Barbara Pym's narrative intersections

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Barbara Pym's narrative intersections

Abstract
The project of this dissertation is to place Barbara Pym's realism in the context of modernism, anti-modernism, and postmodernism in the twentieth-century English novel. My argument is not that Pym is a late modernist or that she is, per se, a long-lost Postmodernist. She is a realist who has learned the lessons of the former and whose traditional, linear narratives are punctuated by moments of awareness to the fragmented nature of identity and by blips of authorial acknowledgement and even laughter over the simultaneous separation and blending of the text world in which characters live with the "real" worlds of the author and the reader. The remaining chapters that follow proceed in a manner of accretion and expansion, as I further define the descriptive narrative categories I broach in the Introduction by means of providing close readings of Pym's own narratives. In Chapter I, I look at Pym's diaries and letters as discursive embodiments of her earliest narrative attempts to make sense of identity, romantic love, and the fictive process in terms of the cultural narratives explored and exposed by such postmodern theorists as Mikhail Bakhtin and Peter Brooks. In Chapter II, I more thoroughly interrogate the realisms of Austen and Woolf and then offer a reading of Excellent Women as an example of the ways in which Pym uses her knowledge of both authors to create her own narrative paradigm. Chapter III looks at Jane and Prudence, No Fond Return of Love, A Few Green Leaves, and Less than Angels in order to emphasize Pym's thematic and stylistic commitment to detachment as a means of standing back from life in order to record it, savour it, and even protect oneself from it, and then in the act of discursive distancing actually reconnecting to community. And Chapter IV then engages An Unsuitable Attachment , The Sweet Dove Died, and Quartet in Autumn as examples of Pym's comic, novel-of manners brand of postmodern ontology as defined by Brian McHale.

Keywords
Literature, English

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BARBARA PYM'S NARRATIVE INTERSECTIONS

BY

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Master of Arts, Ohio University, 1991

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
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in

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December, 1998
Ph.D. Dissertation

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[Date: 2-23-98]
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ABSTRACT

BARBARA PYM'S NARRATIVE INTERSECTIONS

by

Jennifer Beard
University of New Hampshire, December, 1998

The project of this dissertation is to place Barbara Pym's realism in the context of modernism, anti-modernism, and postmodernism in the twentieth-century English novel. My argument is not that Pym is a late modernist or that she is, per se, a long-lost postmodernist. She is a realist who has learned the lessons of the former and whose traditional, linear narratives are punctuated by moments of awareness to the fragmented nature of identity and by blips of authorial acknowledgement and even laughter over the simultaneous separation and blending of the text world in which characters live with the "real" worlds of the author and the reader. The remaining chapters that follow proceed in a manner of accretion and expansion, as I further define the descriptive narrative categories I broach in the Introduction by means of providing close readings of Pym's own narratives. In Chapter I, I look at Pym's diaries and letters as discursive embodiments of her earliest narrative attempts to make sense of identity, romantic love, and the fictive process in terms of the cultural narratives explored and exposed by such postmodern theorists as Mikhail Bakhtin and Peter Brooks. In Chapter II, I more thoroughly interrogate the realisms of Austen and Woolf and then offer a reading of Excellent Women as an example of the ways in which Pym uses her knowledge of both authors to create her own narrative paradigm. Chapter III looks at Jane and Prudence, No Fond Return of Love, A Few Green Leaves, and Less than Angels in order to emphasize Pym's thematic and stylistic commitment to detachment as a means of standing back from life in order to record it, savour it, and even protect oneself from it, and then in the act of discursive distancing actually reconnecting to community. And Chapter IV then engages An Unsuitable Attachment, The Sweet Dove Died, and Quartet in Autumn as examples of Pym's comic, novel-of manners brand of postmodern ontology as defined by Brian McHale.
INTRODUCTION

THE POLITICS OF THE JEJUNE

Section I

Good writing has always been attacked, most notably by other good writers. The most cursory glance at literary history reveals that no literary masterpiece has been safe from assault at the time of its publication, no writer’s reputation unassailed by his contemporaries: Aristophanes called Euripides a “cliché anthologist . . . and maker of ragamuffin mannikins”; Samuel Pepys thought “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” “insipid and ridiculous”; Charlotte Brontë dismissed the work of Jane Austen; Zola pooh-poohed “Les Fluers du Mal”; Henry James trashed “Middlemarch” and “Our Mutual Friend.” Le Figaro announced when “Madame Bovary” was published, “Monsieur Flaubert is not a writer”; Virginia Woolf called “Ulysses” “underbred”; and the reviewer for the Odessa Courier wrote of “Anna Karenina,” “Sentimental rubbish. . . . Show me on page that contains an idea.” (Salman Rushdie “In Defense of the Novel, Yet Again”)

This dissertation will ask and attempt to answer what at first glance may seem a simple question: where does the fiction of Barbara Pym fit into the twentieth century? As a writer of comic novels of manners she is typically categorized by critics as a post-World-War II resuscitator of Jane Austen’s drawing-room irony and Anthony Trollope’s parish-centered pastorals. Most often Pym is discussed as a realist whose straightforward pleasurable novels exist as an aesthetically conservative and even willfully naive denial of the experiments of modernism and as a nostalgic hedge against further departures from realism offered by her postmodern contemporaries. Though Pym has in the last decade become the subject of a steadily cumulative academic industry, almost no attention has been paid to the ways in which her realism might be more than a post- and pre-Trollopian
interlude between two major waves of experimentation in the twentieth-century novel. I am of course referring to not only the Victorian mother and son, Fanny and Anthony Trollope, but also to the contemporary best-seller Joanna Trollope. Pym has been constantly described both favorably and pejoratively since the 1950s by reviewers as a novelist in the Barsetshire tradition, and similarly Joanna Trollope has been marked for posterity as a Pym descendent albeit—according to *The London Times* review of *The Rector’s Wife* [1991]—a literary daughter with a “much stronger grasp than Pym on the tangled web of family life.” Joanna Trollope is enjoying the sort of critical reception of her parish- and community-oriented novels of class and manners that Pym did not receive until the last years of her life. The 1980s and 90s have been decades in which the sort of realism now being employed by the likes of Trollope, Anita Brookner, or Mavis Cheek has been re-embraced by critics and scholars as well as by the reading public with an unabashedness that sets the milieu of contemporary literary expectation apart from the economic and imaginative environment that kept Pym’s novels out of print from 1963-1977. This is a deliberate simplification. While I do not want to suggest that realism is predominant again, I do want to emphasize that it is significantly less controversial than it was in the three decades following the war.

From 1950-1961, Pym published six novels: *Some Tame Gazelle* (1950), *Excellent Women* (1952), *Jane and Prudence* (1954), *Less Than Angels* (1956), *A Glass of Blessings* (1958), and *No Fond Return of Love* (1961). In 1963, however, upon sending *An Unsuitable Attachment* to Jonathan Cape who had published all six predecessors, Pym was shortly to find herself deprived of an audience as the result of a pervasive if unorganized marketing decision on the part of the publishing industry to not publish fiction that, though “well-written” (a phrase used again and again in the rejection letters she received from the numerous publishing houses to which she sent her manuscripts from 1962-1976) could not be counted on to turn a profit. As Wren Howard of Cape explained in a letter written in March 1963: “Several of us have now read, not without pleasure and interest, the typescript of your novel *An Unsuitable Attachment*, and have discussed it at considerable length, but have unanimously reached the sad conclusion that in present conditions we could not sell a sufficient number of copies to cover costs, let
alone make a profit” (Holt ALTA 196). Pym, however, had a different interpretation of the rejection and, though she certainly began to doubt her abilities more than ever, she also saw that Cape like many other publishing houses was changing its lists to feature “contemporary” writers (generally “men and Americans” as she once remarked to Hazel Holt) who addressed anger, violence, addiction, and sexuality in open and often controversial ways (VPE 213). In a November 1963 letter to Philip Larkin regarding her rejected manuscript, she speculates: “I suppose it was the money, really, they didn’t think they could sell enough copies. However well they do out of Ian Fleming and Len Deighton and all the Americans they publish, I suppose they can’t afford any book that will not cover its cost. (I don’t think I really believe this!)” (VPE 222).

What Pym did believe was that her subtle style and domestic subject matter, in the midst of a publishing market that now had the ability to sell tens of thousands of copies of Henry Miller’s Tropic of Cancer in one day, would never draw the sort of controversy or spectacle now seemingly necessary in the eyes of publishers’ readers. In her notebook for that miserable spring she made a list headed “1963 so far. A Year of violence, death and blows” which included among other items: “My Novel rejected by Cape”, Reading The Naked Lunch”, “My novel rejected by Heath”, “Tropic of Cancer by Henry Miller (60,000? copies sold on 1st day of publication [4th April])” (VPE 215). In a July 1963 letter she reflected when writing to Larkin: “It [An Unsuitable Attachment] is rather a mild book. I shall try to make my next (which I have almost started) less so!” (VPE 217-218). But a month later, though she expresses some doubt about her own abilities, she is clearheaded in her conviction that her books are neither as simple, nostalgic, nor unworldly as they might at first seem when compared to those by Henry Miller, William S. Burroughs, or James Baldwin: “Three people who have read it tell me it isn’t below the standard of my others. (I am incapable of judging now!) I did read it over very critically and it seemed to me that it might appear naive and unsophisticated, though it isn’t really, to an unsympathetic publisher’s reader, hoping for that novel about negro homosexuals, young men in advertising, etc” (VPE 220 emphasis added).

Americans and espionage novelists were not, however, the only writers being
published in the early 1960s. English realism had found a new life in the 1950s with Kingsley Amis’s Angry-Young-Man satires and Iris Murdoch’s fablesque expositions of good, evil, and the nature of love. And 1963, the year of what seemed to be Pym’s demise as a recognized author, saw into print Margaret Drabble’s *A Summer Bird Cage* and John Fowles’s *The Collector*. So it cannot simply be said that the provincial comedy, the quest for goodness, the domestic exploration of feminine emotional identity, or existential probings into quotidian ritual and social conventions surrounding desire and coupling had gone entirely out of fashion. And other writers of Pym’s generation, such as Elizabeth Bowen and Elizabeth Taylor who wrote of middle-class familial function and dysfunction, managed to maintain publisher support without noticeably sensationalizing their domestic subject-matter or radically altering their traditional prose-style.¹

Even the books of Miss Read (in life Mrs. Dora Saint) which made no attempt to

¹ Pym’s feeling that she had been somehow slighted by her publisher who sent her only a brief letter of rejection after publishing her five previous novels is not just sour grapes, for the publishing industry was during this period changing its focus from bold promotion of worthy authors at all costs to money-making. For a more detailed insider’s view of the turn toward business-as-usual handling of authors that had occurred since the 1950s I turn the reader to the second volume of Doris Lessing’s autobiography *Walking in the Shade* (1997):

A first novel, or collection of short stories, was kept alive, not remaindered. The second novel, always a tricky moment, was similarly nursed. But a reputation was growing in the literary world. A third book, perhaps a fourth. None of these may have sold more than a few hundred copies. Then a book takes off, for some reason. It wins a prize—there were only a few then—or is mentioned on radio. More likely, I think an invisible hoard of goodwill is growing, and there is a moment when the scale is tipped: the writer now has a steady readership, a constituency, who look out for a new book by her or by him. It can be a slow process, but it is organic, with a life in it: books recommended, books lent, a reputation growing mostly by word of mouth. And now the new book may at last sell ten thousand, twenty thousand. All this time the writer has been living frugally, or has an office job, or subsists on reviews, a radio play, an article sometimes. . . . Everyone of us who care about literature cherishes a list of books that are out of print, or not published at all, or published but the editors have not troubled to sell them. . . . Once upon a time the publishers knew very well how important these difficult books were, a little spring of bubbling vitality. Some of us remember wistfully the days when a publisher might say: “Neither you nor I will make a penny out of this book, but it should be published” (105-8)

Pym certainly had a faithful readership, and when her books did make it back into the public eye after 1977 she received many letters from her former faithful who had assumed her dead for the last fifteen years (*VPE* 307).
be, in literary terms, anything more than detailed provincial portraits of the trivial goings-on in the schoolhouses and parishes of small villages and the eccentric personalities that flourish there or nostalgic tributes to a mythologized age when bucolic Edwardian innocence had not yet been shattered by the Great War, had little trouble finding their way into print throughout the 1960s. In fact, Miss Read’s The Market Square, which falls into the sentimental prewar category was published in 1966 by Michael Joseph and was then picked up by the paperback conglomerate, Penguin, in 1969. At approximately the same time that The Market Square was being seen ushered into print, Pym sent An Unsuitable Attachment to Raleigh Trevelyon at the very same Michael Joseph only to receive what had by this point become the expected reply: “A pleasant book, but hardly strong enough” (Holt ALTA 219).

A quick juxtaposing glance at the first sentences of Miss Read’s externally attentive narrative portrait (“It had been raining in Caxley, but now the sun was out again. A sharp summer shower had sent the shoppers into doorways, and many of the stallholders, too, from the market square, had sought more shelter than their flimsy awnings could provide.”) when read against the opening paranoia of Pym’s Rupert Stonebird (“They are watching me, thought Rupert Stonebird, as he saw the two women walking rather too slowly down the road. But no doubt I am watching them too, he decided, for as an anthropologist he knew that men and women may observe each other as warily as wild animals hidden in long grass.”) indicates a great deal. Pym is attempting to plumb consciousness in her parish novels in a way that reaches beyond Read’s nostalgic conjuring of a simpler time in recent history before the muddy trenches of the Great War or the urban turmoil of a post-World-War-II, post-empire England struggling toward socialism.

My interest in Pym’s publishing history in these early paragraphs is not so much an attempt to defend her merit in the context of those writers with arguably more or less creative talent who were being published. I do not compare her first sentences with Miss Read’s in order to suggest that Pym was a better or more deserving writer. Rather, I am interested in offering examples of the types of realism that were being published, purchased, and read in the early 1960s. Miss Read is hardly a stylistic or thematic risk-
taker, yet her readership was as solid as the audience who lauded the more literary and thematically daring Drabble, and clearly Read's publishers expected those readers to be more dependable at their local book-stalls than Pym's had so far shown themselves to be. What interests me in particular is the way in which Pym's novels fall between reading populations or even generations. They are not for instance as youthful or iconoclastic as Margaret Drabble's or Henry Miller's; in fact, Pym's novels are decidedly middle-aged and even middle-of-the-road in their subject-matter. And though they do aspire to something beyond the nostalgic straight-forward storytelling found in Miss Read, they do not overtly experiment with narrative style or indulge in philosophical speculation in the way that John Fowles's or Iris Murdoch's novels are generally considered to.

By placing Pym in this context of other English novelists who wrote and published realist fiction in the post-war years when continental and American writers had in large part continued on the anti-realist trajectory begun by modernism but lately labeled postmodernism, I want to problematize Pym's critical placement as a simple rejuvenator of and adherent to the no-longer fashionable provincial parish novel written in a mode that was in the 1950s being used more loudly and noticeably by the equally comic though immeasurably more caustic Angry Young Men (or anti-modernists) as a vehicle for vitriolic class commentary. Pym was obviously invested in writing novels that could be likened in narrative tone, setting, and plot to those of Austen or her nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary descendants. But it is my contention that Pym's realism is equally contoured by the philosophical and narrative concerns that motivated the more overt experiments of those novelists most readily categorized as modern and postmodern. Thus, the deceptively simple question of Pym's categorical placement in the twentieth century with which I began this Introduction quickly splinters into several questions, each interrogating the terminology most often used to describe fiction in England in the Twentieth Century: modernism, anti-modernism, and postmodernism.

