirky band of minor characters, but the central thesis of "a life ruined by literature" cannot quite be reconciled with the fact that Ruth Weiss's life is quite clearly and irredeemably ruined by her insufferable parents.

### 3.2.2 *Providence*

American critics and reviewers cite *Providence*, Anita Brookner's second novel, as her third, as it was only published in the United States some time after her chronological third, *Look at Me*. All three novels are variations on the same theme: a lonely, reserved and scholarly young woman ventures into an affair with a cad; the woman (unlike Pym's women, who mostly have the dubious honour of marriage to the undeserving wimp), retreats into isolation, and

resolves to transmute her experience into literature or scholarship. (Pym wives are relegated into the more subservient role of compiling indexes for their husbands' scholarly tomes.)

In *Providence*, Kitty Maule is trapped in a sort of cultural schizophrenia. She gravitates between her eccentric Parisian grandparents, an acrobat and ex-couturière, respectively, who dress her in exquisite creations, and who anxiously wait for news of romantic involvement promising marriage - once again wonderful portraits of peripheral characters by Brookner - and her more sober English self, a lecturer on the Romantic Tradition at a British provincial university. Kitty is in love with Maurice, the Professor of Mediaeval History; he is in love with his pseudo-celibacy, and cathedrals. Michael Barber (1983b:36), in *Books and Bookmen*, refers to him rather bluntly as "a pious shit" [sic].

As in the case of *A Start in Life*, many critics have pointed out that the novel's central theme is that of loneliness:

"On the surface, this novel seems almost stereotypically reactionary - successful woman pines for the love of a good man - yet Brookner looks beneath the stereotype with such a fine eye for the nuances of quiet desperation that we empathize completely with Kitty's suffering rather than scorning her as a sociological anachronism. Loneliness, as Brookner sees it, transcends education and even liberation" (B.O., 1984:803).

The ending of the novel is ironic, as the fastidious "lover", Maurice, carries off the sexy but dim-witted student, and Kitty is left with only her scholastic

proficiency in the satirically portrayed groves of academe. "With a nice blend of sympathy and detachment, Dr Brookner shows how a woman who should have a lot going for her is yet undone by her inability to learn the rules of the game" (Barber, 1983b:36).

The theme is enhanced, perhaps a shade heavy-handedly, by Kitty's conscientious seminars on *Adolphe*. These deal with "love, guilt, and accidie [and] counterpoint the major themes in Kitty's dilemma" (Fullbrook, 1982:575). "Kitty's failure to see that this man will ditch her as *Adolphe* ditched his mistress is entertainingly ironic and so is her blindness to the fact that a dim, beautiful girl in her seminar will carry him off. Neatly, and with a sense of high comedy, Ms Brookner has again shown life being damaged by literature" (O'Faolain, 1982:30).

Wendy Lesser (1984:479) finds the discussion of *Adolphe* a flaw in the novel, as it is "too symbolic", and Harriet Waugh (1982:28) also feels that the literary analogy is a trifle overwrought:

"My trouble with Miss Brookner's quiet, almost dry, but satisfying novel, was that I felt that I was suffering from the same kind of problem as the heroine in relationship to the novel. I also lacked the information. I felt that if I was brighter I would find a stronger connection between Kitty's study of the Romantic Tradition and her dilemma than in fact I did. I felt like the least bright member of Kitty's class, a girl who reduced every higher thought to the prosaic. I could see the comparison, but I could not quite see where the comparison led."

Kakutani (1984:19) feels that the juxtapositions in the novel have "a certain overkneaded quality"; the novel lacks the "fine-tuned sense of irony" of *Look at Me*. Similarly Wendy Lesser (1984:478) finds that Brookner's irony is occasionally "too heavy to be credible, the authorial wink a bit too broad". Judith Gies (1984:17) finds Kitty's plight metaphorical, and Kitty a "curiously frozen protagonist". She is "not so much a real woman as a symbol of the disappointed child in all of us", and the protagonist of *Look at Me* is "less iconographic" and more believable. Similarly Julia O'Faolain (1982:30) feels that the reader's perception that Kitty's fate has been pre-ordained and manipulated makes it hard to feel for her.

Merle Rubin (1984a:25) finds the novel spell-binding in Brookner's adept depiction of the consciousness of her heroines: "So successfully, in fact, does Brookner capture that state of mind which would excuse faults, soften harshness, take all blame on itself, that at times the foreknowing consciousness of the author and the self-deluding consciousness of her characters seem to merge, making it hard to know the dancer from the dance." Brookner, then, is skilled in exploring "the many-layered structure of the mind trying to apprehend reality, the complex relationship between expectation and disappointment, desire, and frustration".

Kate Fullbrook (1982:575) notes that Brookner concentrates on internal action "with almost Jamesian finesse", "while outwardly the surface of her characters show [sic] scarcely a ripple".

Kathleen Kearns (1984:39), however, intimates that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish Brookner's perspective from Kitty's: "Having set up the parallels between her character's obsessions and corresponding theoretical issues, she seems a little unsure of how to proceed . . . she is often too absorbed in presenting her themes to make clear how she feels about Kitty's cosmic preoccupations . . . An uncomfortable sense emerges that Brookner wants to be critical of her tiresome heroine, even make fun of her, but can't quite bring herself to do it." Michiko Kakutani, similarly, finds the prose sentimental and self-pitying in patches, the result of Brookner's "almost total identification with her heroine" (1984:19).

Most of the reviews are laudatory, with flattering comments on Brookner's skilful play of irony and literary allusion. Her writing is "as austere elegant as the dresses made for Kitty by Maman Louise" (Schwarzer, 1984:108), smoothly fluent, coolly elegant, but by no means dry. (Another ironic note is struck by Kitty's admiration of the Romantics' "assumption of effortlessness", a pose to conceal their laborious endeavour.) The novel is "calmly intelligent", and the "sane, cool, distanced elegance of the prose makes a perfect medium for this romance of the overtly controlled heroine". Brookner writes "cleverly and carefully", and this "highly literary novel" is "deftly conceived, thoroughly self-assured and very enjoyable" (Fullbrook, 1982:575). Judith Gies (1984:17) avers that the novel is more than a novel of manners:

". . . Miss Brookner is uncommonly deft, witty and serious; clearly she is reaching for more than a novel of manners. Speaking to her students of Benjamin Constant's novel 'Adolphe', Kitty Maule reminds them: 'If the despair

is total, the control remains. This is very elegant, very important. It is also atypical.' The same might be said of 'Providence.'"