I will address Pym as a writer whose choice of a traditional narrative form, the comic novel of manners, is a means by which she can take stock of and even subtly critique the temporal moment in which she is living and writing. As I read her, Pym is a novelist
very much invested in simultaneously seeking and creating a nexus between the “reality” of
daily life in post-war Britain and her own idiosyncratic vision of what it means to turn life
into text. Pym is a writer who is utterly modern without necessarily being modernist or
any of its anti- or post-derivatives. But this is not to say that she does not stylistically
partake in certain aspects of each of these categories. In *The Condition of Postmodernity:*
*An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (1992), David Harvey offers Baudelaire’s
definition of the artist as the foundation of modern and postmodern experimentations in
syntax and narrative:

> we find him defining the artist as someone who can concentrate his or her
vision on ordinary subjects of city life, understand their fleeting qualities,
and yet extract from the passing moment all the suggestions of eternity it
contains. The successful modern artist was one who could find the
universal and the eternal, ‘distill the bitter or heady flavour of the wine of
life’ from ‘the ephemeral, the fleeting forms of beauty in our day.’ (20)

But what then makes art modernist, in addition to modern (the synonym of contemporary),
is the degree to which the artist chooses to “represent the eternal and the immutable in the
midst of all the chaos,” the chaos of a technology and consumer-based urban world. And
this is the point at which writers, and painters “showed a tremendous preoccupation with
the creation of new codes, significations, and metaphorical allusions in the languages they
constructed.” In other words, rather than mirroring reality, modernist and postmodernist
artists began to work at the level of shocking the audience into examining its sense of a
language-based reality as artifice: “if the word was indeed fleeting, ephemeral, and chaotic,
then the artist had, for that very reason, to represent the eternal through an instantaneous
effect, making ‘shock tactics and the violation of expected continuities’ vital to the
hammering home of the message that the artist sought to convey” (21).

Pym does not attempt to shock her readers, ever. Her focus is on the known, the
mundane, the expected. It is my contention that she is absolutely in keeping with
Baudelaire’s definition. But, rather than imbuing her narratives with the violence and
chaos of this century, she builds a domestic stronghold in which her characters attempt to
construct lives against the grain of cultural deconstruction and find humor in the gaps between the realities to which they self-reflexively cling. My critical method and mode is, then, very much a mirroring one in which I seek to establish an intersection of overlapping aesthetic discourses into the center of which I will place Pym.²

My intended audience is those who read and write about Pym, and to be a part of that group is to be a part of her textual universe as well, a place where there are hearty, snickering disagreements, but where an effort is made not to be nasty, to refrain from back-biting, to mock oneself as well as others for taking umbrage. Hypocritical or mealy-mouthed are two of the more pejorative terms that can be applied to so non-swaggering a stance, but I prefer to promote such an artistic and critical self-situating as an attempt at seeing a closer approximation of what is in the text, as opposed to what is not. My take on the extant body of Pym criticism is that it is generally informative, lovingly written and therefore utterly readable.³ There are very few incursions from the wider contemporary world of modern theory. And this is something of a loss because the critical reading can become repetitive and limited in its insights. But it is also a boon, because Pym’s always satiric take on academic obfuscation reminds us that discursive joy and delight must always come first otherwise there is no point in her ever having offered these books up in the first place. (Something I like to think of as Pym’s own contribution to deconstruction.) Bits of theory here and there operate effectively when reading Pym, and my point throughout this project be will that the arrived critical assessment of Pym’s talents and shortcomings and

² With Harvey I want to foreground all definitions of modernity and modernism with an eye to the protean contradictions articulated by Baudelaire. Harvey opens his chapter “Modernity and Modernism” first with Baudelaire’s 1863 statement: “‘Modernity, the painter of modern life is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is the one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immutable.’” And then he posits his own attention to the tensions and contradictions inherent in defining the deliberately undefinable: “I want to pay very close attention to this conjoining of the ephemeral and the fleeting with the eternal and the immutable. The history of modernism as an aesthetic movement has wavered from one side to the other of this dual formulation, often making it appear as if it can, as Lionel Trilling (1966) once observed, swing around in meaning until it is facing in the opposite direction” (10).

³ In Chapter I, I do make one exception to this self-imposed rule of not using the shortcomings of other critics as a springboard for launching my own readings of Pym in my critique of Anne Wyatt Brown’s therapy-based critical biography of Pym. Whereas Wyatt Brown looks for and diagnoses neurotic tendencies and narrative coverups in Pym’s diaries and fiction, I have opted for the critical model of a discursive flow chart.
her general textual scope can by widened by the likes of Mikhail Bakhtin, Peter Brooks, Frederic Jameson, Jean Paul Sartre, Paul de Man, and Patricia Waugh.

Nevertheless, I firmly believe that a densely woven blanket of scholarly allusions to all that is \textit{au courant} in theory today will hardly elucidate the reader on any substantive points about Pym. And she is always my first priority. This has been a difficulty, because the theoretical explanations or historical touchpoints can be as enthralling to write about as Pym’s novels. But I have deliberately reigned in those other tendencies, because any two or four paragraphs that are spent summarizing and then setting aside certain points about the many loaded meanings into which a generalized word such as “philosophy” or “desire” can be problematized is to defer even further attention to a writer who so rarely gets the spotlight. So my methodological metaphor for the theory that does appear in the following pages is that of wandering through a discursive meadow picking flowers for a bouquet. I should probably be embarrassed at so potentially insipid an image, but I am not. For it allows me to use the theory for Pym and for myself rather than handing both our voices over to be strangled into silence by a steadily creeping vine of intertwined critical fractiousnesses. More than any other my critical and theoretical model is Bakhtin’s dialogic, because it is the most vague and the most liberating. But just as I invoke Bakhtin’s terminology in Chapter I, I will be positing it in order to leave it behind.

As any Pym reader knows, the act of writing a contextualizing, categorizing dissertation about just where her novels fit into a larger schema of academically contrived aesthetic categories is rife with potential for comic absurdity. The metaphor in my title of Pym’s various narratives (fictional or otherwise) forming an intersection (\textit{a la} David Lodge) in which the boundary between reality and textuality are continually merging and then moving away in opposite directions is an attempt to remain true to Pym. Aside from the fact that she is most easily described as a middle-class comic novelist of manners, Pym’s narratives defy easy categorization. And the simple purpose of my study will be to open up the critical field in order for her to begin to be read in terms of her actual temporal moment and in relation to her fiction-writing contemporaries.

The issue of Pym’s relationship to the likes of Fowles, Drabble, Lessing, Spark,
Weldon, Murdoch and untold others has, in the midst of this project, emerged for me as one of the most fascinating ways of plumbing the depths that readings of her in isolation or in terms of her nineteenth-century echoes have not begun to reach. And my take on her relationship to contemporary theory is similar in that, like the fictional and poetic texts of so-called modernism and postmodernism, I read theory as one more layer of discursive activity, another stratum of energy impinging on an invisible force field of words and ideas. Such is the atmosphere into which Pym was born and automatically interpolated in 1913, and one from which her creative and greedily aware imagination could not help but take sustenance. This simple statement that she and her fictions are a product of her century seems so obvious as to be unnecessary, yet it is the missing cornerstone in our current academic assessment of Pym’s novels as intelligent, touching, and hilarious yet not necessarily important indicators of a discursive moment.

And just what was Pym’s particular discursive moment? In *The Harvest of the Sixties: English Literature and its Background 1960-1990*, Patricia Waugh discusses the return to political and economic conservatism of the 1980s, an era often conceived by disaffected radicals in terms of the “cultural heritage” romantic conservatism of the almost self-parodic *Salisbury Review*, with its image of a lost England of country squires, pastoral bishoprics, and patriarchal family ritual” (30). In essence, Waugh is making the argument that any literary representation depicting provincial nostalgia or corporate aggrandizement is often immediately pegged as aesthetically complicit with Thatcherite, janus-faced images of returning England to its glory days of bucolic feudalism and the sort of stiff-upper-lip national identity that aspires toward global control. Waugh provides the controversial reputations of Philip Larkin and Martin Amis as evidence of the ways in which choices of form and theme have often been read as politically defeatist or monetarily obsessed rather than as “a proto-postmodern recognition of the inevitable complicity of any sustained cultural critique with its focus of discontent” (27). Thus she describes the way in which Larkin and Amis embed cultural critique within representations of the failure of the Labour ideal and seemingly depth-less tales of corporate robbery and Tory triumph:

What is interesting about the example of disaffection voiced first in
Larkin and then in Amis’s work is that the style of each is arguably
complicit with its object of critique. Larkin derides the less-deceived
mentality born of Welfare State lowered expectations, yet his poetry has
been criticized for its own deflation of transcendent impulse. Amis’s satire
of nihilistic commercialism and the culture of style and surface is developed
in novels which eschew psychological depth and actually espouse the slick
style of the urban operator. (32-33)

What I find so interesting in Waugh’s depiction of the tendency in the last two decades
among critics and artists to equate form with political intent or insipid naivete is the way in
which it shines light on the still controversial edge to Pym’s reputation as a minor old-
fashioned novelist of dubious literary value.

In many ways, Pym’s rediscovery in the late 1970s and 1980s is reflective of the
“Thatcherite Little Englandism,” “cultural heritage” consumerism that Waugh describes.
One way of looking at her return to the public eye and the fiction-reading public is that in
1977 Pym was offered to the reading public as an embarrassing oversight and even
deliberate exclusion on the part of the liberal publishing industry of the 1960s and 70s.
And then there is her association with Larkin, who saw in her fiction a depth and an
existential darkness that mirrored his own. But it is possible that the warm public response
to her novels has been read by the likes of her contemporaries (I am thinking specifically
here of Fowles and Byatt whose critiques of Pym I will discuss in Chapter 2) as more the
result of Salisbury-Review nostalgia than genuine readerly appreciation of the incisive way
in which her characters quietly confront the nihilism of the contemporary world all the
while cherishing social ritual and material comfort in order to hedge what Waugh has
labeled contemporary “ultimate dread” (28). This is why an author like Fowles feels so
free to bemoan Pym as all that is retrograde in English fiction, as a writer who is liked by
tweedy female teachers of English of a certain generation and who appeals to suburban
American academics pining for an English garden and a thatched cottage in Oxfordshire.

It is my argument, however, that in subtle ways Pym embraces narratival nihilism
as readily as or arguably even more readily than Fowles does. In terms of the authorial role
that each plays in his or her fictional worlds, Fowles consistently remains the magus, the trickster who will as readily pull the narrative rug from beneath his characters as from his readers. Pym, on the other hand, as I will discuss in Chapters 3 and 4, is an author who continually resigns her authorial control to her narrative formula and to her characters’ and readers’ meandering desires for . . . . For what? For a happy ending, but one that is not too happy or too contrived. To their yearning for—to use Waugh’s terminology—“talk and chat” which may “oppose authentic ‘being’” but which, nevertheless, “remove[s] ultimate dread” or at the very least pushes it beyond the glow of the electric fire (28).

Of Margaret Drabble, Pym was a great admirer to the extent that she often attempted to mimic her style. The younger woman’s name comes up often in Pym’s journals and letters throughout the 60s and 70s: “I’ve finished a very rough re-doing of that Sweet Dove Died novel about Leonora etc, but what reader would want to identify herself with Leonora? 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 . . . . Perhaps the best thing to do now is to ‘write’ nothing but bibliographies” (VPE 250). Pym wrote the above in a letter to Larkin in May of 1969, and two years later she wrote to him again of her attempt to insert herself in a Drabblesque world in her various drafts of a manuscript compiled and published posthumously as An Academic Question: “Rather to my surprise I find I have nearly finished the first draft of another novel about a provincial university told by the youngish wife of a lecturer. It was supposed to be a sort of Margaret Drabble effort but of course it hasn’t turned out like that at all” (VPE 263). And in her diary in 1979, Pym compares their styles of realism while contrasting the mode of detail: “The enrichment of my own novels may be suggested by my reading of the two latest Margaret Drabble novels (The Ice Age and The Realms of Gold). 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” (VPE 328–29). Like Pym, Drabble takes on the world of domestic ritual and female relationships, and addresses the narrative tradition of Austen and the question of its applicability to the contemporary world of consumer-induced urban decay and provincial rot.
Whereas Pym limits her intertextual associations with the likes of Jane Austen to a likeness of form and plot and to character's conscious associations of their lives with those of Austen's characters, Drabble overtly and intrusively interrogates the tradition she finds herself working in and against:

Jane Austen recommended three or four families in a country village as the thing to work on when planning a novel. Esther Breuer might well have been expected to approve this advice, with its implication that depth rather than breadth is of importance, and intimate knowledge of a corner more valuable than a sketchy acquaintance with the globe. In fact, perversely, Esther Breuer disliked the only Jane Austen novel she had ever read (which was, perversely, Sense and Sensibility) and frequently boasts of her inability to tackle the others. "Too English for me," she will sometimes add, in her impeccably English middle-class intellectual's voice. (The Radiant Way 79)

Sheer narrative heft is the most remarkable contrast between Drabble and Pym. Both focus on their characters' sustaining, personal rituals, and Pym's Emma Howick (A Few Green Leaves) is as troubled by the fact that she has been named after Austen's heroine by her academic mother whose area of specialization is the Victorian novel as Drabble's Esther Breuer is in hiding from her Englishness and the potential suffocation that entails. Drabble's sentences, paragraphs, and novels tend toward the capacious, whereas Pym's--as she points out in her diary--are pithy. And while Drabble collects her characters for tea and long conversations in apartment blocks where one's neighbor is likely to be a serial killer, Pym sends her characters to jumble sales and cat shows and in an always tongue-in-cheek way questions whether or not tea can really save a drowning soul.

Unlike Pym, Drabble is not a novelist known for her comic moments. Nor is Doris Lessing whose portrayals of laughter in any number of the many novels she has offered up over the decades generally entail hysteria and an avoidance of repressed desires that will sooner or later bubble up in full scale psychosis and/or cultural anarchy. And then there is Muriel Spark. Like Pym, Spark writes concise comic novels in which she examines the
manner of a variety of microcosms of contemporary English society. Both Pym and Spark also have connections to organized religion. Pym overtly depicts the balm and detachment offered by a Church of England that has very little to do with doctrine or spiritual probing and everything to do with community-forming rituals that nevertheless allow individuals to hide from one another and themselves, while Spark rarely mentions the church (Catholic, Anglican, or otherwise) and instead explores the horror that life in a godless or meaningless society can entail. I am thinking in particular of Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *The Girls of Slender Means*, and *The Driver’s Seat* in which characters are scattered respectively before fascism, small-scale post-war technological cataclysm, and an inarticulable urge toward toward self-destruction.

If Spark’s novels can be read as bleak parables diagnosing the sad state of affairs that Western culture has embraced in the late twentieth-century, then Fay Weldon’s novels are technologically spectacular and horrific fables of life in the pre-millennial age. Her female protagonists confront the ennui of their lives and marriages once domestic routine and emotional betrayals both small and large begin to make suburban contentment impossible. Like Spark and Pym, Weldon’s novels are comic but ruefully and sometimes even horribly so as, for instance, the protagonist of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* looks at her surgically re-vamped, perfect, romantic-heroine body and feels emotional glory and simultaneous stabs of physical pain.

Fables need not, however, always embrace nihilism as they critique it. Iris Murdoch’s fablesque novels of the lives of bourgeois characters and their search for love and passion in an often flat-line culture explore and affirm morality in a way similar to Pym’s consistent tendency to offer her characters an optimism about the day-to-day living they sometimes find so difficult to muddle through. For Murdoch moral existence consists of seeing and treating others as fellow subjects rather than as objects of desire or antipathy. Life may be in a continual state of upheaval. And myth, magic, and natural disaster may impede her characters in their search for meaning in their lives, but whether or not Murdoch’s individual characters are successful is entirely dependent upon whether they are individually and sustainedly able to recognize shared humanity. Pym’s characters do not
go out on the same treacherous moral limbs that Murdoch's characters find themselves on, but the similar overall emotional affect of her œuvre is one of attention to small detail and to even the most inconsequential of social interactions as a means of making a private meaning around which to construct both a narrative and a life.