More slighting opinions include that of Galen Strawson (1982:579), who contends that Kitty's love for Maurice is too incredible, "revealing a fundamental lack of moral sense that is hard to reconcile with her intellectual gifts and literary-psychological acuity". Strawson contends that the construction of the novel is "trackless", that the narrative is "vexed by slippage that fails to maintain the development that it promises and needs. Some of the time this structural inconsequence helps to dramatize Kitty's own incondite nature. But on the whole it hinders rather than enhances our perception of her". Despite this, however, there is a great deal to admire in the novel; it has "strong, unusual undercurrents of charm", it is "impressive in its detail, despite a sense of over-academic endeavour", there is "mastery in the vignette", and "a certain, quick-eyed brilliance in the rapid sketch".

The *New Yorker* (Anon., 1984a:144-145), however, calls the novel "airless" and "overwritten", and "were [Kitty's] students assigned this novel, they might scribble in the margin 'Heroine's tragic blind spot,' or 'N.B.: irony.'" The heroine is a total bore, a statement corroborated by Kitty's own words in the novel.

Robert Taubman, although finding the novel "warm and delightful about donnish life", wonders "why Anita Brookner should spend so much delicacy and irony on situations which she has planned from the start will come to nothing" (1982:18-19), and Anneliese Schwarzer (1984:108-109) feels that Brookner's prose is so

elegant, her writing so controlled, that "the admiring reader may find it difficult to remember that our world is not as narrow as it is portrayed here".

The crux of this thesis is the correspondence between the novels of Barbara Pym and Anita Brookner, and it is important to note that similarities between the writers are discerned for the first time in reviews of *Providence*. The anonymous reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* (Anon., 1983a:66) calls *Providence* "a slice of British academic life à la Barbara Pym, but with a Gallic twist". Harriet Waugh (1982:28) contends that the story "has the gentle concentration of Barbara Pym", but one might take issue with Waugh's statement that "Just as you know that Barbara Pym's ineffectual heroine will be left that much more spiritually impoverished at the end of the book than she was at the beginning, so do you know that Kitty's brief show of spirit is doomed".

Harriet Waugh's appraisal of the spiritual condition of Pym's women is exaggerated. Pym's characters have a Christian robustness which saves them from the emotional and spiritual annihilation of Brookner's women.

My contention is echoed by Judith Gies (1984:17), who notes that the novel's "genteel ado sounds much like Barbara Pym territory, and there is much here that is similar - wit, detachment, gentle spinsters. But Miss Brookner's work is more ambitious and more disturbing. Barbara Pym's women belong in a context. When men disappoint (as they invariably do), there are always the comforts of the parish jumble sale. Kitty Maule, on the other hand, is an anachronism, and we sense that her future will not be cozy".

Michiko Kakutani states that Barbara Pym is Brookner's literary model: "At 30 years old, Kitty is living the life of a spinster twice her age; except for the fact that she lives in contemporary London, she might well have stepped out of a Barbara Pym novel, so restrained and old-fashioned are her manners and expectations. Kitty spends hours 'on the routine matters of rising and eating and drinking coffee,' carefully practices the little rituals handed down from her grandmother - like stuffing tissue paper in her shoes at night - and regards the university's staff meetings as the high point of her social life" (1984:19).

Wendy Lesser (1984:478-479) finds certain stylistic resemblances between Pym and Brookner:

". . . Anita Brookner's novels have a great deal in common with Barbara Pym's: they tend to be about single women whose love affairs don't conclude satisfactorily (though Brookner's affairs are far sexier than Pym's); they focus closely on the daily details of cooking, sewing, and general household tasks [Pym's trivial round and common task]; they contain such fixtures of English country life as jumble sales and vicars (though Pym is much heavier on the vicars than Brookner); and they emphasize the value of wit, giving great credit to characters for small amusing observations. The humorous eye which Pym often turns upon the church, Brookner reserves for academia . . ."

These apparent correspondences will be analysed in full in the following chapters. However, a superficial judgement at this stage is that Brookner's work covers much the same ground as that of Pym, but that her ironies are grimmer, her denouements more felling, her writing less livened by wry humour,

and that she evokes infinitely more melancholy portraits of emotional states and modes of existence than Pym does in her mild comedies of manners.

### 3.2.3 *Look at Me*

In an eight-line review, Joyce Johnson says of Brookner's third novel, *Look at Me*:

"If there is such a thing as a perfect novel, this comes very close. Brookner tackles isolation and loneliness head on, sparing us no shame or petty human cruelty, never missing an irony and never writing a flat sentence" (Johnson, 1983:675).

The narrator of *Look at Me* is Frances, a single woman working in a medical research library. Like the previous Brookner heroines, she desires something more from life than she already has. She is beguiled by the seemingly glamorous world of Nick, a doctor, and his vain wife, Alix. Through these two handsome but predatory characters, Frances meets a man much like herself, but through the machinations of Nick and Alix, and after Frances's public humiliation at a restaurant, she is left to live alone, with only her talent for writing to sustain her.

The plot is suggestive of Brookner's own pronouncements on the creative impulse, as literature is presented as a resource, or penance, for those who are not "lucky".

Critical response to *Look at Me* was favourable, and several prominent reviewers selected the novel as the best of its year. In fact it was mooted by some critics as belonging on the Booker shortlist; in the event, the Booker Prize for 1983 went to J.M. Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K*.

Kathy Field Stephen (1983:24) notes: "Though 'Look at Me' never falls to the level of the merely dolorous, it is not a book that pulls punches. Those looking for a lighthearted romance would be advised to choose something else."

Barbara Bannon (1983a:91) of *Publishers Weekly* calls Brookner "an elegist of despair and sorrow, of isolation in cozy, empty flats; of repressed emotions and things left unsaid; and of ill-fated, un-lived lives passed among undying memories and mementos of the dead", while Patricia Craig in the *Times Literary Supplement* comments on literature once again, as in Brookner's previous novels, being presented as a resource of those in whom some vital quality is absent. The novel is written with the kind of exactitude that makes for humour, and is "intelligent, absorbing and accomplished" (Craig, 1985:479).

John Mellors (1983:32) finds the plot predictable, but the chronicle piquant, and the novel "is a thoughtful study of loneliness and melancholia". Brookner's prose is "full of bright images: a man's 'small gooseberry eyes', and a Christmas kitchen in which you can see 'the enticing gleam where the mince-meat had oozed through the pastry'". This predilection for minute and precise detail is characteristic of much of Barbara Pym's writing, although Mellors does not make this analogy.

Anne Duchêne (1983:289) comments in comparable fashion on Brookner's impeccable inventory - "the detail here is planted with the penetration and precision of a tattooist's needle".