These few pages and references only begin to articulate Pym's vital place in a comprehensive reading of the fiction of post-war Britain. What makes her such a fascinating figure is that her fiction and her personal writing contain so much amorphous potential and such widely ranging associations as Austen, Woolf, Bakhtin, Larkin, Fowles, and even Paul McCartney and John Lennon. Thus I will make my transition into the more methodologically theoretical half of this Introduction with the somehow not so mind-reeling generalization that Pym's narratives fall somewhere between Jane Austen's comic marriage tales and The Beatles' pop-song/ode to nihilism, "Eleanor Rigby":

October 20, 1968—I think John Lennon so repellant-looking now—like a very plain middle-aged Victorian female novelist, with that long hair. I used to like the Beatles once and I still like their songs if I don't have to look at them. (letter to Philip Larkin VPE 248)

Section II

Several friendly readers of earlier drafts of this manuscript have expressed bemusement at what they call my tone of apology: apology for Pym's questionable literary credibility, and apology for my own innovative but somehow not intrepidly enough stated claim that her slippery evasion of traditional descriptive categories of narrative style is what makes her able to stand on her own among her more fêted contemporaries. Such conversations have proven the most frustrating and ultimately the most fruitful in my revision process. For no matter how ruthlessly I have gone back through the varying versions of these chapters in order to bolster authoritatively the claims I am making for Pym and myself, I realize that what my readers label my tone of apology is on my part a deliberately tentative attempt to enter Pym into a discourse that has so long ignored and even actively rejected her, a discourse that she yearned toward as a novelist unable to find a
publisher and simultaneously scorned and even mocked in her self-consciously cozy novels of spinsters working on the absurd fringes of self-important academic institutions. My provisional tone and my flat definitions of conventionalized yet continually equivocated stylistic categories are less a matter of graduate-school-induced scholarly cowardice and confusion than they are a deliberate ploy to alter, expand, and even diffuse the existing system of academic clichés and hedges surrounding the ubiquitous categories into which fiction written in this century has been carved and crammed: modernism, anti-modernism/realism, and post-modernism.

Barbara Pym had little to no regard for the generic categories into which novel-length fictional narratives have been pigeon-holed by critics, historians, and academics in order to facilitate the act of writing literary history or of teaching university students the "differences" between the novels of the late Eighteenth Century and those of the late Twentieth Century. I problematize the word "difference" in order to emphasize that the narrative experimentation of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1767) is as "like" James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1915) or Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993) or Robert McLiam Wilson's *Ripley Bogle* (1989) or Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1993) or Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1989) as it is anomalous to them. This depending on just what definitions of such terms (now too often become uselessly over-laden buzz-words of individual critical schools) as the novel, identity, desire, aesthetics, stylistics, realism, modernism, anti-modernism, or postmodernism one is using.

Of course, Jane Austen is not the sum total of realism. Of course, Charlotte Bronte is in moments as close to being modernist as Joyce or Woolf was to Sterne's attempt to dive into the infant consciousness of Tristram Shandy. Of course Graham Swift's deconstruction of history in *Waterland* (1992) is as dependent on an old-fashioned storytelling model as is any three-decker Victorian novel. Nevertheless, it will be my purpose in the remaining pages of this Introduction to examine in a deliberately generalized fashion what has been meant by the categories of realism, modernism, anti-modernism, and postmodernism in order to more fully understand the discursive atmosphere in which Barbara Pym became a novelist equally praised and punished for her commitment to a so-called
realist narrative style. I will indicate briefly the general conflicts in English literary circles of the late Twentieth Century as a means of getting closer to understanding the currents that have fed into the critical discourse surrounding Pym since she published her first novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, in 1952.

What I cannot emphasize strongly enough and which will bear repeating several times is that in outlining this schema of critically conjured categories I promptly plan to leave them behind. When in later paragraphs and chapters I compare and contrast Pym with Bakhtin or Austen or Woolf, I am doing exactly that—reflecting off of one another multiple texts or authorial statements about aesthetic strategies for getting life as it is onto the page. What I am not doing is comparing Pym with some abstract definition of Woolf as Modernist. And I am not trying then to place or not place Pym into said abstract category. In the simplest of analogies I want to present Pym as an antennae of sorts receiving all of the currents of her contemporary aesthetic climate as well as of her long English and Continental literary and philosophical legacy.

So much of the critical discourse surrounding Pym addresses her worthiness: Is she worthy of being spoken of in the same sentence with Woolf? Is it an exercise in futile absurdity to regard her writing as utterly contemporary (of a piece with much that has come out of so-called modernism and postmodernism) rather than as nostalgic and simple-minded when her characters are continually searching for and finding routes back into a cozy, non-apocalyptic world of domestic routine and quotidian detail? Is it possible to talk about the narrative subtleties, borrowings, and rebellions of a contemporary writer without using certain terminology that has come to be synonymous with the names of twentieth-century writers, terminology that empowers at the same time that it imprisons? The pigeonholes have become tautologies. Woolf and Joyce are modernists. Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin are anti-modernists. John Fowles and Doris Lessing are postmodernists. To account for Pym, to make a case for her stylistic astuteness alongside all of the above without imprisoning her in the very rigidified categories that have been as incapable of accounting for her as they are of any other more "obviously" modernist or postmodernist writers has been my quest.
My argument is not that Pym is a late modernist or that she is, per se, a long-lost postmodernist. She is, if anything, a realist who has learned the lessons of the former and whose traditional, linear narratives are punctuated by moments of awareness to the fragmented nature of identity and by blips of authorial acknowledgement and even laughter over the simultaneous separation and blending of the text world in which characters live within the real worlds of the author and the reader. John Barth's critique of nostalgic narrative styles in "The Literature of Exhaustion" is helpful here, for under the clichéd rubric of Pym as a twentieth-century Jane Austen her fiction might be considered delightful in a cotton-candy sort of way that hardly merits the attention of academic canons and criticism. I am referring to Barth's statement that "Beethoven's Sixth Symphony or the Chartres Cathedral if executed today would be merely embarrassing" precisely because of its technical outdatedness: "A good many current novelists write turn-of-the-century type novels, only in more or less mid-twentieth century language and about contemporary people and topics; this makes them considerably less interesting (to me) than excellent writers who are also technically contemporary" (72).

My argument, then, is that Pym is technically contemporary, but subtly so. Belied by her gentle readability and lack of narrative disruption is an utterly contemporary acknowledgment of the tension between unconscious impulses and conscious tactics for coping with an ever present sense of modernist proliferation and postmodernist deconstruction which can variously be discussed as Freudian desire, Lacanian lack, Sartrean isolation, a Bakhtinian glut of voices speaking out of one mouth and one dowdily clothed, church going, continually fragmenting, yet mundanely obsessed self. The gaps in identity are filled in by domestic ritual and decoration. Pointless Victorian endtables are covered with even more pointless doilies and snowstorms, but the spaces are filled in by objects in need of constant dusting, just one of many quotidian activities around which Pym's characters construct their days and thus distract and protect themselves from the threatened deconstruction of desire. And for Pym desire is what motivates discursivity, which becomes a realm for author, characters, and readers to coexist as if in a protected internal domestic space behind the curtains of which we can hide from the always imminent
knowledge that we are all hurling toward narrative and mortal disintegration.

Section III

In the 1940s and 50s French existentialists may have been interested in the means by which human beings build identity and meaning as a spiritual bulwark against the nausea of meaninglessness, and by the 1960s poststructuralists were pulling on the loose threads of culture and language, unraveling identity, morality, and truth as they have been understood since Descartes and the beginning of the modern era. However, the turn toward a sociopolitical reconfiguration of a moral reality made by many writers in England at the end of World War II suggests that the deconstruction of identity and truth was neither inevitable nor the only viable philosophical, emotional, or aesthetic option. In fact in its constant negation and dismantling, the disintegration of such fundamental concepts as the existence of an objectively documentable reality and the existence of individual identity as divorced from subjective moments of fleeting perception was no answer at all for those living in an infant welfare state and grappling with what it means to face a future where class and power as they have always been known are forcing individuals to reevaluate the violently shifting nature of social identities that had been in place since the industrial revolution or earlier. In response to and as a reflection of this cultural state of affairs, many post-war English writers turned to realism, often as a symbolic rejection of what they believed to be the excesses of modernism.  

And just what has “modernism” come to signify at this late date in the Twentieth Century? Margaret Drabble describes it as “an omnibus term for a number of tendencies in the arts which were prominent in the first half of the 20th century,” the passenger concerns of which include consuming recognition of cultural relativism, the immersion of identity in a cauldron of irrational desire, and the ensuing friction sparking every conscious moment between unconscious impulse and socially conscious attempts to be dutiful, rational, and productive (Companion 668). Modernists wanted to reconfigure that concept known as

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4 The genderedness, or more specifically the masculinity, that is often argued to be a defining thematic and stylistic feature of postmodern narratives is something I want to acknowledge at this early juncture without making it a focus. It is a point I will return to briefly in upcoming paragraphs.
reality by plumbing discontinuity, instability, and irrationality. In other words, if the most compelling Victorian novelists can be described as evoking the emotional preoccupations and urgencies of their characters by offering fully visualized external worlds in which characters reveal themselves in moments equally inspired and camouflaged by immersion in sensory impression (free-indirect style is the critical terminology that would be most applicable here), the modernists wanted to strip narrative of the rules of chronology, continuity, and external causality in order to effect an aperture through which moments of consciousness could be semantically visualized and captured as a photographer might simultaneously capture and freeze motion.

For Jeanette Winterson, “The Modernists were trying to return to an idea of art as a conscious place (their critics would say a self-conscious place), a place outside of both rhetoric and cliche. . . . Poetry, poetic fiction, is not an artificial language (or at least when it is, it ceases to be poetry), but it is a heightened language. It is recognizably the language we all use but at a pitch beyond the everyday capacities of speech” (37). This metaphor of heightened pitch is a useful one, for it indicates the subtle yet profound differences that can exist between a writer who is on a self-conscious quest to achieve a representation of life that is beyond the norm while at the same time evoking a sort of universal emotional poignancy and immediacy that pierces more clearly through the consciousnesses of readers than any novel or poem has yet been able. The subject matter of a modernist novel is not necessarily different, the characters are not any brighter or more heroic or depraved, but the means by which language and syntax are employed to represent them offers a world of difference. Thus Winterson suggests, “‘To compare the prose style of Woolf’s Jacob’s Room (1922) with Bennett’s Riceyman Steps (1923) is an exercise in astonishment. Looking now, with hindsight, we can see at once which book is modern, that is to say which style proved the right equipment to put into words that which was only just bubbling into the collective consciousness” (39).

In Modes of Modern Writing (1977), David Lodge distinguishes modernist and postmodernist writing as “writerly” in its high aestheticism and rigorous commitment to form as a metaphor for the inscrutable riddle of human existence. Anti-modernist prose,
then, is by contrast readerly in its reactionary re-embracing of traditional realist modes of characterization and narration as a political statement about class and the elitism of culture.\(^1\) The high modernists may have thought of themselves as dismantlers of the increasingly mausoleum-like edifice of Victorian and Edwardian individualism and its artistic reinforcement in the three-volume realist novel, but the anti-modernists of succeeding generations felt as oppressed by what they believed had become an imperative to obscure as Virginia Woolf had earlier felt suffocated by the weight of Arnold Bennett’s easily caricatured, rambling descriptions of houses and windows rather than of the people who lived within and gazed longingly (or not) from said casements. Thus Woolf writes in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924):

That is what I mean by saying that the Edwardian tools are the wrong ones for us to use. They have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things. They have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there. To give them their due, they have made that house much better worth living in. But if you hold that the novels are in the first place about people, and only in the second about the houses they live in, that is the wrong way to set about it. Therefore, you see, the Georgian

\(^1\) Just as I compared in my Introduction an actual sentence from Pym to one from Miss Read in order to clarify a certain tonal difference among realist novels, the comparison between an Edwardian realist and a Modernist can say more than any amount of descriptive analysis on my part can. First there is the more traditional introduction of a major character by his narrator as offered by Arnold Bennett:

On an autumn afternoon in 1919 a hatless man, with a slight limp, might have been observed ascending the gentle, broad acclivity of Riceymen Steps, which lead from King’s Cross Road up to Riceymen Square, in the great metropolitan industrial district of Clerkenwell. (Riceymen Steps 11).

And then there is the hatchet into the heart of Betty Flanders that Woolf wields at the bottom of page one of Jacob’s Room, thus giving more emotional information in the space of a paragraph than Bennett (for all his lovely prose) could effect in a chapter:

Such were Betty Flanders’s letters to Captain Barfoot—many-paged, tear-stained. Scarborough is seven hundred miles from Cornwall: Captain Barfoot is in Scarborough: Seabrook is dead. Tears made all the dahlias in her garden undulate in red waves and flashed the glass house in her eyes, and spangled the kitchen with bright knives, and made Mrs. Jarvis, the rector’s wife, think at church while the hymn-tune played and Mrs. Flanders bent low over her little boys heads, that marriage is a fortress and widows stray solitary in the open fields, picking up stones, gleaning in a few golden straws, lonely, unprotected, poor creatures. (Jacob’s Room 7-8)
[read modernist] writer had to begin by throwing away the method that was in use at the moment” (112-13).

Anti-modernism flourished in the 1950s as the group of writers known often as the Angry Young Men wrote poems, plays, and novels exposing the intellectual and philosophical hypocrisies of an oxymoronic middle-class British socialism as it faltered in a culture riddled with finely nuanced and seemingly ineradicable class prejudice. But the re-embacing of realism was not limited only to aesthetic and socioeconomic reactionaryism. Indeed, many novelists and poets also deliberately employed the linear, minimally disrupted narrative style of the previous century as a medium of provisional reconstruction wherein the ideological categories of identity, truth, reality, and art taken on by modernist writers could be explored for and with a potentially broader and more socioeconomically diverse reading audience. In other words, to condemn the reinvigorated interest in realism in England to a philistine nostalgia for old securities is reductive to say the least. Nostalgia may have abounded in an era when church services were held in bombed ruins and all shopping entailed endless queuing and obsessive attention to coupon books. But English novelists were re-vamping the old realism of Bennett and Gissing to fit their contemporary concerns with morality in a world that had just shown itself to be so resolutely capable of the gravest crimes against all that is rational, reasonable, or humane.

The renewal among English novelists of the realist narrative at the end of World War II has, to be sure, prompted a mixed response. As French philosopher/novelists Sartre and Camus pushed the existential search for meaning toward narratival nihilism, as Roland Barthes pronounced the death of the author, and as Alain Robbe-Grillet effaced the consciousnesses of his central “characters,” Americans such as Truman Capote were hip-deep in journalistic research and pathology reports that put “factual” flesh on the corpse of what John Barth in 1967 labeled a genre of “exhausted possibility.” “Anti-modernism” and “realism” are the terms most often employed to describe the English novel after 1945, and the defensive and/or nostalgic implications of each gives a hint to the pejorative manner in which the rest of the literary world was looking at what seemed to be an insular, willfully provincial, and unexpressive rejection of any aesthetic innovation that had been offered to
the novel as a genre by modernists such as Woolf and Joyce. The larger implication of John Barth’s claim that the realist novel was dead in the water is, of course, that the literary pond was also full of the bloated corpses of England’s contemporary school of novelists. Barth’s expressed task in “The Literature of Exhaustion” is not specifically to lambaste what anti-realists have often concurred to be the sluggish state of the post-war English novel; rather it was his purpose to praise Jorge Luis Borges as a “technically up-to-date artist” who he believes is, beside Beckett, the only contemporary who can be discussed along side the “‘old masters’ of twentieth-century fiction” Joyce and Kafka (73). But his expressed lack of interest in novelists who choose to write “turn-of-the-century-type novels, only in more or less mid-twentieth-century language and about contemporary people and topics” became a handy springboard for those anti-realists interested in dismissing the majority of English fiction in the 1950s and early 60s as lumpishly uninspired and intellectually retrograde.