Elaine Jordan (1983:23) suggests that Frances is tougher than most reviewers make her out to be, and her "melancholy retrospective shows a bravery of wit". Frances is not denied only love; she is also denied good manners, and the novel is "a meditation on experience in the French tradition". Jordan finds an analogy in the theme of *Mansfield Park* (the first comparison of Brookner with Jane Austen):

"Isn't Anita Brookner in fact reconsidering the theme of *Mansfield Park* - modern, role-playing, self-seeking and profligate breach of convention against the affections of the honest heart? There are coincidences of naming: the Frasers were old London friends of Mary Crawford, there's a Maria here whom James (Henry Crawford and Edmund Bertram) goes off with, and there's Fanny, as the Frasers call her, although she tells us at once that she does not like to be called this. What Fanny Price wins is what this Fanny desires: love that is open, innocent and simple and that can be felt to be so because it is acknowledged in society, not another illicit, complicated and humiliating affair. She had wanted to be a bride, approved by the good wishes of friends, 'the daughter of the house once more'."

Thus it would seem that Brookner shares a nomenclatural *penchant* with Barbara Pym, *vide* Pym's Jane, Prudence Bates, Leonora Eyre, et al.

Sally Emerson (1983:85) comments on the novel's wit and style (prose of great delicacy and strength); once again the heroine, as in the previous novels, is a "withdrawn, lonely person who is intellectually sharp and emotionally naive". Kate Fullbrook (1983:451-452), in a fulsome review, comments that *Look at Me* is on familiar Brookner territory - "the psychological study of the independent, genteel, intelligent, modern woman trapped by her virtues in a world that recognizes only excess as grounds for sexual love". (Once again shades of Barbara Pym, although Fullbrook notes the analogy between Nick and Alix, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's Buchanans in *The Great Gatsby*.) The themes of the novel - "melancholy, truth, memory and the retreat to childishness" - dominate the work.

It might be expedient at this juncture to comment on similarities between Nick and Alix, and Tom and Daisy Buchanan of *The Great Gatsby*. It is, of course, fortuitous that the narrator in Fitzgerald's work is also called Nick. The following extracts from the novel do, in fact, complement Fullbrook's analogy. The first is a description of Daisy Buchanan ("Listen to me", if not "Look at me"), the second Nick Carraway's condemnation of the Buchanans as "careless people":

I looked back at my cousin, who began to ask me questions in her low, thrilling voice. It was the kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again. Her face was sad and lovely with bright things in it, bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth, but there was an excitement in her voice that men who had cared for her found difficult to forget: a singing compulsion, a whispered 'Listen', a promise that she had done gay, exciting things just a while since and that there were gay, exciting things hovering in the next hour (Fitzgerald, 1971:15-16);

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy - they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made . . . (Fitzgerald, 1971:186).

Hermione Lee (1983b:32), in a review pithily entitled "Melancholia in Maida Vale", calls *Look at Me* a "schematic, relentless little novel, sometimes oppressively plangent in tone" (*plangent* is a favourite adjective of Brookner critics), with "a marvellously sharp, Muriel Sparkish eye for lonely London scenes (libraries at closing time, Christmas Day laundrettes, Sunday streets) and an alarming knowledge of sadness". The horror of Christmas day as a day to be endured by the lonely is a recurrent Pym scenario.

Michael Barber (1985:29) also comments on the pervasive nature of Brookner's themes and characters. Brookner's discourse is "coolly and elegantly told", but "the trouble is that we have met Frances, or someone like her, twice before, and may yet do so again - I haven't read *Hotel du Lac*, but its heroine sounds sadly familiar. It is time Professor Brookner packed her lonely bluestockings off to a nunnery - or better still, Plato's retreat - and wrote instead about a nubile, red-blooded *goer*".

Resemblances to Barbara Pym are noted by three reviewers: Michiko Kakutani (1983b:14) finds Fanny not unlike Barbara Pym's heroines - "she is someone who has been raised to be polite and earnest, and yet feels that the Old World virtues of her parents have ill equipped her to deal with the brave new world around her". Francis King (one of Pym's staunchest admirers) finds the situation at the start of the novel reminiscent of Barbara Pym - two cultivated,

upper-middle class, unattached women working in a reference library. "However, if these were Barbara Pym women, there would be more gaiety or, at least, gallantry to their quiet desperation, and they would also no doubt be active in their local churches" (King, 1983:27). This factor in the writing of Barbara Pym - her women clinging to the wreckage, such as it were - marks a substantial difference in approach by the two writers. King finds a double irony in the novel; the victim, a would-be novelist, having been eager to make the real life characters around her do her bidding in her fiction, finds herself manipulated, "doing the bidding of others in the fiction they devise for her".

Mary Cantwell (1983:22) finds a further irony in the novel, and also discerns that the novel goes beyond the novels of Barbara Pym:

"It would be an error to see 'Look at Me' simply as a novel about a self-conscious young Englishwoman who becomes a writer on the order of, at a guess, Barbara Pym. Instead, it is a horror story about monsters and their victims told in exceptionally elegant prose. It is a great pleasure to read, especially when one considers that Frances, in becoming a writer, may end up the biggest monster of them all."

Frances, then, rather than being "ruined by literature" is saved by it, after a fashion:

"And what does Frances get, besides exclusion from the banquet? She gets material. Frances, who has had two stories published, will embark on a novel.

Unequipped to participate in certain passions, she can at least comment on them and so create their simulacrum.

"Maybe, of course, that's what she wanted all along. A case can be made for her retreat's being too precipitous. Perhaps her descent to the desk and the typewriter is no descent at all but a hoped-for ascent to a peak from which to watch Alix, Nick and James mired in talk and complications. But it's cold up there in the empyrean, and the price Frances must pay for so privileged a perch is a lifelong chill. That and the knowledge that most of those down below, certainly Nick and Alix, will think writing a poor substitute for living" (Cantwell, 1983:22).

Although similarities between Brookner and Pym are merely glossed over by critics, the main thrust appears to be that Brookner's treatment of the loneliness and melancholy of the archetypal "excellent woman" is infinitely more bleak, cutting and incisive than that of Pym. Even Pym's darkest moments are generally leavened by a wry sense of humour, or at least a modicum of pleasure in the trivia which comprise our mundane existence.

#### 3.2.4 *Hotel du Lac*

The 1984 Booker Prize for Fiction was awarded to *Hotel du Lac*, although several critics thought J.G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* a worthier contender. However, *Contemporary Review* (Anon., 1985b:48) called Brookner's novel "a brilliantly intuitive study of a lonely Englishwoman's holiday in a typical Swiss lakeside resort, and her reaction to her fellow guests".

Edith Hope, a writer of romantic pulp fiction under the "more thrusting name" of Vanessa Wilde, is exiled to a sedate Swiss hotel, having jilted her fiancé on their wedding day.

Although Sebastian Faulks's (1984:18) heart sinks at the beginning of the novel "to find that [Brookner] has booked us into that old standby of English ironists, the hotel of disappointed gentility" (cf. Elizabeth Bowen, Patrick Hamilton, Terence Rattigan and D.M. Thomas), the guests in the hotel are functional in the telling of the tale. "What looks at first like peripheral comic characters - deaf mme de Bonneuil, cast off by her son, ravaged Monica, banished by her husband, and a grotesquely greedy ageing mother and daughter - become *exempla* in Edith's interior debate about women. She detests the 'ultra-feminine' baiters of the sexual trap, but is at odds with feminism" (Lee, 1984:22).

Martha Bayles is less complimentary about Brookner's assortment of types: "This is no *Magic Mountain* or *Ship of Fools* attempting to reflect, through an assortment of social types, the tensions of a larger world. In fact, it scarcely seems to matter what century we are in" (1985:38).

Edith observes the ménage of hotel guests, writes letters to her married lover, and works at her new novel. Ultimately refusing marriage to the appalling Mr Neville - his proposal goes on the lines of: "As my wife, you will do very well. Unmarried I'm afraid you will soon look a bit of a fool" - Edith ponders "the question of what behaviour most becomes a woman".

Having won the Booker Prize, *Hotel du Lac* attracted such a plethora of reviews, that it is impracticable to cite them all. Once again Brookner "describes unhappiness and loneliness with unsettling skill" (Emerson, 1984:99); however, Edith Hope's advantage over Brookner's other heroines "is that she has more sense of humour". Edith Hope (an ironic touch to the surname?) is "the first of Miss Brookner's heroines to arrive at a nonromantic, wryly realistic appreciation of her single state" (Tyler, 1985:31). (Anita Brookner has revealed in an interview that after the appearance of *Look at Me*, she was chided by an aunt for writing too many books about lonely women, the tales having too much of an autobiographical slant, as it were.)

Adam Mars-Jones (1985:18), however, disagrees. Edith's identity is "composed only of negatives"; hers is "a temperament so thoroughly self-punishing that she doesn't actually need to be treated badly in order to generate the demure agony that is her recurrent emotion"; *Hotel du Lac* is, in essence, "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".

As the other characters in the novel "crisscross in a quadrille of genteel despair" (Faulks, 1984:18), Brookner describes their foibles and idiosyncrasies with wit and style. The plot of the novel "is one of minor intensity - .001 on the fictional Richter scale" (Sutherland, 1984:20), but Edith's "right choice . . . redeems the novel from its unoriginality" (Faulks, 1984:18).

However, Angela McRobbie (1984:34) notes that *Hotel du Lac's* forte "is the debt it owes to its lower generic equivalent, the pulp romance. The slow sorrow with life which finds temporary release in the strong-jawed hero is here displaced into a more upmarket world. Nothing, it seems, can really be moved or changed in the hothouse of traditional emotions". Martha Bayles is more snide - "*Hotel du Lac* is a Harlequin Romance for highbrows" (1985:38).

Plot, however, is subservient to style, for: "How these possibilities unfold is less important than the manner in which they are related. . . . [Brookner] . . . is insidiously observant, so soft of voice the reader must listen closely for the wry wit and sly humor; and poignantly moving" (Anon., 1985d:59). The novel is a "discerning, resplendent novel of sensibility" (Soete, 1985:178); Brookner's usual melancholy is lightened "with an amusing ironic touch", and the novel is a "pensive, pleasantly droll tale by a deft author" (Donavin, 1985b:665).

Indeed, much has been made by critics of Brookner's acclaimed "style". Several critics have quoted the opening lines of *Hotel du Lac* as an example of her "sweeping syntactic line with its regular insurance clauses taken out in mid-sentence to guard against anything so crass as a straight statement of descriptive fact" (Sutherland, 1984:20). Martha Bayles is once again less complimentary: The opening sentence "depicts autumn fog on a Swiss lake, but it also metaphorically focuses the novel on an intensely subjective realm extending from here to the windowsill and no further" (1985:37).

Brookner's (and Edith's) literary sensibilities are also the topic of much speculation. Hermione Lee finds Cleopatra's lines apposite, as "Edith at last comes to admit that she believes in her own romances, and chooses to act more like Cleopatra than Virginia Woolf" (1984:22). Also, the grave formality "catches at the heart", much in the manner of Rosamond Lehmann, to whom the novel is dedicated. Barbara Hardy (1984:1019) finds Edith's repeated physical resemblance to Virginia Woolf tiresome, as well as "her bad habit of platitudinous quotation from Shakespeare, Stevie Smith and Proust in her inner monologue and love-letters". Jane Austen and Henry James provide the most analogies: "Diabolical Mr Neville . . . pops up talking like a Jane Austen villain and offering a Jamesian marriage of status" (Lee, 1984:22); "Mr Neville . . . is a little Daniel Deronda in reverse, recommending egocentricity and bad behaviour" (Hardy, 1984:1019); on the other hand, however, Mr Neville "appears to have stepped straight from the pages of E.M. Forster" (Faulks, 1984:18). Henry James is Brookner's model both with regard to style - "a classical propriety in the organisation of her story, and prose that would not have seemed unusual a hundred years ago", and subject matter - "love, marriage, social nuance" (Lasdun, 1985:42). Dean Flower (1985:310-311) notes that "certain moments suggest *What Maisie Knew* or *The Sacred Fount*", while Edmund Fuller finds that some passages "about perennial dilemmas of love and philosophies of marriage, made me imagine James's Isabel Archer displaced by a century - not in details of story . . . but in thematic resonances" (1985:28).

Margo Jefferson (1985:234) is even more catholic: *Hotel du Lac* "alludes with ironic fondness to Muriel Spark, Barbara Pym, Rosamond Lehmann, and Stevie Smith. There are fastidious nods across the Atlantic to Margaret Atwood and Mary Gordon. And a homage (slightly mocking) to Iris Murdoch is embodied in

the elegant, perverse male lead, who tempts Edith to forswear her austere romanticism and marry for pride, prejudice, and position". A further quote from Jefferson finds an echo in Barbara Pym:

". . . Brookner's leading ladies are writers and academics who turn Faith, Hope, and Charity into Self-Scrutiny, Longing, and Self-Effacement. Solicitously astute, they observe the world with irony but also with genuine feeling, attending to the needs of others in a way that ensures their own needs will go unheeded" (1985:234).