“Anti-modernism” is often employed as a synonym for the realist mode when it is used consciously and politically by those writers who want to reclaim the novel from what they believe to be the esoteric distortions into which its modernist or post-modernist practitioners have allegedly tortured and prodded its prose style. Kingsley Amis is not untypical of his generation in his suggestion that audiences would happily be spared the “seriousness with which they--the Jameses, the Woolfs, the Lawrences--took themselves” without any substantial intellectual compromise. In fact, for Amis and many other Movement writers of the 1950s, stylistic ambition had an almost fascistic anti-humanism at its core: “‘A correlation emerges between a proneness to the more spacious or inflatable poetic forms and an indifference to what has often been considered the prime literary subject, relations between human beings’” (Morrison 217). Anti-modernist rhetoric can be brutal, resentful, and even adolescent in its rants against its modernist parents, but such vitriol was very much a part of the literary discourse thirty years earlier for those modernists struggling to shake narrative from the stultification of Victorian duty and Edwardian sedation. The loquacious omniscience and consciousness-suffocating obsession with external detail represented by traditional nineteenth-century narrative
conventions and still practiced by many widely influential twentieth-century novelists was particularly targeted by Woolf who leapt upon the material concerns of a complacent people led by a paunchy king whose youthful ardor had been spent eating rich food, smoking cigars, and drinking port while waiting for his intrepid mother to die and turn over her decaying empire. Thus, in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf discredits with a barbed civility the narrative and prose styles of Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells, and George Gissing:

Mr. Bennett has never once looked at Mrs. Brown in her corner. They have looked very powerfully, searchingly, and sympathetically out of the window; at factories, at Utopias, even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature. And so they have developed a technique of novel-writing which suits their purpose; they have made tools and established conventions which do their business. But those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us those tools are ruin, those tools are death. (109-10)

Woolf's withering glance out of Mr. Bennett's window is different only in tone and nuance from Amis' disgust over the ways in which literary "'Experiment' . . . boils down pretty regularly to 'obtruded oddity,'" and the willful ignoring of the conventions of syntax passes for stylistic greatness: "'Shift from one scene to the next in mid-sentence, cut down on verbs or definite articles, and you are putting yourself right up in the forefront, at any rate in the eyes of those who were reared on Joyce and Virginia Woolf and take a jaundiced view of more recent developments'" (Lodge 101).

When Amis's class-conscious, arguably anti-aesthetic theorizing is compared with that of Woolf who is not unsimilarly pleading for artistic attention to be returned to humane attempts at rendering the nuances of identity and perception, the false dichotomy between anti-modernism and anti-realism becomes quickly apparent ("anti-realism" is a descriptive term offered by Cristopher Nash as a discursive bracket indicating the departures from traditional narrative assumptions made by modernists and post-modernists). The so-called modernists and postmodernists are generally identified as challengers of traditionally received assumptions and forms of the realist novel, but this is not to say that those so
categorized (Joyce, Woolf, Martin Amis, Jeanette Winterson) are not interested in representing that elusive ideological specter, the “real.” This said, an interrogation of what is meant in such a context by the term “realism” becomes a matter of paramount importance especially as a foundation for understanding the aesthetic subversion seemingly offered by modernism or postmodernism.

In its most reduced capacity realism traces the history of the novel as a “life-like” account of the commingled external and internal lives of characters on a certain landscape working their way through a certain situation. Defoe, Richardson, Smollett, Fielding, Burney, Austen, Dickens, the Trollopes, the Brontës, George Eliot, Bennett, Wells, Gissing: in one way or another each of these very different novelists can be described as realist. And while many of these writers experimented in a variety of ways with a narrative means by which to charge the consciousnesses of their characters with life-like verisimilitude, all ultimately stick to and develop as fully as they can the traditional first- or third-person omniscient narrative that conforms to a linear chain of events which occur according to a cause and effect estimation of chronological time. The drive for narrative “believability”—the aspiration on the part of the author to convince the reader that, even if these events did not take place, they could have—can be seen in the English novel as far back as the epistolary tradition which implicitly provides a raison d’être for the narrative’s textual existence. At the end of the eighteenth century Austen’s parody in Northanger Abbey of the fantastic excesses in sensibility promoted by the gothic novel gives further indication of the investment this new and popular genre had in the illusion of truth.

In The Rise of the Novel (1957) Ian Watt was the first critic to define formal realism as “the narrative embodiment of a premise . . . or primary convention, that the novel is a full and authentic report of human experience” (32). And some 35 years later Cristopher Nash, in World Postmodern Fiction: A Guide (1993) reinforces realism’s imperative toward journalistic verity as the “sense of the necessity to make fiction livable” in his theoretical envisioning of the reader who “looks ‘through’ the language of the text at a predetermined ‘real world’” and begins to respond as though he or she is a character simultaneously witnessing events as they unfold: “At bottom, the orderliness of an
unambiguous causal conception of the universe is essential. The Realist hope pivots on the assumption that a similar order of relations—linear, temporal—operates between the book and the reader, that similar rules of cause and effect operate in both. That is that they may cause the reader in time, to respond as a mind within the book’s world would respond” (9).

Nash is particularly useful in his description of the realist ontos as that of a “positively determinable world” in which events are witnessed and transcribed in the absence of modernist and postmodernist doubt about the viability of perception or the medium of language as a concise and apt means of representation: “The reader would have ‘said’ the same things had he/she been there, and he/she would have been there only the narrator makes it his business—and the reader counts on him—to get there first. It is a compact between reader and narrator to the effect that the latter will declare what is ‘truly’ happening and the former will go—will be carried—along” (11). So positive in fact are the assumptions of order, unambiguous causality, and unhindered renderability at the foundations of realism that the use of the term as a distinction of literary contextualization is rarely followed by any attempt at definition. A work, in terms of general categorization, either is or is not realist in its narrative tone and form. Even Margaret Drabble, in The Oxford Companion to English Literature, roots her definition of the narrative style and its philosophical underpinnings in the terminology of opposition and the hollow ubiquity accorded to “a literary term so widely used as to be more or less meaningless except when used in contradistinction to some other movement, e.g. Naturalism, Expressionism, Surrealism” (824).

Realism is that quality and quantity that so much of literature in the Twentieth Century has set out not to be. Drabble describes the conscious imitation of French Naturalism conducted by George Moore and Arnold Bennett, but also concurs that “the English novel from the time of Defoe had had its own unlabeled strain of realism” that has since “been applied to English literature in varying senses and contexts” (824). So meaningless does Drabble seem to find the term that she limits her definition to a brief list of its artisans and their influences. Yet, ironically, it is only under the entry for Naturalism (defined as a counter-trend in the definition of Realism) that she describes the journalistic
passion that motivated novelists to churn out three-volume epochs attempting to transcribe into words the external world and the antics, sorrows, and deprivities of its humble, vice-ridden inhabitants. These writers “shared the conviction that the everyday life of the middle and lower classes of their own day provided subjects worthy of serious literary treatment. These were to be rendered so far as possible without artificiality of plot and with scrupulous care for documentation, i.e. for the authenticity and accuracy of detail, thus investing the novels with the value of social history” (699).

The assumptions underlying a descriptor at once so useful and so useless abound, and the Naturalist tendency described above on the part of writers and readers alike to look to fiction as a form of social history further emphasizes the belief in language as an indubitable source of knowledge. For even if a given narrative is purely fictitious, it could and even may have happened in some other place to some other characters who are not unlike those people the author and reader have encountered on their own. Nash makes it clear that the many self-proclaimedly anti-Realist movements that have fought not to be choked out of the ontological garden by Realism’s pervasive network of potentially strangling roots are so vehement in their proclamations of what they are not in order to avoid being subsumed or totalized into a single, unquestioned and unquestioning cosmic order secured by the “data of experience” as read with an empirical eye to assembly (310).

Realists writing in the twentieth century have found narrative irrevocably changed by the experiments in form as a means of more directly rendering human consciousness conducted by the likes of Woolf and Joyce. The attempt to make narrative more “real” or “life-like” is hardly a twentieth-century phenomenon, Stern tried to break through the barrier of language early on in the novel’s history with Tristram Shandy. And the emotional outbursts found in Charlotte Brontë’s first-person narratives arguably distort the otherwise cool reportage of events after the fact (think of Jane Eyre’s rant on the battlements which Woolf, ironically enough, finds so stylistically out of place). Modernists took inspiration from such aberrations and strove to denaturalize traditional narrative assumptions about causality and chronology by focusing on the spiraling,

* See A Room of One’s Own
intertwined relationship between internal and external existence. Thus Woolf in “Modern Fiction” demands:

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being ‘like this’. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms. . . . Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (189)

She wants the writer and reader to acknowledge the distractions, the impossibility of clear focus, the diaspora of perception, and the nebulous haze of knowledge and identity. This is exactly the complexity she believed Edwardian writers to have lost in their exquisite attentiveness to the color of the sky and the stones on the path.

My earlier point that the differences between fictional narratives categorized as modern and anti-modern served as a helpful and necessary springboard to aesthetic passion driven by varying degrees of nostalgia for what the novel once was and could be again is reinforced by Nash who describes each movement as rhetorically dependent on the other. In short, he sees modernism as an advancement in realism rather than a break from it. And Nash’s equalizing vision of these tumultuous waves of narrative nostalgia and reaction is really a late twentieth-century clarification of a tendency Watt recognized in the 1950s when the anti-modernism of Kingsley Amis and The Movement was exploding weekly across the pages of such English broadsheets as the Spectator, the Times Literary Supplement, and the Guardian: “the tendency of some Realists and Naturalists to forget that the accurate transcription of actuality does not necessarily produce a work of any real truth or enduring literary value is no doubt partly responsible for the rather widespread distaste for Realism and all its works which is current today” (32). Anti-modernists were as disgusted with what they often caricatured as a gargoylesque love of difficulty justified as literary experimentation as the entrenched literary establishment (the Leavises being its most obvious figureheads)—raised on the high modernism of Woolf, Joyce, Pound, and Eliot—
was with the Movement's seeming obsession with prose that often came off as more irreverently rude than aesthetically revolutionary.

In the 1950s, Watt warned against the rigidity of reactionary self-categorization: "This distaste, however, may also promote critical confusion by leading us into the opposite error; we must not allow an awareness of certain shortcomings in the aims of the Realist school to obscure the very considerable extent to which the novel in general, as much in Joyce as in Zola employs the literary means here called formal realism" (32). And in the 1990s Nash teases out more explicitly a significance in the conflation of conventional visions and methods of realism that I have found crucial to my own yearning to place Barbara Pym in the active role of a writer whose narrative style is as dynamic as that of a Woolf or an Amis. Pym may not have thought of herself as anti-establishment or anti-modernist, but this is not to say that she was aesthetically out of sync with other writers of her generation.

In "People and Paper Houses: Attitudes to 'Realism' and 'Experiment' in English Post-war Fiction" (1979), A. S. Byatt pithily addresses the "irritable territorial definitions" that have marked the last century of literary discourse and activity in England as one of anxiety about both realist and anti-realist predecessors combined with "a strong sense of the value of a habitable imagined world" and a profound nostalgia, rather than rejection of the great works of the past" (181). The implications for fictional narrative and the critical discourse that forms, announces, categorizes, and reacts to it is "a curiously symbiotic relationship between old realism and new experiment" in which "the result is not realism, but is intimately and uncomfortably related to it" (169-70). Such anxiety is most marked in fictive texts such as John Fowles's The French Lieutenant's Woman (1969), where the

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Useful here is Frederic Jameson's discussion in The Political Unconscious of epistemological breaks in the category of "contemporary history" which falter when the question is raised of just whose contemporary history is being examined. Thus he states: "the problems begin when your epistemological break begins to displace itself in time according to you own current interests, so that Balzac may stand for unenlightened representationality when you are concerned to bring out everything that is 'textual' and modern in Flaubert, but turns into something else when with Roland Barthes in S/Z, you have decided to rewrite Balzac as Philippe Sollers, as sheer text and ecriture" (17). In other words, depending on the definition and time parameters one is attributing to Pym's contemporaneity or that of individual schools and modes of criticism, she is either retrograde or cutting edge.
novelistic impulse to reproduce the consuming universe of a Victorian novel is acknowledged and discussed at those points in the narrative when the story becomes most compelling. In other words, Fowles as author and narrator resists the manipulation of expectation as it has been offered and satisfied again and again in the Victorian novel by ruining the flow of the story that he has heretofore taken such pains to tell. Thus, he ends Chapter 12 by asking fundamental questions about the nature of his enigmatic heroine: “Who is Sarah? Out of what shadow does she come?” (80). And instead of telling the reader what he has set us up to want to know, Fowles as narrator begins Chapter 13 with a metadiscourse on what it means to write fiction in the 1960s:

If I have pretended until now to know my characters’ minds and innermost thoughts, it is because I am writing in (just as I have assumed some of the vocabulary and “voice” of) a convention universally accepted at the time of my story: that the novelist stands next to God. He may not know all, yet he tries to pretend that he does. But I live in the age of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Roland Barths; if this is a novel, it cannot be a novel in the modern sense of the word. (80)

For Barbara Pym the imperative described by Byatt and demonstrated by Fowles to write metafiction was far less anxiety producing than it was an amusing opportunity to acknowledge the intricate layeredness of text and reality that a century and a half of Victorian tradition and Modernist renovation had taught her to see and delight in. Rather than feeling anxiety about narrative traditions of the sort that fueled much of the rhetoric of her anti-modern and post-modern contemporaries, Pym’s oeuvre (this includes her novels as well as her posthumously published diaries and novels) shows her to be a writer who greedily and even messily consumed language and narrative as a gourmand feasts on desserts. (It comes as no surprise that her characters devote such intricate attention to their meals, whether elaborate or simple.) Byatt makes a case for post-war narrative prose as a realism fattened by the experiments of modernism and the apocalyptic fears of life in a nuclear age, in combination with a memory of tradition that is at once nourishing and suffocating.
In the final pages of this Introduction and the following chapters, I offer Pym, her novels, and her private anecdotes and speculations about love, quotidian chores, and the fragmented nature of identity and reality as an exemplar of Byatt’s interest in those writers who have few qualms about their yearning to create a “plain, good, unfussy, derivative realist prose” that feels no need to declare “that that is not what it meant to be, not what it meant to be at all” (167-68). Pym’s sense of her literary heritage is far more playful than it is anxious, as is her attitude toward the trend she sees on the part of her many contemporaries to dismantle narrative expectations the minute they are set in place. While often ironically acknowledging the postmodern plight of a fragmented, ever-dispersing selfhood, she maintains the sense of a continuous textual universe in which her bookish narrators and characters revel in the richness of their literary past. Thus Pym’s constant interface between “text” world and “real” world demonstrates what is for Byatt the ideal post-war relationship between tradition and the ravenous individual talent, “not parody, not pastiche, not plagiarism—but a good greedy reading, by a great writer” (167-68).

Section IV. In terms of historical chronology, Pym’s career as a novelist is an interesting case-study because it sits directly between the two waves of prose experimentation that mark the beginning and end of the Twentieth Century. She is overtly neither a modernist nor a postmodernist, but in both her fiction and her personal writing she engages her more experimental forbearers and peers in a discourse of sorts. While her narratives often concede that identity and the ways in which we create meaning and structure in our daily lives are not so straight-forward, unified, or linear as they have been depicted by traditional realism, she always remains a humanist who refuses to disassociate herself or her characters from culture or community. This is not, then, meant to imply that a modernist necessarily replaces human feeling with austere experiments in syntax. Neither Woolf nor Joyce did this. But whereas they were certainly more apt to portray their characters’ unreachable isolation, Pym explores loneliness while continually returning her characters to the healing balm of community. Though Pym was a rapacious reader of the Anglo-American and Continental fiction of both her modernist predecessors and her anti-
modernist contemporaries, she was neither opposed nor allied to any single aesthetic school or trend. Rather she alternately admired, laughed at, and even critiqued all that came her way, spinning out of her expansive knowledge of fiction and poetry her own translucent web of allusion and narrative revision.