Pym's virtues are wittier: "Why this need for Patience and Courage? And the bewildered English spinster, now rather gaunt and toothy, but with a mild, sweet expression, may hardly know herself. Really, if I ever have any children I think I must call them Patience and Courage. Twins - rather dreary stolid little girls" (Pym, 1984d:122).

*The Virginia Quarterly Review* (Anon., 1985e:92) sees Brookner's novel as descending from the tradition of Jane Austen, and it "can be likened to the recent fiction of Barbara Pym, especially *The Sweet Dove Died*. But if there is great pathos in Brookner's novel, there is less bitterness and bleakness than that which beclouds Pym's brittle universe". This is a somewhat curious pronouncement, as the anonymous critic isn't more explicit about possible correspondences between *Hotel du Lac* and *The Sweet Dove Died* (an unlikely duo), and Brookner's heroines, as Anne Tyler correctly points out, are infinitely more susceptible to gloom:

". . . Anita Brookner has often been compared with Pym - less because of style . . . than because of her cast of players. Her central character is invariably a mild-mannered English spinster, pleasant to look at, if not very striking, and impeccably dressed. She is so correct, so self-controlled and punctilious, that we are surprised to learn how young she is - not yet out of her 30's. Not too old to look up in a quick, alert, veiled way whenever an unattached man wanders past.

"But what she sees when she looks at the man - well, till now, [*Hotel du Lac*, that is] that's where she differed from most of the women in Pym's books. Pym's heroine would generally see someone appealing but comically flawed (as all men are, she would reflect with a smile). Miss Brookner's always saw a rescuer. Pym's heroine would be rueful, self-mocking. Miss Brookner's was seriously hopeful, and seriously cast down when her hopes failed to materialise" (Tyler, 1985:1).

This is an important difference in the work of these two writers, reflecting a maturity and lack of mawkishness in the writing of Barbara Pym.

Only two reviewers find *Hotel du Lac* ultimately unsatisfying: Martha Bayles (1985:38) asserts that the novel works as a comedy of manners "capturing a peculiar mode of frustration, which occurs whenever the English encounter one another in a foreign place". Mary Sullivan (1984:687) finds the book "mild" and "readable", but castigates it for "the absence of any hard reality. All the characters, including Edith, come across as ideas rather than as people with bodily attributes or petty preoccupations of everyday life". This is another important Pym attribute, the preoccupation with "the trivial round, the common

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task", which anchors her characters soundly in reality and sanity - even Marcia's mad preoccupation with the milk bottles in *Quartet in Autumn* does this to some extent. Although Julian Jebb (1984:27) enthuses about *Hotel du Lac*'s "extraordinary blend of wit, seriousness and an unassuming attitude to philosophy enshrined in a perfectly told short novel", Hermione Lee (1984:22) comes closer to the mark in identifying the slight tedium of encountering yet another melancholy Brookner novel, albeit conceived in meticulous prose style:

"After four novels, the 'Brookner' hallmarks - a twilight, dreamlike inwardness, an austere subject-matter, an infinite melancholy - become, perhaps, a little shadowy and self-shadowing."

### 3.2.5 *Family and Friends*

Critics generally concur that Brookner's fifth novel marks a departure from her established *dramatis personae* as well as her *modus operandi* in respect of style and form. Unlike her other novels, *Family and Friends* does not focus on the loneliness of a youngish, unmarried woman, who is out of depth with regard to the sexual mores of her time, but on the vicissitudes of a family of European descent, now living in England. The themes, too, are "big" - the conflict between classicism and romanticism, reason and emotion, the bounds of duty and the burden of charm (Gardam, 1985a:26).

In the light of interviews given by Anita Brookner, it would appear that there is a fairly strong autobiographical element in the first three novels, at least -

vide her "exercise in self-analysis" discussed earlier. In a Radio 3 talk in 1985, however, "Miss Brookner acknowledged that she has drawn in this book [*Family and Friends*] on her own family of her parents' and grandparents' generation. She felt 'the exhilaration of disposing of these characters whom I had always seen as immensely powerful'; and she laughed as she wrote the last sentence of the book, in which a little girl of Miss Brookner's own generation called Victoria appears" (May, 1985:26).

*Family and Friends*, then, is a study of a continental family, now living in England, dominated by the matriarch Sofka, and this novel by Brookner has elicited the most diverse and disparate criticism to date.

Negative criticism by no means outweighs the positive, however; thus it is of little consequence which is examined first. It might perhaps be expedient to examine reviewers' comments on style, as it is "a novel whose style is itself about style" (Wandor, 1985:682).

The novel begins and ends with a wedding group photograph, and in a cinematic manner, the writer zooms in (in sepia tones) on every member of the family. We see Sofka (albeit through a glass, darkly), and her four children: the rakish Frederick, coquettish Betty, quiet Mimi and reliable Alfred. Each of the characters is scrupulously and meticulously stereotyped by Brookner. Michelene Wandor admits to feelings of ambivalence about *Family and Friends*, and her comments on the novel are illuminating:

"In this study of an upper-middle class family, Brookner continues with great confidence the style for which she is best known: meticulous, slightly distant,

self-consciously stylistic, but in a way that produces an impeccably flawless prose . . . Although the novel takes us through [the characters'] growing up, their marriages and their interrelationships, it is not so much the material content of the novel as its point of view that is of most interest.

"The narrative tone recalls the hallmark of Fay Weldon (although the content is very different), in that the authorial voice acts as an observing guide, making sure that we never get involved with either characters or events. This is one of the curious legacies of our fictional history; it is as if the nineteenth-century moralist has joined with the Brechtian tone to present a cool, external picture of a way of life. 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" (Wandor, 1985:682).

Fortunately Wandor qualifies her reference to Fay Weldon, as Weldon's brittle, know-it-all style is somewhat removed from the cool reticence of Brookner. However, one is forced to agree with Wandor's final judgement; *Family and Friends* is an over-intellectualized study of a European family's "dance to the music of time", and one which places the reader in the position of an ultimately disaffected voyeur.

Irony has been recognised as the hallmark of Brookner's writing; this is frequently situational irony which leaves the reader gasping in the final pages of the novel, for although one senses that the hapless female protagonist's

expectations are likely to be confounded, Brookner has the knack of springing unpleasant surprises on the temporarily lulled and bemused reader. D.P. Donavin comments on Brookner's ironic distance from her characters in *Family and Friends*. The novel is written in a deliberately arcane style, which is appropriate to its subject, although "neither the levity nor the smooth storytelling that highlighted Brookner's last novel, *Hotel du Lac* . . . is evident here" (Donavin, 1985a:1474).