Pym’s Alaric Lydgate (Less than Angels), Prudence Bates (Jane and Prudence), or Leonora Eyre (The Sweet Dove Died) may quietly and obliquely toy with the modernist pose of detachment from emotion and commitment above all else to form.8 What might seem like a muddled conflation on my part of the individual positions of author, characters, and aesthetic theory is actually a significant feature of Pym’s own fundamental refusal to sever the relationships between author, narrator, character, plot, style, and the various ideological interpretations of reality, identity, and art that provide the foundations of any attempt at narrative. Thus, the list of her characters and their own relationships to the larger discourse of modernist sensibility can be continued. Tom Mallow (Less than Angels) may feel profoundly the impossibility of communication and connection with other human beings. And Mildred Lathbury (Excellent Women) may, while sitting in a cafeteria, feel awash in a sea of noise, matter, and movement. But Pym’s prose is far too familiar and even welcoming in its rhythms to alienate the reader from a sense of common humanity shared alike by audience, characters, and author. At the level of narrative, her prose poses no impediment to consumption and the only real ruptures in the smooth flow of images and events are brought on by laughter, by Pym’s deliberate manipulation of social and linguistic incongruities. To use a phrase of David Lodge’s, she is a readerly author par excellence. If Joyce’s Stephen Daedalus is consumed by the “ineluctable modality of the visible,” and if Woolf’s Clarissa Dalloway carries about with her “a perpetual sense, as she watched taxi cabs, of being out, out far out to sea and alone,” the consciousness of Mildred Lathbury is preoccupied by far more concrete, even base mundanities. Clarissa may be rooted in the minutiae of taxi cabs, mantle ornaments, and the image of her face in a mirror, but such details remind her of her disconnection, of the internal diaspora of self belied by her

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8 The term “modernist” could just as easily be replaced here with “existentialist,” for Pym’s characters are continually engaged in a process that might be described as a Sartrean existential reckoning.
“pointed; dartlike; definite” reflection. Mildred’s anxiety or nausea, on the other hand, is the result of feeling too responsible, too concretely alive and answerable to those who demand her tea and sympathy and take her deeply ingrained sense of duty for granted:

I felt resentful and bitter towards Helena and Rocky and even towards Julian, though I had to admit that nobody had compelled me to wash these dishes or to tidy this kitchen. It was the fussy spinster in me, the Martha, who could not comfortably sit and make conversation when she knew that yesterday’s unwashed dishes were still in the sink. Martha’s back must have ached too, I thought grimly, noticing the plate rack needed scrubbing and the tea-cloths boiling. (161)

Pym is a realist who is well-aware of the epistemological argument between modernists and anti-modernists. But instead of writing aesthetic treatises concerning what form she thinks fiction and the novel should be taking in the post-war world or creating overtly intellectual characters who are prone to internal spiritual and aesthetic speculation (Stephen Daedalus in Portrait) or to external discussions of the same (Jake Donaghue in Murdoch’s Under the Net), Pym’s characters think of themselves simultaneously as authors who rarely write and fictional creations who belong in Victorian novels reading limp, green, suede-bound volumes of Christina Rossetti while simultaneously wishing they had the intellectual discipline to face the rigors of reading modern poetry. Pym’s characters own books by an author named Barbara Pym. They defy the boundaries of discreet text-worlds encapsulated in individual novels by moving in and out of one another’s physical vicinity and gossipy anecdotes. They know about modernism and anti-modernism and imagine to themselves that the materialist mundanity that marks their lives and anecdotes is not quite the stuff one would find in a novel by Virginia Woolf. Wilmet Forsyth’s (A Glass of Blessings) experience of the eccentric Miss Daunt’s irrelevant and dramatic mutterings while giving blood during a community drive is the most explicit sort of reference a Pym character might make to modernism but it is not untypical of the stance her characters take to the modernist sensibility: “It seemed like a ‘stream of consciousness’ novel, but I was relieved when she stopped talking for I had been afraid that she might
address me. Virginia Woolf might have brought something away from the experience, I thought; perhaps writers always do this, from situations that merely shock and embarrass ordinary people” (78). What makes Wilmet’s observation all the more telling in terms of Pym’s own aesthetic agenda is the fact that Woolf is offered as a representative writer rather than a stylistically categorized one. Her adeptness at the “stream of consciousness” style may set her apart in some ways, but in others she is from Pym’s perspective just one more novelist trying to get the life going on around her onto the page.

In short, Pym does engage the texts of modernism but not with the reactionary vehemence of her contemporary anti-modernists. Her comic narratives are devoid of the reactionary violence of emotion that became the early hallmark of Kingsley Amis and the so-called Angry Young Men. If Pym’s narratives lack the anti-modernist vitriolic defense of realism against the formal experimentation of modernism, then postmodernism is an equally tricky label to apply to an author whose linear and historically chronological narratives are virtuoso mimicries of a pre-Joycean story-telling aesthetic. Nevertheless, the category of the postmodern remains sufficiently malleable and open-ended to be useful in trying to contextualize Pym’s late twentieth-century ironically self-referential, self-deprecating realism. Within postmodernism—despite its oxymoronic construction by critics as the textual embodiment of the ultimate rejection of character, self, plot, and sense—there is a place for realism as a useful if no longer effortlessly viable narrative tradition. And what I mean by effortlessly viable is that, though many contemporary writers may in their novels be concerned with the dismantling of the real, the self, and consciousness, they unashamedly employ certain nineteenth-century modes of storytelling. But embedded in their stories is a self-interrogation by which the realist form is allowed its narrative momentum up to a point yet is continually checked by intrusive authorial commentary, and such reminders that this is just a story about fictional characters are often placed at a point just before or after a narrative climax.

In my construction of Pym as a provisionally or marginally postmodern writer, I in part want to evoke the most literal definition of the term: that writing which comes historically after modernism, a response consisting in varying degrees of rejection,
reevaluation, and assimilation. As markers of extremity against which to measure Pym’s artistic moderation I offer for a moment the dark, lower-middle class raucousness of Kingsley Amis’ *Lucky Jim* as the quintessence of the angry anti-modernism of the 1950s and 60s and the cosmically apocalyptic comedy of disintegration in Martin Amis’ *London Fields* as a representative of the postmodern 70s, 80s, and 90s. Pym neither lashes out in Jim Dixon fashion at the “obtruded oddity” the elder Amis attributed to Joyce, Woolf, and Pound, nor does she revel in the decomposition of self, morality, and art in the manner of the contemporary Amis. Nevertheless, she was, like the former, writing realistic, provincial, comic novels out of a desire to fill a certain emotional and spiritual void often attributed to modernist experiments in form and epistemology. But, like the latter, Pym is also a writer with a postmodern sensitivity to the constructedness of self and the multiple impulses and fragmentary narratives that are suppressed beneath the traditional stories by which we identify ourselves as whole, historically locatable individuals.

Certainly, I am over-simplifying here in my reduction of the two Amises and the important roles as novelist and public-figure each has played in his own time to a few sentences each. But the contrast between father and son and the artistic climates which each in part created and in which

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9 In *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Brian McHale distinguishes between modern and postmodern writers by claiming that whereas the former are interested in the nature and mechanics of knowing, the later are obsessed with the question of being. His study, which he labels a work of “descriptive poetics” is then interested in comparing the difference between the two, often only subtly different approaches: “This is essentially a one-idea book—an admission that probably ought to embarrass me more than it in fact does. That idea is simply stated: postmodernist fiction differs from modernist fiction just as a poetics dominated by ontological issues differs from one dominated by epistemological issues. All the rest is merely a matter of dotting i’s and crossing t’s” (xii).

10 Helpful here is Frederic Jameson’s reenvisioning of postmodern fragmentation as the cultural dominant of late capitalism, in other words, as an atmospheric given not unlike the air we breath rather than one of many aesthetics a writer might chose: “The conception of postmodernism outlined here is a historical rather than a merely stylistic one. I cannot stress too greatly the radical distinction between a view for which the postmodern is an (optional) style among many others available, and one which seeks to grasp it as the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism; the two approaches in fact generate two very different ways of conceptualizing the phenomenon as a whole, on the one hand moral judgments (about which it is indifferent whether they are positive or negative), and on the other a genuinely dialectical attempt to think our present of time in History” (85).

Pym, then, is writing in the postmodern era, so her oeuvre cannot help but reveal, revel in, and attempt to come to terms with the late twentieth-century breakdown of a Realist epistemology and ontology, a paradigm in which a totalizing Realism breaks down into continually proliferating realisms (71).
their fiction has flourished can be an instructive one for suggesting the array of fictional possibility that lies in-between, from the decades immediately following the war to the decades leading up to the millennium.

If Kingsley and Martin Amis can be placed at the extreme ends of a continuum of late twentieth-century fiction in England, then in the middle expanse exist a vast and various population consisting of many equally deft and defiant female writers. I am aware that book-ending a half-century with a patriarch and his male progeny casts a masculine shadow across the literary landscape, but I am not displeased with the visual effect of a teeming crowd of women at the center of said continuum. This is not to say that the women are more homogeneous in their message and style than the men, for the fantastic hyperbole of Doris Lessing, Angela Carter, and Fay Weldon is often worlds away from the housebound morality plays of Iris Murdoch, Margaret Drabble, and Barbara Pym. Nevertheless, there is among these women a vein of moderation, a continual return to humanism and domestic realism as a refuge from the deconstructive millennial shower outside that has, by contrast, turned the homes in Martin Amis novels into suffocating caves of unpent anxiety and not-so-subtle cruelty.¹¹

Though Pym’s novels are often compared stylistically to Victorian novels in which the narrative is told either by an omniscient third person or a retrospective first person whose fullness of vision is the result of hindsight, Pym’s authorial persona is neither god-like nor manipulative in whatever omniscience it may employ. She is more a reporter of the daily trivial details of life as it goes on around her than an isolated auteur, working out some pithy social microcosm on paper as it transpires in the profound cogitations of her artistically sensitized imagination. And in this role she is not always invisible either. Indeed, she turns up in No Fond Return of Love in the Eagle House dining room, eating

¹¹ Of course, as I finish this sentence, many examples of male writers who turn to love and nurturing as refuge from the philosophical storm come immediately to mind: Julian Barnes’s “Parenthesis” in A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters, in which he nuzzles his wife’s neck in the night, John Fowles’s Daniel Martin who travels the world and textually revisits the many loves and sexual partners of his life looking for meaning and a resting place, and even the moment in Martin Amis’s The Information when the protagonist’s son returns to him unharmed by the vengeful and murderous Steve. This is all by way of saying that my male/female dichotomy is as false as it is superficially helpful.
and observing her protagonists, Dulcie and Viola, as they observe Aylwin Forbes’s crotchety mother, his charming but skittish brother, his estranged wife, and her reconciling mother:

It was at this point that somebody came to the unoccupied table, but as she was a woman of about forty, ordinary-looking and unaccompanied, nobody took much notice of her. As it happened, she was a novelist; indeed, some of the occupants of the tables had read and enjoyed her books, but it would never have occurred to them to connect her name, even had they ascertained it from the hotel register, with that of the author they admired. They ate their stewed plums and custard and drank their thimble-sized cups of coffee, quite unconscious that they were being observed. (176)¹²

This novelist does not demand our attention for long and never even registers on the consciousnesses of those who will find themselves as the focus of her fifth novel, but the appearance is a significant one, predating John Fowles’s more famous appearance with and observation of Charles Smithson in The French Lieutenant’s Woman (1969) by nearly a decade.

Admittedly, Pym’s appearance in No Fond Return of Love is neither so Derridianly motivated nor thematically and strategically central to the outcome of Dulcie’s narrative as is Fowles’s appearance in Charles’ train car.¹³ Fowles’ narrator speaks of his role as

¹² In “Women Victimized by Fiction: Living and Loving in the Novels of Barbara Pym” (1980), Barbara Brothers interprets the intertextual movements of characters between novels is indicative of Pym’s brand of realism as the chronicling of human relationships rather than the creation of characters and scenarios.

¹³ My Derrida invocation is a metonym for deconstruction as a historical and philosophical movement, and I should make it clear that I am eliding Derridian deconstruction with Fowles’s very differently motivated narrative antics as a rhetorical shorthand. Fowles himself is historically concurrent with deconstruction and in part sympathetic with its interests in detotalization, but he takes issue with its more extreme dismantlings of the connection between the author and his or her work: “There’s no right reading of a text, certainly not. And there’s no way, I think, of knowing what actually happens mentally as the process is going on. We don’t know to what degree people visualize, for instance... I’m all for deconstruction on that side. What I don’t like is the corollary they’ve made. You know, the author is a mere irrelevant detail, who sells half a pound of text like half a pound of sugar. I rather object to that. I still haven’t got over J. Hillis Miller’s book on Hardy—when he said that all the biographical data are irrelevant to the true understanding of Hardy. (Tarbox 175).
observer and recorder as that of a hungry cannibal or of a ruthless, late-twentieth-century tabloid journalist, whereas Pym’s appearance is more whimsical and humorous in a tongue-in-cheek way. The unnamed author’s holiday in Taviscombe and dinner at the Eagle House is certainly a narrative disruption, but one that is as ironic and superficially inconsequential as the fact that Dulcie has one of this writer’s novels in her small bathroom library:

After a while she ventured out to the bathroom. It was an old-fashioned comfortable room with a faded rose-patterned carpet on the floor and the bath encased in mahogany. A shelf on the wall held a selection of books, their covers now faded and buckled by steam. Viola noticed The Brothers Karamazov, Poems of Gray and Collins, Enquire Within, The Angel in the House, and a few old Boots Library books, A Voice Through a Cloud, Some Tame Gazelle, and The Boys from Sharon. By the bath there was a tin of Gumption and a rag. (73)

In No Fond Return of Love, more so than in any of her other novels, Pym plays with fiction and reality, blending them into a sort of “fourth dimension” reminiscent of the one Dulcie imagines, a plane on which book-world and life-world are indistinguishable. Dulcie is a character created by Pym, but she is also living in a common world with Barbara Pym who in 1950 published a book entitled Some Tame Gazelle, now sitting faded, warped, and probably unread on a shelf in Dulcie’s bathroom. Whereas the metafictional moments of authorial interruption and commentary in The French Lieutenant’s Woman are arguably the polemical/aesthetic motivation for Fowles’s detailed narrative of life in post-Darwinian Victorian England, Pym’s physical entry into her own text is less a matter of intrusion into a narrative on the brink of automatic deconstruction than it is an ironically self-referential aside.

Pym is often reminding the reader of her existence, but always in easily forgotten moments such as the one mentioned above or when she names Rodney Forsythe’s secretary, in A Glass of Blessings, Miss Pim, a character who is only mentioned once and who is described as a romantic whose imagination and sense of humor—stifled as they are
by her tedious office job—cause her to get hysterical over mild criticism. And this is just one way in which Pym’s sense of the blurred boundary between reality and textuality is acknowledged in her narratives. If Fowles uses the narrative form of the Victorian marriage-plot in order to deconstruct it and in doing so comment on both Victorian and twentieth-century assumptions about life and discourse, Pym is more benignly acknowledging her own role as observer, writer, and narrator before quickly bowing out again in order to give her readers the narrative outcome they expect. She follows through with the romance plot by offering marriages or continued courtship at the end of each of her novels, but she certainly establishes a doubt for the reader about just how ideal such outcomes will be over the course of the characters’ lives beyond the textual boundaries of their particular narrative. Again, like Fowles she is questioning the typical happy or tragic ending, but instead of giving two entirely different endings as Fowles does in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, she embeds the schism in her characters’ always tenuous feelings about their relationships with others.

First and foremost, Barbara Pym’s fiction is that of a pragmatist who examines what it is to exist daily in a world of cups and saucers and flatware, lipstick and decorative hats and ugly brown dresses, buses and churches and cafeterias. She is an examiner and philosopher of minutiae, who allows her characters and her readers to look into the tea cups they so often clutch and sip from and see something other than the murky, milky beverage those cups so delicately or practically convey to parched, strained lips. What they see reflecting off the liquid surface are their own ironic, questioning, far-from-docile faces. And swirling in the leafy dregs is an assurance of a universe of possibility outside of the order and limitation of daily ritual and cultural tradition. To adapt a phrase from Brian McHale’s *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), each of Pym’s books offers the reader an opportunity for doing “unlicensed ontology in a teacup” (25). Whereas McHale is using the teacup symbolically in order to convey an image of the postmodern novel as a delicately crafted, porcelain vessel that conveys the chaotic disorder of the deconstructed narrative from the author who pours it out to the reader who has been invited to this deliberately topsy-turvy teaparty, Pym’s teacups are as literal as they are symbolic.
Pym gives license to her characters and readers to examine their beingness, but at the same time she calls for neither a social revolution nor a cultural free-for-all. Many Pym critics might argue that her stylistic and thematic restraints, her characters' self-imposed limitations on possibility, and the obsession of both author and characters with the most minor and mundane of details automatically thwart any real doubt or self-examination. And I would be the first to concur that her characters largely stick with the roles and ruminations that they know and find most comfortable and comforting. In fact those who flee the culture and the society, such as Tom Mallow (Less than Angels) and Marcia Ivory (Quartet in Autumn), are self-alienating outcasts whose disregard for the norms of daily English life lend them a certain futile wanderlust or disqualifying madness which eventually kills them. However, those like Letty Crowe (Quartet), Mildred Lathbury (Excellent Women), Dulcie Mainwaring (No Fond Return of Love), and Catherine Oliphant (Less than Angels) who maintain their ties with society and culture in spite of a feeling of alienation or who, like Alaric Lydgate, return to a nation and a domestic situation after a long estrangement are almost heroic in their stoic ability to muddle through the status quo and to find over and over again moments of contentment, humor, and joy. Instead of dashing their teacups against the garden wall in disgust at the futility of human life or in a desperate attempt to break free, Pym's characters sip their tea, nibble their digestive biscuits, balance saucers on their knobby knees, and try to make the best of a ridiculous situation.

The chapters that follow proceed in a manner of accretion and expansion, as I further define the descriptive narrative categories I have introduced here by means of providing close readings of Pym's own narratives. Since I am interested in Pym's literary context, I will also continue to offer points of comparison and contrast between Pym's prose style and thematic concerns with those writers past and present whose fiction can be read as defining moments in the history of the novel in England. In Chapter I, I will look at Pym's diaries and letters as discursive embodiments of her earliest narrative attempts to make sense of identity, romantic love, and the fictive process in terms of the cultural narratives explored and exposed theorists as Mikhail Bakhtin and Peter Brooks. In Chapter II, I will explore the narrative and stylistic means by which Austen and Woolf attempted to
depict their own versions of a constantly proliferating reality and identity and then offer a reading of Excellent Women and the ways in which Pym creates her own narrative paradigm. Chapter III will look at Jane and Prudence, No Fond Return of Love, A Few Green Leaves, and Less than Angels in order to emphasize Pym’s thematic and stylistic commitment to detachment as a means of standing back from life in order to record it, savor it, and even protect oneself from it, and then in the act of discursive distancing actually reconnecting to community. And Chapter IV will then look at An Unsuitable Attachment, The Sweet Dove Died, and Quartet in Autumn as examples of Pym’s comic, novel-of manners attempt at “doing” ontology and what this means in terms of stretching the elastic parameters of narrative in the last half of this century, a period which is commonly and never unproblematically labeled the postmodern era.
CHAPTER I

EARLY PYM IN A NARRATIVE VORTEX: A *VERY PRIVATE EYE* AND SOME TAME GAZELLE

31 July [1933]. After lunch I took some Yeastvite tablets and continued to take them after tea and supper. A slightly unromantic way of curing lovesickness I admit, but certainly I feel a lot better now. (Hilary is playing ‘Stormy Weather’ incessantly—my theme song I think!) After lunch I read Richard Aldington’s new book, *All Men are Enemies*—it was rather interesting but intensely depressing. After tea I turned to Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy* and began to read about Love Melancholy—but I haven’t got to the part yet where he deals with the cure. Perhaps I am suffering from the spleen too—in that case I may be completely cured by taking a course of our English poets—which all points to drowning my sorrows in work. I think I shall try to develop a ‘Whatever is, is right’ attitude of mind—and quite honestly I suppose all this is rather good for me—and an affair with Lorenzo probably wouldn’t be! (*VPE* 25)

In this chapter I will look at Pym’s earliest discursive inclinations, and by beginning with this relatively non-traditional representation of Pym as a youthfully exuberant romantic (read man-chaser) at the center of a whirlwind of cultural images, desires, and possible selves I intend to offer the narrative sensibilities she brings to earliest fruition as an analogy for a par ticu lar moment of gender, class, race, nation, and textual tradition in the Twentieth Century: a century of violent wars and glamorous Hollywood images into which Pym was in 1913 born and thus automatically interpolated. Represented in these letters and diary entries is Pym’s dynamic sense of the provisional and malleable nature of identity, an intuitive acknowledgement which will later give her realistic fiction an aesthetic slipperiness and even edginess that is often glossed over by her critics as well as...
by her fans. In this attempt to see the many faces of Pym as she is presented in the fragments that make up the posthumously edited and published *A Very Private Eye: An Autobiography in Diaries and Letters* (1985), I will turn to the discursive speculations of Peter Brooks and Mikhail Bakhtin to aid my articulation of Pym's ironic, often hilarious, sometimes contradictory, profusely romantic sense of her life as something that she is simultaneously writing and watching (as though on a cinema screen). My own delight in these first- and sometimes third-person fragments of personal writing is evident in the extent to which I give Pym's identities room to speak for themselves in these pages. But I also want to allow those playful, always ironic voices to stand on their own in refutation of the argument made by Pym biographer Ann Wyatt-Brown that they are simply symptomatic of Pym's personal neurosis rather than aesthetically savvy attempts to understand larger cultural bifurcations and contradictions as mediated by the discourse of postmodern theory and art.

In *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984), Peter Brooks explains that the boundary between life as it is lived and as it is told and remembered does not exist: "We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meaning of our past actions, anticipating the outcome of our future projects situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories we recount in order to explain and understand where no other form of explanation will work" (Brooks 3). If indeed we do live in a nebulous yet pervasive narrative vapor then Pym's self-conscious poses (of the sort exemplified in the above epigraph which appear throughout the 1930s) acknowledge the atmosphere in which lives and novels are always already awaiting us. For Pym the aesthetic landscape of the 1930s is explained by the readily available and addictively consumable narrative of flirtation, infatuation, and bittersweet nostalgia. But as the decade passes and the war begins, superficial titillation and passing fancies (though still attractive) become less available plot mainstays as the saga of Sandra and Lorenzo is slowly revised into her first published novel, *Some Tame Gazelle*, where the Victorian romance of despair and reconciliation between hero and heroine is transcribed into ironic befuddlement, and triumphal understanding occurs within Belinda Bede who learns that her real romance is
with her own imagination.

I will trace through Pym's diaries and letters her earliest discursive attempts to articulate her continuously protean sense of her own identity and the extent to which her daily record of her interactions with men becomes deliberately and playfully conflated with the romantic narratives that are at the foundation of her emotional and intellectual life. Barbara Pym's fictional characters look at the world around them and at the nonexistent or fizzled romantic relationships they have been taught to live for and must cope with what Kathleen Rowe helpfully describes as the "the deflation of [their] ideals" (8). Culturally constructed though such ideals may be, each protagonist must revise her expectations, and the result puts a new spin on an aging genre. In this way, Pym's fictions function as romantic comedies similar to those that dominated film screens in the 1930s, with the difference being that the happy ending of heterosexual romantic acknowledgement and reconciliation on the part of the heretofore sparing protagonists is, in Pym's narratives, always undercut. The romance becomes the ironic romance or anti-romance, and the cultural mirror in which women are ordered to see themselves as obedient and grateful partners of admirable, hard-working men is exposed as a fun-house prop of sorts in which idealized distortion is offered to a confounded populace as truth. Pym, thus, devoted her writing career to exploring the tension between desire and mundane reality, and, by the time she created Leonora Eyre of The Sweet Dove Died and Marcia Ivory of Quartet in Autumn in the late 1960s and early 1970s, she had witnessed the potential for this fissure to become a yawning chasm of self-absorption, emotional deprivation, and even dementia. For Pym in the 1930s, however, the onset of adult femininity still offered an intoxicating taste of soaring possibility in which desire was neither so obviously an ever-deferred, -never-surmountable product of discourse nor the so-called realities of daily life so existentially alienated as it often proved itself to be with the accumulation of years and words and simultaneously comforting and suffocating narrative scripts.

In her diaries, in her correspondence with Henry Harvey and Robert Liddell, and in her early attempts to recast her real-life relationships into ironic fiction, Pym is plotting her way out of the prescribed model of a femininity tied to romance and marriage that often
came part-and-parcel with Victorian realism. As an inheritor of both the nineteenth-century novelistic tradition and the high modernist break with Victorian sentimentalism and rejection of a moral sensibility based on familial duty, Pym constructs her own *ars poetica* by blending a realist narrative structure with self-reflexive commentary on the ways in which such stories are no longer viable. Pym's textual quest for a new sensibility by which to understand her own isolation is her contribution to the project of the novel in this century to overthrow inadequate traditions in plot, characterization, and narration and to experiment with a narrative syntax by which stories are not only told they are constructed with an eye to their own deconstruction.

**Section I**

*5 October [1933].* Worked in the morning and had coffee with Harry at Elliston's. I ordered a copy of Ernest Dowson's poems in Bodleiana and spent some time finding appropriate lines and poems. I'm beginning to enjoy my pose of romantically unrequited love. (*VPE* 27)

From her earliest Oxford diary entries, Barbara Pym is acutely conscious of herself as a character in a heady melodrama of her own creation. Indeed, the very first entry of *A Very Private Eye*, which begins in January 1932 at the start of her second term at St. Hilda's College declares her obvious sense of herself as a romantic heroine waiting to happen: "January 15. A new term in a new year--a golden opportunity to get a peer's heir--a worthy theological student--or to change entirely! But Oxford really is exhilarating" (*VPE* 13). In the early years of Pym's aesthetic apprenticeship, which begins most intensively at Oxford and carries on through the remainder of the 1930s, into the 1940s, and throughout the war, infatuations with romantically idealized men serve as her primary impetus to write. The pages of her diary are preoccupied with continually writing herself into and out of love; she uses paper and ink to imagine herself into her own feminine desirability and, later, out of rejection and disappointment over the impossible fantasy of happily-ever-after coupledom. For Pym, the loosely reflective and confessional format of
the diary is a blank page on which she can construct herself as the feminine protagonist of any of the traditional women's genres. Strains of the melodrama, the soap opera, the marriage-plot romance, the novel of manners, the gothic mystery, and the romantic comedy all weave in and out of her daily narrative of her life, and the predominant trope by which she writes herself into textual being is that of her loves. But as important as her sense of herself as a desiring and desirable heroine is at this time, equally so is her sense of herself as a writer capable of emotional subtlety, ironic detachment, and life-like verisimilitude.

At Oxford, one male undergraduate after another floats into her purview and becomes laden with a romantic significance that gives each his place in her litany of memorable encounters and relationships, all of which contribute to her early conflation of fantasy with her obsessive recording of "real" life at the most minute and mundane level of detail. Immersed as Pym is, while reading for a degree in English at St. Hilda’s, in a world of poetry composed by "great men," wherein beauty and love take the form of hypnotic alliteration and eloquent meter, she is simultaneously drawn to the masculine beauty surrounding her, which she then confuse with the romantic promise of the poetry she is reading. Pym’s flickering hopes, upon arriving at university, of winning the heart of some as yet nameless theological student or peer’s heir eventually blend into infatuations with Rupert Gleadow and Henry Harvey, and their masculine names dominate the pages of her diary as fleeting admirations that turn into fixations, and eventually "real," if romantically unsuccessful intimacies. No matter how intensely the young Pym may feel herself to be suffering from unrequited affection, she exists in a constant state of aesthetic excitation, and is as inspired by the poetry she is reading as she is by the athletic, tweed-clad young male bodies and precocious intellects surrounding her. Objectifying them as possible lovers in much the same way that she objectifies herself as a dashing heroine, she creates an automythologizing narrative of devil-may-care modern femininity as it is (simultaneously and contradictorily) foiled and fed by cultural narratives of heterosexual romantic love. In other words, her January 1932 hope "to change entirely" is as predicated on the young men she encounters as it is on her postmodern sense of the malleable and fictive nature of identity, and her already active artistic aspiration to record and reinvent life.
in the particular and peculiar voice she cultivates in her diaries.

What is evident from these early texts of self exploration and disclosure is that they are an exercise in plot and character development. Written, ostensibly, for her eyes only Pym uses her diary to craft an epic romance of her love for the various men on whom she dotes. But upon closer observation, what emerges from beneath the surface of man-crazy obsession is an infatuation with the possibilities of persona. Casting herself as heroine in the drama of Oxford life as it spins out with passionate ferocity across the pages of her diary, Pym experiments with her new-found sense of herself as a vibrant, fashionable, intelligent, independent, sexually desirable woman. Liberated from the insularity of the small country town and the rigid formality of boarding school, she sets out to take the comparatively more permissive Oxford by storm. In one move, the rural, naive school-girl launches imaginatively into a life of urban sophistication and intellectual promiscuity. The self-doubt hidden behind a flirtatious facade and the drama of blossoming romance and physical passion that unfold in the Rupert Gleadow and Henry Harvey episodic romances thus become early scenes in Pym’s developing romance with herself as a textual creation.

In *Barbara Pym: A Critical Biography* (1992), Anne Wyatt-Brown paints the young Barbara Pym as she emerges from the pages of personal writing found in *A Very Private Eye* as a pathetic eccentric so besotted by ideas of romance and so debilitated by her dependence on approval from the aloof males she targets for her obsessive-compulsive admiration that she must turn to fiction in order to gain distance from and control over a continual inundation of dejection: “The discrepancy between the frivolity and sexual desperation evident in the private documents and the restraint of the novels was so marked that Pym’s readers have been forced to reappraise her work in the light of sometimes pathetic biographical facts” (7). For Wyatt-Brown, “The story contained in her diaries is sad, and the style of composition offers little indication that its author would eventually write witty, eccentric fiction” (26). And, in light of the fact that Pym often described her day-to-day existence in terms of the men to whom she was attracted and the men by whom she had been disappointed, Wyatt-Brown all too easily stereotypes the author as the quintessential disappointed spinster who turns to fiction in desperation to escape her lonely,
manless existence: “She belonged to a transitional generation of women. Born in 1913, just prior to World War I, she grew up with the expectation that she would marry. To her dismay, disastrous encounters with men in young adulthood suggested that she was doomed to disappointment. Consequently she had to seek her pleasures in fiction rather than in marriage” (5).

I do not see the same picture. Certainly all the weltering emotion and stinging rejection are vividly alive in Pym’s diaries, but so is a portrait of a resolutely creative young woman, so alert to the power of narrative and fiction to alter lived reality that she wavers back and forth between two worlds: the “real” one (of writing dull academic essays, crossing the street, and eating breakfast) and the Hollywood romance always playing itself out in her head and across the pages of her diary:

11 November [1933]. Armistice Day. I went to St Mary’s and everything outside was almost more silent than I’ve ver known it before. In the evening Harry took me to the flicks—Bebe Daniels in The Song You Gave Me—which was bad but amusing. Then to Harry’s rooms where I let him kiss me properly, and so gave up the ‘Lorenzo ws the last person who kissed me pose—sad, but what’s the use. H. seems to be in love with me if he meant what he said—anyway we got on beter than usual. I also had some beer and borrowed a book on Modern Art and some Proust. (VPE 30)

To be sure, the differences between my reading and Wyatt-Brown’s are as much a sign of who we are respectively as readers and critics as they are any sort of reflection of the “real” Pym, the woman and artist. Wyatt-Brown sets out on a clinical quest and often employs the therapeutic language of disfunctionality and neurosis in order to “analyze [Pym’s] psychic structure” (4), and, in doing so, finds much to support her claim that “Pym’s personal psychology, not her social environment, constrained her” (3). In this diagnostic schema, Pym is so beset by emotional deficits that escape into fiction becomes her only, if temporary, refuge from herself and from the rest of humanity: “The severely limited aspirations of her characters can be attributed to the self-imposed restrictions that characterized her own adult behavior. Also her novels contain private fantasies, which she
found difficult to explore in any other fashion, combined with the vignettes of absurd behavior that she assiduously recorded in a series of small notebooks. . . . Pym's obsession with such observations suggests her anxiety, as well as her fascination with human eccentricity” (4).