This "deliberately arcane style" is also commented on by Derwent May (1985:26). He poses the following provocative question in the opening lines of the review: "Anita Brookner's new book is certainly a novel - but is it a story? Stories imply event, drama, change." *Family and Friends* has none of this, and is "more like some strange kind of painting, with a group of figures who take on different appearances as you tilt it or rotate it, but are always held in exactly the same pattern, and only give the faintest impression of movement of their own". This is exacerbated by style. Brookner writes in "a dreamy, languorous [present] tense that seems to eliminate time", and "it is always Miss Brookner who is moving about, drawing her attention now to this, now to that detail on the canvas . . . She is interested here in emotions and moods, elements in her personages to which incidental, temporal fact is really of no consequence . . . Consequently another feature of her language here is that it is nearly always analytical and general". This is all done with mastery and elegance, but Brookner's Grecian urn type vision is ultimately a little boring for the reader.

Galen Strawson (1985:21) says in mitigation that Anita Brookner "is an authority on exilo and irresolution, on missed opportunity and unfulfilled expectation, on sexual and emotional incompetence, and the long continuities of sorrow and

deprivation that defy interruption by forceful action. One feels she could spend the rest of her life writing effortlessly and stylishly in this vein, and that her new novel is, for her, something of a routine exercise". In *Family and Friends*, the novelist appears mechanical, and the novel is "unrelieved by the humour of her earlier novels, and overstocked with lacklustre generalities". Although the novel has "light and gloomy charm", it is compromised by its lack of depth. There are "too many modestly grandiloquent phrases that have the sound but not the sense of aphorisms . . . [and] Brookner strains repeatedly for resonances that she fails to achieve . . .".

While commending Brookner for widening the scope of her novel in *Family and Friends* (she has moved to the past, abandoning spinsters), Caryn James (1985:15) nevertheless feels that Brookner has surrendered her appealing qualities: her heroines' wit, the reader's implied superiority to the befuddled women (Brookner being ironic again?), as well as her graceful style. The narrative of *Family and Friends* is "stiff and laborious", the device of the family portrait is "stilted", and the narrative voice fails to develop any sort of persona. Although these stylistic gaucheries irritate, Brookner still manages to achieve "the subtlety and breadth of the best novels of manners".

A final dissenting voice is that of Lee Lescaze (1985:26). In the previous novels, Brookner's women were wimpish creatures; her men, although perfidious, were in control and assured. In *Family and Friends*, "her male protagonists are as prominent as the females. So they are doomed to be just as weak and silly". The author's contempt for her characters gives her work "an icy sheen", the omniscient first person device is awkward, the author has an awe-

some eye for meaningless detail, and the novel reveals "less craft" than the earlier ones. Also the characters' seeming obliviousness to their surroundings (World War II) "makes them seem like 19th-century figures in a 20th-century landscape". The engaging metaphor of the hare and the tortoise (hares are the real winners in life) which was central to *Hotel du Lac* no longer exists - "there are no hares left, only tortoises too slow and cumbersome to be of much interest".

Although Brookner is censured for the self-consciousness with which she depicts the odd dynasty of *Family and Friends*, more positive appraisals are not lacking. The following is a good example of the more eulogistic reviews:

"*Family and Friends* is a wonderful book composed of drawing room vignettes, of amorous wisps and emotional fragments. Brookner's celebrated reputation is built on her fine exposition of unsought loneliness, but this new novel entertains, touches, tells you more of the characters it canvasses" (Kingsley, 1985:20).

Precisely the failings for which *Family and Friends* is slighted by some critics, are hailed as virtues by others. The novel is "cool, precise, deliciously ironic" and clearly Brookner's best. She presents a "dark comedy of manners, a witty analysis of family relationships and human behavior". With laser-like probing, Brookner draws "clear portraits with an elegant economy of words and with sharp, aphoristic impact". Brookner has assembled this novel "with an artist's eye" and "every page has gems that beg to be read aloud" (Bannon, 1985:60).

Michiko Kakutani (1985:18), although chafing at Brookner's "italicized applications of Freudian logic" and her cynical view of society - she is so intent on proving her hare and tortoise thesis that "she reduces all human relationships to a blind Darwinian struggle, devoid of chance and magic and love", finds *Family and Friends* a satisfying novel. Complimenting her on her "careful, angled prose" and her "delicate sense of gesture and detail", Kakutani notes that *Family and Friends* is more remote, more lacking in self-pity than some of the previous novels which were threatening to become predictable and routine.

Sally Emerson (1985:63) reiterates much the same argument. *Family and Friends* is a richer book than *Hotel du Lac*, the latter a "beautifully put-together book" which lacked the energy and occasional touch of rawness of *A Start in Life* and *Look at Me*.

Although praising Brookner's "impeccable connoisseurship . . . [and] . . . her cosmopolitan sense of period, fashion, nuances of conduct" in the sequence of tableaux which makes up *Family and Friends*, and finding the book "a pleasure to read", Sybille Bedford also voices a hint of doubt:

"And yet at times I had a nagging doubt. I don't quite know how to define it. A sense of remoteness? A feeling that it was all a game, a knowing game played with detachment by the author? (I felt this in *Hotel du Lac*, and not at all in *A Start in Life*)" (Bedford, 1985:29). In a Radio 3 talk Brookner confessed that the writing of *Family and Friends* came easily to her, was in fact effortless, and Bedford continues:

"Yet an ambivalence persists. If the tale is meant to move, there may be something in the very accomplishment in the telling that gets in the way of sentiment. As though it were all done by mirrors."

*Family and Friends* was well received by eminent scholars and novelists, Frank Kermode finding it "rich and interesting" (1985:13), and A.N. Wilson (1985:973) calling it Brookner's best novel to date. Lee Lescaze (1985:26) finds the novel has "less craft" than Brookner's others; whereas her earlier works "prompted critics to reach for comparisons with Henry James and Virginia Woolf, no such comparisons come to mind for 'Family and Friends'". Other critics were fairly quick to spot literary echoes and analogies. The novel 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" (Hill, 1985:195). A.N. Wilson (1985:973) feels that the tone could be Chekhovian, if any of the characters spoke. When the characters do open their mouths, it is to eat rather than speak (shades of Barbara Pym's preoccupation with food here, perhaps). Wilson finds a more apt analogy in Ivy Compton-Burnett, an author who has been mentioned in connection with Barbara Pym also. Brookner's world in *Family and Friends* is a "mirror-version of Ivy Compton-Burnett's, where *all* is conveyed by dialogue and by dialogue alone. There is, though, a strong similarity, morally and spiritually, between the two worlds . . . There is the same sense . . . that family life gives opportunities for the most hellish exercises of power . . . *Family and Friends* . . . is like a Compton-Burnett novel adapted for the cinema. The silent cinema".

R.Z. Sheppard (1985:67) finds analogies in characters: Alfred, the sombre bibliophile, refutes the opening lines of *Pride and Prejudice*, while Frederick seems to have stepped out of Turgenev. Little overt mention is made of Barbara Pym, although Kakutani (1985:18) once again discerns parallels with the archetypal "Pym-like spinster, diligent, correct and impeccably earnest", in the early novels. Caryn James (1985:15) feels that *Family and Friends* shows Brookner "taking control of the genre she has inherited from Jane Austen and Barbara Pym", and welcomes it as a sign of artistic maturity. Finally, Susan Hill (1985:195) finds Brookner adept at describing possessions - "furnishing, draperies, garments, accessories - and food". Although she does not mention this, the description of minutiae is a characteristic of Pym's manner.

*Family and Friends*, then, although something of a watershed novel, elicits an ambivalent response from reviewers, and although gracefully and exquisitely written in the polished prose for which Brookner has become noted, it fails to engage the reader's emotions, leaving him a disaffected spectator of Brookner's distant, if stylistically accomplished novel.

### 3.2.6 A *Misalliance*

With *A Misalliance*, published in 1986, we are back in familiar Brookner territory; however, the brave divorcee has taken the place of the hopeful spinster. Blanche Vernon's husband has left her, after twenty years of marriage, for a young computer analyst called Mousie - from all evidence a type described more fully in *Hotel du Lac* as "the young woman executive . . . the

*Cosmopolitan* reader . . . those multi-orgasmic girls with the executive brief-cases" (Brookner, 1985b:26-28).

Blanche spends a great deal of time in devising ways in which to kill time: she sits in her immaculate flat (having artfully left an unwashed cup or two, just to give her cleaning lady something to do, but otherwise bare of any Pym lived-in or cosy touches), drinking white wine "rather steadily" (shades of Stevie Smith drinking gin with verve), she does volunteer work at the local hospital, and she also spends a lot of time at the National Gallery, where she compulsively studies paintings of nymphs. These nymphs, with their flagrant sensuality and "archaic smiles" are metaphors for Blanche's musing upon the chasm dividing womankind. Once again there are the predators: the beautiful, the lucky, the ineffable, the careless, and the "excellent women": those who are "doomed to serve, to be faithful, honourable and excluded".

The "misalliance" of the title refers to the tangled complexities of Blanche's relationship with the mute child Elinor (encountered at Blanche's hospital duty), as well as between the errant Bertie and the quirkily named Mousie. Victoria Glendinning, however, discerns a further misalliance:

"She [Brookner] has become a major stylist. The misalliance here is between manner and matter. As in *Hotel du Lac*, she is just brooding, beautifully, about why some (apparently unworthy) women drive men wild while others do not" (1986:n.p.).

Therefore, on the one hand there are the "good" women, the uxorious neighbour, Mrs Duff, as well as Blanche's cleaning lady (another Barbara Pym

type, as she is a spinster for whom the church outing provides the most excitement in life) - on the other hand, there are the feckless ones - Mousie and Sally, the indolent stepmother of the mute child whom Blanche befriends, and who accepts Blanche's cash handouts as her inalienable due.

The few reviews which have appeared to date are uniformly laudatory, although one reviewer somewhat plaintively remarks:

"Loneliness is Anita Brookner's forte and her new book is as cheerful as a wet March morning. She would probably take 'The Bench of Desolation' for a future title if Henry James had not earmarked it for one of his comparable studies of quiet desperation . . . [However] . . . It is ignoble to wish she would write something a bit more cheerful" (Seymour, 1986:25).

Caroline Moore (1986:n.p.) similarly laments that self-pity, however bravely disguised, ends by alienating the reader's sympathy.

Other reviewers, however, notably Victoria Glendinning (1986:n.p.) who remarks that readers have sometimes longed to strangle the Brookner heroine with the sleeves of her own cardigan, scenting an assumption of superiority in her lonely fastidiousness, as well as Madeleine Kingsley (1986:28), find Blanche a more credible creation than Brookner's previous heroines:

"We may find her mildly infuriating, but Blanche's saving grace is that she, too, is irritated by her feeble passivity and, as much as anyone, admires the 'pagan energy' and 'bliethness' of Mousie" (Kingsley, 1986:28). Blanche is "a real

fictional heroine, pluckier, funnier and a lot more interesting than anyone Brookner has ever written about before" (Foster, 1986:212).

Most critics agree that in matters of style, the novel shows Brookner at her best - the writing is lucid, ironic, "hypnotically pleasurable to read" (Seymour, 1986:25). Also, according to Madeleine Kingsley, "delicacy and individual portraiture is the real Brookner forte". The novel has the "assurance and tenacity" of *Look at Me*, and Brookner manages to capture the desolation of life after desertion "probably better than any other English writer since Elizabeth Bowen" (Hickman, 1986:43).

In *A Misalliance*, then, Brookner has abandoned the experimental form of *Family and Friends*, and retreated to the milieu she has made her own. However, the slight tedium felt by the reader in encountering yet another uptight heroine, is voiced by Caroline Moore (1986):

"But the intelligence and coolly despairing realism that have become the hallmarks of Anita Brookner's writing are showing signs of becoming a creative straitjacket. By blocking off even the hope of 'unrealistic' possibilities, she has produced a novel that is drained not only of gusto, but even of narrative interest."

### 3.3 The critical consensus

In marked contrast to that of Barbara Pym, Anita Brookner's publishing history has been both short and remarkably successful. Brookner, already eminent as

an art historian and the author of several works on art history and criticism, has published a successful novel every autumn since 1981. Her work is more overtly autobiographical than that of Barbara Pym,<sup>1</sup> and the much vaunted Brookner style is, according to the writer, achieved without undue effort or revision.

### **3.3.1 The scope of the critical oeuvre**

Given Brookner's relatively recent emergence as a novelist of stature, it is perhaps not surprising that no substantial criticism of her work has appeared to date. Critical opinion is therefore confined to reviews of her novels which have appeared in literary and popular journals, although interviews which she has given - the most illuminating being that with John Haffenden (1985) - have also added considerably to an appreciation of her fictional craft.

### **3.3.2 Anita Brookner's themes**

Brookner has been described as "an elegist of despair and sorrow", who explores loneliness "with a fine eye for the nuances of quiet desperation". Her major theme lies in her contention that the world is not won by virtue, that the fable of the hare and the tortoise is a fallacy, as most explicitly expounded in *Hotel*

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1 "Self-deprecating Brookner, who is 48, is the only child of elderly parents, now dead. She has a wide social life but will pull down the shutters. She is a very solitary person who is elusive and unmarried. It is widely assumed that she writes about herself" (Anon., 1986a:123).