Admittedly, part of what makes me react so strongly to Wyatt-Brown's thesis is the fact that her project, at least on the surface, is not so dissimilar from my own interest in examining the cultural and autobiographical factors that contributed to Pym's early conscious development of her idiosyncratic vision and voice. But, whereas Wyatt-Brown posits repression and constraint as the foundational metaphors of Pym's fiction, I prefer to emphasize Pym's acknowledgement of the proliferating possibilities for self representation in a life dedicated to recording as much of the social activity going on around her as humanly possible. Certainly Pym's fiction acknowledges and explores the power of repression to both form and deform identity, but her diaries tell a very different story of a young artist who often finds herself at the center of a maelstrom of images and possible identities. And her subsequent trying on of these various selves is testimony to a nascent postmodern hyperawareness of the fictional basis of any identity, intimacy, or artistic rendering of life as well as to her unconscious absorption of intellectual and aesthetic movements commenting on and subtly altering the cultural imaginary in the early half of the Twentieth Century.

The story that unfolds from the earliest pages of Pym's Oxford diary is that of a slightly bored student of English literature far more interested in romantic scenarios than in the weekly essays she must write: “29 April [1932]. Was in the Bodleian with Mary Sharp—coming out at lunchtime we met Rupert at the corner of Catte St. Neither of us knew quite what to say—a bad sign—or good. In the afternoon I had a letter from him in green ink, which cheered me up, as I was in the middle of a foul Sidney-Spenser essay. I saw him just before tea and he came back into St. Hilda's with me. After tea I returned to the Bod.—tried to finish my essay—but naturally I was thinking about Rupert the whole time” (VPE 13). I do not, however, want to give the impression that Pym took no interest whatsoever in her academic persona and pursuits. On the contrary, during the first year of
her stay in Oxford she from time to time exhibits as much delight in her pose of academic assiduity as she does in spying on young men who take her fancy and in beau acquisition (which in the young Pym’s repertoire are not necessarily the same thing): “16 June. Had my report in the morning, and a letter from R. on Air Squadron paper. The former amused me much—keen, etc.—I seem to give rather a good impression of myself!” (VPE 14). This theatrical sense of cutting a figure and adopting an applauded pose is where the eighteen-year-old Pym’s interests lie, more so than in the actual tedious and solitary work that must be the platform on which a career of academic glory is built.

For the most part, Barbara’s reading of English Literature feeds her amorous fancies and, by autumn 1933, impatience with the comparative doldrums of reading for her Schools has increasingly turned her attention to novel writing and to her idea of herself as a novelist: “9 September. Reading Acorned Hog. Shamus Frazer is immensely entertaining—he and I might have a little in common I feel. No need for modesty in a diary. Now I want to write something more fantastic about a girl called Gabriella. Tokalon Biocel Skinfood is just lumps of lard, scented and coloured pink” (VPE 26). Her wide reading of those twentieth-century novelists who are not on her official reading lists keeps her mind alive to possibilities for her own story lines and her own style. Additionally, her eye for the smallest details of domestic life and her ear for romantic melodrama as it is piped through the wireless make it clear why Beowulf is last on her list of priorities:

15 September [1933]. More work. At lunchtime while I was eating my ham, chicken roll and HP sauce, a band on the wireless was playing the waltz ‘But for You’ from the Lilian Harvey film. The passion came over me in a wave ‘accompanied with an inward sense of melting and languor’. Read More Women than Men by I. Compton-Burnett and saw no point in it—unreal people and not much of a story. Spent the evening variously. I had to decide between giving my face a steam beauty bath and doing ‘Beowulf’. I chose the former, and I think the result justified my choice. After a baked-beans supper I embroidered my red satin blouse and did some knitting. (VPE 26)
This entry is particularly telling in that it records so succinctly Pym’s sensitivity to
the glut of narrative voices clamoring for her attention and the interloping plots that
accumulate as she sits and knits and imagines herself into various garments, guises, and
romantic entanglements. The domestic life of cooking, eating, embroidering, knitting,
making herself beautiful, and shivering from the sensations of love suggested by the radio
is set in stark contrast to the comparatively colder call of academia. To “do” Beowulf as a
central old-English text is a far cry from reading and immersing herself in Beowulf the
fantastic adventure which would appeal to her own epic tendencies. For Pym, even at this
early date, reading is a vital source of imaginative sustenance, but, as the above entry so
wittily clarifies, any juxtaposition between “the greater English poets” and contemporary
novelists such as Compton-Burnett is a source of irony rather than reverential hierarchy. In
other words, her reading of More Women than Men is conducted with as much thoughtful
analysis as her reading of Beowulf should be. Compton-Burnett may, in Pym’s first
analysis, be short on plot and character believability, but she is an author to whom Pym the
apprentice novelist will turn again and again as a tutor in the art of dialogue. On the other
hand, Beowulf, Spenser, Sidney, and Marvell are more poignant than academically
memorable. In Pym’s diaries, letters, and novels, the lines crafted by England’s greatest
poets, rather than inviting scansion or a rundown of canonical placement and importance,
invoke detailed flashbacks of infatuations and passionate meetings, induce visions of what
heroine and hero were wearing and eating, and contribute atmosphere to the various
geographic and domestic settings of the author’s imagination. The following passage
comes from her post-Henry diary of 1938 and refers to one of the encounters she had with
Jay, a freshman with whom she shared several cinematically romantic moments:

5 March. When we got into the Botanical Gardens we lay down on the
grass under a tree. There were branches of mistletoe in the branches so we
kissed. After a while we went into the hothouses and looked at the
goldfishes and the palms. Jay kissed me by the orchids and stole a spray
for me. They were pinky-mauve with purple centres like velvet. I thought
they had a sweet smell but Jay said they smelt like the tomb. I remembered
Marvell and so did he:

The grave's a fine and private place
But none I think do there embrace.

I said that perhaps it would be nicer to have a marble vault together than a house in North Oxford. (VPE 66)

Little wonder that such moments, embellished as they are with Marvell's lines and an Emily-Brontë gothic morbidity should linger in Pym's mind for the next two decades as the quintessence of romantic intimacy.

Pym's post-adolescent clamorings for power and attention were brought to a boiling point by a combination of recent liberation from parents and the provinces, compulsive reading, and fearlessness in the face of the intoxicating possibilities of boundless emotion. In 1978 Pym wrote the one, very short autobiographical piece in which her retrospective summation of her years chasing Henry Harvey (which were at this point still a secret of her private papers) make it clear that the pain of his romantic rejection in the face of their continuing friendship had long since been distilled into an amusing piece of fiction:

When I was eighteen, I went up to Oxford to read English. Most aspiring novelists write at the University, but I didn't though I did start to write something in my third year, a description of a man who meant a lot to me. I tore it up, but this person did appear later in a very different guise as one of my best comic male characters. There was nothing comic to me about him at the time, but memory is a great transformer of pain into amusement. At Oxford, as well as English Literature, I went on reading modern novelists. (CtS 382-3)

Of course, the reserved "I" writing in 1978 of her Oxford days is starkly different in tone from the "I" speaking directly into and out of the youthful diaries, an "I" which by the very act of writing rendered all events significant no matter how slight or whimsical. This change in intonation demonstrates the degree to which the narratives by which we understand our lives are revised with the accumulation of years, disappointments, and
doubts about the validity of cultural master plots. Thus the ideal plot of the recently
rediscovered and republished, sixty-five-year-old Pym is far afield from that of the twenty-
year-old who found Oxford (its men, its knowledge, and its sophistication) within her
grasp in the decade prior to the second world war.

By using the term “ideal plot” I mean to invoke the project of plotting one’s life as
described by Peter Brooks, for whom “Plot . . . is the design and intention of narrative,
what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning” (xi). And
narrative is a fundamental means by which human beings interact with their outer realities
as those realities are propelled into “temporal sequence and progression”: “Narrative is one
of the large categories or systems of understanding that we use in our negotiations with
reality, specifically, in the case of narrative, with the problem of temporality: man’s time-
boundedness, his consciousness of existence within the limits of mortality” (xi). Plot,
then, is a “principal ordering force of those meanings” with which humans struggle to
make a finite set of years and possibilities potentially meaningful. And, while plot denotes
a life expectation that is happily determined and unchallenged, a standard of activity and
expectation passed easily from one generation to the next, plotting expresses the vigorous
activity and emotion with which each individual “move[s] forward” to face what it means to
pass a certain amount of time before being returned to oblivion. The momentum of this self
construction is similar to that “dynamic aspect of narrative—that which makes a plot ‘move
forward’ and makes us read forward, seeking in the unfolding of the narrative a line of
intention and a portent of design that hold the promise of progress toward meaning” (xiii).

To be sure, this act of self authorship is neither so open-ended nor consciously set-
to as my reworking of Brook’s emphasis on the active nature of plotting, as opposed to the
passive acceptance of plot, might connote. Each individual is born into a narrative or
intersection of narratives that determine to a great extent how her or his life plot will read.
A woman such as Pym, born in Wales to middle-class English parents in the final halcyon
year before the Great War, expected and was expected to comport herself with taste and
tact, to meet a man of similar age and class, to fall in love and be fallen in love with, to
receive and accept a proposal of marriage, to put aside her former interests and
occupations, to occupy herself with her husband’s interests and career (which would vicariously become hers), to bear his children, to raise them to be contributors and perpetuators of class and kingdom, and to die after a life of selfless devotion a domestic saint. But history—in the form of the world wars, suffrage, the cinema, ad infinitum—has a way of intruding on private destinies. And history along with Virginia Woolf had by the end of the 1930s slated the “Angel in the House” and her plot of self-exploitation for extermination.¹ The wars sent women out of the home to earn a living; suffrage gave them the vindication of knowing they had a role in the life of the empire; and the cinema—as well as other forms of a newly burgeoning media—delivered weekly images of active, intensely visible (as opposed to culturally invisible) womanhood. Of course it is necessary to shift my verb tense from past to present, for the marriage plot still exists in the final decade of the century and millennium as a standard for adolescent girls, exhorting them to believe that—though education and career should be taken seriously—romance, maternity, and family are really the keys to automatic self-worth and profound happiness.² This internalized conflict is the space out of which we plot the narrative of our lives, and Pym was no exception. Her diaries of the 1930s and 1940s tell the tale of a woman searching for a new narrative, or, more precisely, an expanded narrative that described her emotional

¹ In “Professions for Women” (published posthumously in 1942), Woolf explains her struggle with the feminine nemesis to honest, incisive writing by women: “I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, The Angel in the House. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her” (236-37). Woolf’s description of the Angel’s smothering, flattering tendencies follows her admission of murder: “She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily... Above all—I need not say it—she was pure... And when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words” (237). And by the time we as readers get to the bottom of the page we know that not only was this murder justified, it was utterly necessary: “I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defence. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing” (237-38).

The sentimental poem cited by Woolf, which gave a name to the already popular Victorian ideal is by Coventry Patmore, who (interestingly) is a favorite of Pym’s as well as of several of her fictional characters.

² I am thinking here of the 1995 controversial best-seller The Rules: Time-tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider.
life as she gradually came to realize that the marriage plot is a sham.

In order to establish an image of femininity very different from Wyatt-Brown's diagnosis of Pym's by turns exuberant and agonized representation of self in her diaries as evidence of the damage that culturally-defined and confining gender roles can have on a vulnerable female psyche, I want to point toward the possibility of unruly femininity, a term I have borrowed from Kathleen Rowe's *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (1995). Drawing on models of laughter produced by such diverse sources as Helene Cixious’s Medusa, Roseanne Arnold’s Domestic Goddess, Claudette Colbert’s Ellie in *It Happened One Night* (1934), and Cher’s Loretta in *Moonstruck* (1987), Rowe offers the image of the unruly woman as a revision and feminization of Bakhtin’s notion of the carnival by giving his very visible but silent “grinning pregnant hags” an unignorable voice: “The unruly woman points to new ways of thinking about visibility as power. Masquerade concerns itself not only with a woman’s ability to look, after all, but also with her ability to affect the terms on which she is seen. . . . I want to suggest that women might begin to reweave the web of visual power that already binds them by taking the unruly woman as a model—woman as rule-breaker, joke-maker, and public, bodily spectacle” (11-12).³

During the 1930s, Pym, as a writer, has not yet obtained the sort of critical vantage point that allows her to sit at a distance watching, recording, and fictionalizing the

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³ Those who know Pym primarily through her later novels of churchy spinsters and bland academics may be surprised at my placing her in Rowe’s context of unruly women capitalizing on bodily spectacle. Pym’s humor is middle-class, sedately mannered, and devoid of the bawdiness that motivates the transgressions of Rowe’s examples taken from contemporary, working-class, primarily American, popular culture. Pym is no Roseanne Arnold, nor, as I have already discussed, is she similar in her gendered irony to the carnivalesque sexuality of Mae West or the bodily over-presence of Marie Dressler. More appropriate visual examples of Pym’s subtle subversion of traditional notions of the female grotesque associated as they are with “both beauty and monstrosity” range from 1930s stars of the screwball comedy, such as Claudette Colbert or Katherine Hepburn, to such contemporary British actresses as Maggie Smith, Emma Thompson, or Josie Lawrence in their comic renderings of middle-class, middle-aged feminine types. (I am thinking of Maggie smith in *A Room with a View*, Emma Thompson in *Peter’s Friends* and *The Remains of the Day*, and Josie Lawrence as the irrepressible Lottie in *Enchanted April*—a favorite novel of Pym’s in the 1930s.) Like these performers, Pym, through her female protagonists, draws on and emphasizes the tension between the social pressure to conform and the desire for more.
world she sees around her. Rather, at this early point in her aesthetic development, she is very much immersed in the fray of desire and disappointment that her later fictional characters comment on from a distance. In her diaries, she is romantic protagonist as well as ironic commentator. Thus her unruliness is at this point as physical as it is discursive. She parades through the streets of Oxford dressed to attract the gaze of all who pass her, and she records in her diary not only how she looks, but who she catches looking at her. And, more importantly, she also describes at length the physical attributes of the young men who surround her. In this way, Pym also begins in her diaries to indulge in what Rowe would label “acts of spectatorial unruliness” (12). As she begins to envision herself as a novelist but is still in the process of discovering and refining her own narrative style and authorial voice, her diary acts as a manuscript of sorts in which she explores the contradiction and tension she finds in her daily life as an independent woman hoping to find the male population of Oxford at her expertly pedicured, fashionably shod feet. This optimism and vivacity—reinforced as it is by the images of feminine glamour and confidence she experiences when she goes to the movies twice a week or when she reads Petrarchan sonnets—gets played out in her diaries through narratives in which she recreates herself and her interactions with the rest of Oxford, in particular its male undergraduate population. The self portrait that emerges from the pages of Pym’s diary is, then, not one of ladylike demureness and passive constrained femininity. Rather, she revels in an unruly femininity achievable through fashion and cosmetics, open perusal and pursuit of eligible males, and active narrativization/fictionalization of mundane reality and hyperbolic emotion into a romance that is comic in its epic self consciousness. Pym looks to romance and melodrama, the most obvious of feminine genres in order to turn her life and her perception of herself into carefully rendered tableaus of beauty offset and made poignant by the mundane, even dull details of daily life.