*du Lac*. Analogous to this is the theme of unrequited love, although Brookner looks beyond the apparent Mills and Boon stereotype with an acute and perspicacious insight. This makes her work infinitely bleaker than that of Barbara Pym, whose heroines' lives are less selfish and more fulfilled than those of Brookner's. A lesser theme is that of filial duty, the care of old or dying parents, which is also undertaken with less fortitude and selflessness than by Pym's female protagonists. Women's education (viz. the study of literature) and its failure to provide them with the wherewithal for life is another theme she shares with Pym, although this is a peripheral concern in the novels of the latter. Literature is presented as a resource of those who are not blessed with good looks or a hedonistic approach to life, and Brookner's contention of "a life ruined by literature" is assiduously worked out, especially in novels such as *A Start in Life*, *Look at Me*, and *Providence*. These novels make the point that literature can damage life in its provision of inadequate or deluding role models. Brookner has herself emphasised this as the virtue and value of fiction, with reservations:

"... 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).

Brookner has, however, been criticised for themes which are too recondite, and not always fully realised. According to some critics, too much delicacy and irony are wasted on situations which inevitably come to nothing.

### 3.3.3. Anita Brookner's characters

Brookner's heroines are single women, generally impeccably dressed, just this side of middle-age. Despite being erudite, and successful in their chosen careers - they are academics, librarians, successful authors - they are singularly blind and obtuse when confronted by the ways of the world and by their choice of obnoxious men. Showing dazzling insight into the explication of a literary text, for example, they are unable to display anything like the same perspicacity to life. More astringent critics accuse Brookner's heroines of being sentimental and self-pitying, and of wallowing in narcissism and self-mortification. Brookner's male characters tend to be pusillanimous cads, hovering, like Pym's, on the periphery of the heroine's existence. Brookner also excels in her depiction of minor characters, who are generally essential to her thesis. These tend to caricature, much in the manner of Dickens, but are portrayed with skill and humour.

### 3.3.4 Anita Brookner's style

Anita Brookner's plots have been described, tongue-in-cheek, as measuring .001 on a fictional Richter scale, as clearly plot in a Brookner novel is often subservient to style. "Plangent", "haunting" and "schematic" are adjectives which proliferate in critical appraisals of Brookner's much vaunted mood and style, and certainly Brookner's themes of loneliness and desolation are meticulously and assiduously contrived. Brookner's impeccable prose style has been variously described as crisp, flawless, lucid, precise and austere elegant. Her cool and

dispassionate sentences are models of classical restraint, verbal economy and dry understatement, and these are necessary tools in the manipulation of her finely tuned sense of irony, her ability to mingle pathos with common sense and dissect emotion while still holding it at arm's length. Her prose is a fine blend of that sympathy and detachment which constitutes wit, although certain critics have accused her of mawkishness in her somewhat repetitive handling of similarly bleak fictional situations. Brookner has a fastidious eye for minute detail and settings, but her insidious and shrewd observation, sensitivity and poignancy, although not without humour and malice, lend greater depth to her novels, and so possibly make them more than mere comedies of manners.

Although Hirst (1979:1) is concerned with the dramatic, rather than narrative comedy of manners, his comments are apposite. He notes that the style of the comedy of manners "is distinguished by the refinement of *raw emotional expression*<sup>1</sup> and action in the subtlety of wit and intrigue". Brookner's barely-contained agony is therefore stage-managed by the decorous and elegant vehicle<sup>2</sup> of the comedy of manners.

Brookner's craftsmanship has been criticised as too sedulous, and some critics demur at her finely wrought irony inevitably coming to nothing in the emotional cul-de-sacs of her protagonists.

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1 My italics.

2 Hirst also comments on the fundamentally English nature of this comic genre (1979:112).

### 3.3.5 Comparisons with other novelists

There have been no in-depth comparisons between Anita Brookner and other novelists. Analogies are restricted to comparisons *en passant*, mostly with regard to theme, character, nomenclature, setting and style, and these have been to writers as diverse as Jane Austen, Henry James, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Christina Stead, Muriel Spark, and Rosamond Lehmann.

### 3.3.6 Comparisons with Barbara Pym

Similarities between Anita Brookner and Barbara Pym were noted for the first time in reviews of Brookner's second novel, *Providence*. Pym and Brookner have certain themes and characters in common, viz. the depiction of the fairly solitary lives of single women, the description of the mundane details of the daily round, and a portrayal of a certain slice of English middle-class life, although Brookner devotes more space to academics than to curates and ponderous prelates. Anita Brookner's work, however, is more ambitious and more disturbing; her heroines are more obtuse than Pym's and lack the latter's wry insight and more frivolous sense of humour. Pym recognises men as being commonly flawed, while Brookner's heroines, fatally but ineluctably, see men as rescuers. In addition Brookner's female protagonists, although in many ways obsessed by the minutiae of life, seem to derive little comfort or satisfaction from them. Brookner's ironies are graver and grimmer, and 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.

Christian fortitude is generally the saving grace of the Pym spinster. Anita Brookner has described herself as a "lapsed Jew", and her remarks on Christianity might be enlightening with regard to her infinitely grimmer universe. In reply to John Haffenden's question: "Do you have a particular grouse against Christianity?" Anita Brookner answered:

"Yes, I have many grounds for complaint. I wish I could accept the whole thing - it would make one terribly cheerful, and give one a stake in the country, as it were - but I can't. I am a lapsed Jew - if such a thing were conceivable, but it isn't. Jewishness is a terrible religion, for its relentlessness, its bad-tempered god, its inability to learn anything at all, its self-obsessed quality . . . I would love to think that Jesus wants me for a sunbeam, but he [sic] doesn't" (Haffenden, 1985:67).

### 3.3.7 Anita Brookner's stature as a novelist

Anita Brookner has had a remarkably rapid ascent to fame, which was undoubtedly accelerated by her winning of the Booker Prize, and the subsequent publicity and aggressive marketing attendant on this. Her novels have been generally applauded (although less appreciative critics have accused her of rewriting the same book, and therefore of being creatively straitjacketed), but her writing span has been too short to determine her immortality in the ranks of "major" or "minor" authors, as has been the case with Barbara Pym. It suffices to say that each new Brookner novel is immediately greeted with a surfeit of reviews in both literary and popular journals, and that in an issue of

*Tatler* (Anon., 1986a:119-123), Brookner is classed with such literary luminaries as Iris Murdoch, Beryl Bainbridge, Margaret Drabble, Penelope Mortimer, Susan Hill, Fay Weldon, Edna O'Brien and Lisa St Aubin de Teran, not to mention Angela Carter.