Section II

Once the act of plotting forward into the future is compounded by writing, the inscribed narrative takes on an energy of its own independent from the psyche that authored
it into existence. In attempting to turn life into text, the individual addresses and incarnates conflicting desires, and the inscribed result, though not necessarily representative of the author's psyche, operates in a way that is similar to the movement of the unconscious mind, "as a system of internal energies and tensions, compulsions, resistances, and desires" (Brooks xiv). Brooks explains that desire is the prerequisite of all plotting: "Desire is always there at the start of a narrative, often in a state of initial arousal, often having reached a state of intensity such that movement must be created, action undertaken, change begun. . . . One could no doubt analyze the opening paragraphs of most novels and emerge in each case with the image of a desire taking on shape, beginning to seek its objects, beginning to develop a textual energetics" (38). In the case of Pym, struggling to plot her way out of futile love and into detached laughter at both herself and Harvey as characters in a comic novel, each entry of her Oxford diary reads in precisely the fashion Brooks describes in the last two phrases of the above passage, "the image of desire taking on shape, beginning to seek its objects, beginning to develop a textual energetics." And these fumbling, self-obsessed, emotionally therapeutic daily records operate as textual stepping stones as she crosses the treacherous rapids of emotion to arrive on the banks of fiction where narratives are produced for the edification and enjoyment of an anonymous audience.

Pym's articulation, in her diary and in her letters, of the internal conversation going on within her imagination between the voices of literary and popular culture as a dialogue of countless juxtaposing voices all pouring out of the wireless at once into the ear of the malleable listener suggests, to a certain degree, her early attunement to heteroglot, fragmented, babbling subjectivity rather than concrete, unified, unchanging, consummated selfhood. I am deliberately invoking Bakhtin with my terminology as his articulation of the author who seeks self-representation and identity through the creation of the hero is important to my reading of Pym as a conscious mirror-gazer who, every time she strikes a new pose, immediately begins to imagine a complimentary character, history, and scenario (none of which need necessarily contradict the other selves she claims or imagines herself to be). With Rupert she is the untouchable Atalanta. With Henry she strives to be Sandra.
And in 1938 she intrigues Jay on their first meeting by affecting a Finnish accent and having herself introduced as Päävikki Olafsson. He enters into the masquerade with ease and the next day, after she has returned to Oswestry, writes: “When am I going to see you again my ‘vaend at Elske’ Vikki—when do you come to London? and when you come will you be a Shropshire spinster? a Finnish student? or just a novelist up to see her publisher?” (VPE 63).

To change my metaphor from the aural to the visual—from babbling voices and fake accents to costumes and mannerisms—Pym’s cast of selves shows her to be comfortable thinking of her own identity as similar to that of a fashion model standing before a reflective surface that simultaneously acts as mirror and prism. She tries on various garments and attitudes, often simultaneously, but what she sees as she preens before the refracting glass is the inadequacy of each socially-constructed costume. And this constant re-creation of and delight in the ironic contrast of her various faces and poses, in addition to the distorting factor of their incongruous proximity, sparks not only self-conscious laughter, but also the impulse to share the joke with others. The diary entry from May 9, 1934 in which she describes Robert Liddell catching her naked in bed with Henry and Milton is a perfect example of this, a situation so ridiculous she has no alternative but to laugh: “In the morning I worked hard in Bodley. . . . Then Henry wrote in German on some of my Milton notes ‘Kommt Du—Ja?’” and a few other things. I went and he was extremely nice—but Jockie came in and caught us reading ‘Samson Agonistes’ in bed with nothing on. Really rather funny. I stayed to supper. Jockie forgave me as I was penitent and was very sweet. (VPE 40).

4 Though Vikki Olafsson is not nearly so powerful a persona for Pym as was Sandra, she does reappear again months after Jay has left for Spain. Pym is at this point living in Poland where, because of the increasingly anxious political climate of the time, she is probably feeling very much in tune with the image of Scandinavian broodiness she has identified with Finland ever since Henry’s move: “2 September [1938]. Shopping in Vikki Olafsson macintosh and battered Austrian hat. Went to Czestochowa by car with Mrs A. Long ride, cold wet day. Forests and barefooted peasants. Saw a wonderful church—turquoise marble, pink, grey, dark grey, white fawn, green crochet work around the pulpit and altars in green puce. Virgin Mary picture with gold door sliding over it and music” (ALTA 82-83). And, “10 September. In the evening Vikki was temperamental—but after cigarettes, some Mozart and a Brandenburg concerto felt better and went for a walk with the dog Bianco” (ALTA 83-84).
In his early essay, "The Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," Bakhtin posits the author as one half of the aesthetic equation: the half that coordinates and records any number of the voices of heteroglossia. Though authorship is ostensibly an act of composition, upon closer inspection it is rather one of reading and interpreting that which already exists. To this extent we are all authors, heroes, and readers constantly involved in the quest for self-consummation, for an assurance of ontological wholeness to meet the mandate of epistemological unity forwarded by modern humanism. Representation of the self as an externally decipherable entity rendered visible and thus knowable when anchored in a physical body and a costumed, accessorized persona is for Bakhtin the primary means by which an author explores the inarticulable multiplicity of inner reality. He uses the metaphor of stripping away "masking layers" in order to reveal the true face, not only of another but of the author's self: "In order to see the true and integral countenance of someone close to us, someone we apparently know very well—think how many masking layers must first be removed from his face, layers that were sedimented upon his face by our own fortuitous reactions and attitudes and by fortuitous life situations. The artist's struggle to achieve a determinate and stable image of the hero is to a considerable extent a struggle with himself" (A&A 6). What makes Bakhtin a particularly useful template for reading Pym's earliest attempts at written self-representation is her delight in the multiple textual possibilities for the "delimited" body and the eager costume changes by which she adorns, temporarily defines, and thus situates her discursive body.

By dwelling briefly on Bakhtin's early explorations of aesthetic activity as the means by which a self collects and attempts to understand its diffuse realities, which he later refers to as myriad voices contributing to a fundamentally dialogic existence, I mean to compliment rather than digress from Brooks' narrative paradigm. Like Brooks, Bakhtin is

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* Bakhtin drafted much of this long essay in the early years of the 1920s, but it was not published until 1979 (Holquist 231).

* The imagination is dialogic in that it is a thoroughfare of voices, a place of coming and going, conversing and interrupting, embracing and colliding. When Bakhtin speaks of the imagination he is referring at once to the creative reservoir of the individual and to the collective sea of discourse in which each of us is immersed. All truth, reality, meaning, knowing is siphoned from this collective atmosphere which hums with the audible and vibrates with inaudible voices of teeming life.
offering another story, using only slightly different terminology, of what it means to set pen to paper. And like Pym’s diaries, his early exploratory fragments of writing attempt to locate (consummate) the self while simultaneously scattering it before an urgent discursive flurry. For Pym, Brooks, Bakhtin, and even myself, no matter how nostalgically ephemeral, fictionally encrypted, theoretically exegetical, or critically incisive we hope our writing to be, we are all preceded, guided, already articulated, and finally limited by narrative. Story-telling is the epistemological rubric against which all physical, emotional, and intellectual information (as if these were three different entities) is measured, ordered, and filed away or discarded based on a linguistically structured intuition of relevance to the plots we believe ourselves to be enacting. Brooks’ explanation that story-telling is fundamental to our psychological makeup is helpful here: “Our lives are ceaselessly intertwined with narrative, with the stories that we tell and hear told, those we dream or imagine or would like to tell, all of which are reworded in that story of our own lives that we narrate to ourselves in an episodic, sometimes semiconscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue” (3).

“Episodic, sometimes semiconscious, but virtually uninterrupted monologue”: it is an apt description of the narrative of authorship that emerges from Pym’s diaries and eventually merges with her earliest attempts to write fiction. Minutely rendered episodes veering into and out of overtly expressed self-consciousness and willful blindness to predictable plot outcomes (i.e. Henry’s continual rejection), the continuing monologue of identity recorded by Pym in her diaries is interrupted only by the demands of daily life (and then only briefly). The life and the writing seem to become almost interchangeable, as the reader is overcome by an increasingly strong sense that the moments described were entered into and enjoyed by the diarist based largely on how she knew they would contribute to the on-going drama of her daily inscriptions: “9 March [1935]. Oxford. I

7 Holquist explains the genre questions posited by the exercises in consummation contained within Art and Answerability. “Consummated wholes may be of one kind or another, but for Bakhtin, who sought to make loopholes into (almost) metaphysical categories, their wholeness can never be absolute. A major irony, amidst a host of other ironies, is that these texts that wrestle with the problem of wholeness are themselves incomplete, raising first of all the problems of their genre. What shall we call these fragments?” (xi).
went to see Jockie at the flat and yearned for Henry, as that atmosphere always makes me. Henry had left behind his grey overcoat and I sat in it sentimentally the whole evening." (VPE 47).

Pym's early infatuation with Henry Harvey is one of the most emotionally and artistically formative attachments of her life and career.* The "Saga of Lorenzo" and the alternating ecstasy and misery of Sandra, as recounted by Pym in her diaries beginning in January 1933, is nothing short of a self-consciously hyperbolic hybrid of epic, melodrama, and romantic comedy set, at least in its earliest stages, in crowded lecture halls and the hushed reading rooms of the Bodleian amidst the very poetic tomes that fuel her fancies:

"29 January. During this week Lorenzo—whose real name is Henry Stanley Harvey—has been much in my thoughts—in spite of being very conscious of each other, nothing seems to happen" (VPE 19). The Christ Church undergraduate drawn (in the earliest stages of her attraction) as Gabriel and then as Lorenzo comes off as an odd mixture of angelic beauty, romantic chivalry, and self-important affectation:

25 January. In P. Simpson he sat next but one to me—so that I was able to observe him. He has beautiful hands—rather too beautiful but eminently the right thing for him. He has twinkling (but not pleasantly twinkling) hazel-brown eyes, like a duck's I think. And what a mouth! He is able to curl it in the most fascinatingly repulsive sneering smile. He walks swiftly in his effortless yet affected manner. (VPE 19).

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* In the Beowulf entry quoted above, Pym mentions embroidering a red satin blouse. The blouse is an important one as it is a signature piece in the wardrobe of Sandra, the name and character Pym gave to the audacious, man-chasing side of her personality. Sandra existed for Pym, according to Holt, from the beginning of her time at Oxford. Although the persona we see starring opposite Rupert Gledew never overtly refers to herself in the third person by this name, her notebooks bore the insignia. The cushions adorning her bed were embroidered with it, and a year later—when Sandra was out in the diaries and on the streets of Oxford in full force—Pym records as a Christmas gift from her friend Mary Sharp, "a black crepe de chine evening bag with a quilted front with SANDRA embroidered on it in pale blue silk—lovely" (VPE 33). In her biography of Pym, A Lot to Ask, Holt quotes a diary line (which does not appear in A Very Private Eye), "In the afternoon I bought an exciting flannel shirt, red, black and white checks—very Sandra" (28), and then adds, "Also very Sandra was a scarlet satin blouse and tight black skirt. Sandra was, in fact, rather 'fast'" (28).
Sneering at Sandra’s/Pym’s admiring scrutiny and placing himself advantageously so as to encourage it, Harvey as Lorenzo is a marvel of egoism whose self assurance inspires awe and whose mortal frailty (which stands in direct contrast and directs even more attention to his beatific handsomeness) inspires pathos: “26 January. He doesn’t like being observed but often looks at you in his malicious way. I hope I may be wrong—but I’m not optimistic about it. . . . . He seemed to have a cold (his nose was a little red)—and coughed several times—also a vaguely hectic flush—or was it my over-solicitous imagination? At about 7 coming past Magdalen I saw him in the lodge—looking lovely and rather flushed. Oh dear!” (VPE 19).

The ensuing relationship between Pym and Harvey is a romantic and sexual debacle; nevertheless, its impact on Pym’s sense of herself as a writer is immeasurable. The Lorenzo diary entries are testaments to the pain of rejection, but more importantly they are also the place where the diarist learns to develop her narrative skills, her eye for idiosyncratic detail, and her buoyant ironic detachment. And though her diary is a private document, she increasingly envisions herself as the object of an audience’s interested, possibly scandalized gaze: “8 January. At Marks and Spencer’s I bought a peach coloured vest and trollies to match with insertions of lace. Disgraceful I know but I can’t help choosing my underwear with a view to it being seen” (VPE 33). Pym writes in her diary as she chooses her undergarments, with the voyeuristic eye of the reader increasingly in mind.

Imagineing the admiring gaze of the male undergraduates who see her walking down the street, the awed and/or dismayed looks of her female peers and dons, and the censoriously ironic critiques of an unmoved Henry, Pym—as Sandra—envisions herself into a carefree, even disreputable existence: “11 October. Having renounced Lorenzo I’m trying to find someone else, but so far no one has specially taken my fancy. In the afternoon I put some henna on my hair—only a little, but it made it quite a nice colour. Next time I must be bolder! JCR [Junior Common Room] meeting—I wore my scarlet satin Russian blouse over a black frock—and had my hair straight, with the short piece hanging down almost into my eyes” (VPE 28). By reimagining herself as Sandra, peeking
coquettishly from behind her Veronica-Lake hairstyle, Pym inscribes her body as a text of independence, glamorous strength, and feminine desirability, and, in doing so, enhances her sense of the scintillating recordability of her life: "17 July. I bought some scarlet rouge and lipstick and some scent—also a brown spotted silk scarf" (VPE 24). In other words, her self-fashioning is conducted both on her body and across the pages of her diary in which she describes her heightened sense of posing and visual effect: "23 July. On the river in the morning—Sandra punting. . . . It was very hot, but I'd put on a cool frock so didn't mind that unduly. But high heels weren't comfortable for walking and I got one or two blisters before we'd finished. . . . I was very happy and hilarious, cracking many jokes" (VPE 24).

The incongruity between scholar and vamp, earnest school-girl and unabashed coquette becomes a pivotal theme of the Sandra/Lorenzo years, one which Pym self-consciously develops to such an extreme extent that it is easy to forget that all those trips to the Bodleian are not made just to ensnare Henry. (She does, after all, study enough to take a Second when she sits for her Schools in 1934.) Throughout 1933 and 1934, Sandra reigns the diary entries as a queen of fashion and impetuous flirtation. In the same month that she and Henry embark on their "real" relationship (as opposed to the fantasy one between Sandra and Lorenzo that has been going on in her head for months) we find her making other, though lesser, conquests among the male undergraduates: "27 May. This day I went to Cheltenham with Harlovin and Harding. It was very wet—so we all squashed in the front. Harding continues to be very funny and Harlovin was as sweet and charming as ever. They teased me a lot about my appalling reputation" (VPE 22). And a week later, "6 June. Went on the river in the afternoon. Got to know Leslie Fearnehough (Queen's) and Michael Rabone (Univ.) because we wanted to borrow a match. I hope they didn't think we were deliberately trying to make a pick up—really I do some unfortunate things but how can you smoke a cigarette without a match" (VPE 23). I will conclude this chapter by examining Pym's creation of a narrativized body very different in outward appearance from that of the ever-confident, even swaggering Sandra. For all Sandra's attractions she is rather a shallow entity whose eager flirtation becomes increasingly over-shadowed by
Pym’s growing—quasi-Sartrean—acknowledgement once the war begins of the self and its body as a metaphorical tomb in which the creative spirit is buried alive and must imagine a world of human relationships in which life is interactive and meaningful.

**Section III.** If Sandra imagined herself as a glamorous, forlorn figure, a visually compelling subject whose Downsonian flair for drama and despair often suggests that she is envisioning herself as the object of a pre-Raphaelite painting, a saddened “stunner”—an immortalized Elizabeth Siddal or Jane Morris—staring into the remote distance, neither *Some Tame Gazelle*’s Belinda Bede nor the woman who later writes of herself changing “from one unglamorous pair of stockings to another” can see herself any longer as a preening, coquetishly sulking object of a scrutinizing artistic gaze. Interestingly, for all the Victorian melodrama and romantic self-imagining that goes on in “the falseness of Lorenzo” entries, Pym does not cast herself or her atmosphere as specifically pre-Raphaelite until 1943 when her pining for Harvey has long-since waned and been replaced by new despair over rejection from Gordon Glover, and war-time Bristol takes the place of halcyon Oxford:

*Monday-Tuesday, 1-2 February.* . . . Today on my way home I discovered a beautiful pre-Raphaelite tomb. I had got to the top of the hill into Victoria Square when I was suddenly filled with a desire to go along the paved stone alley leading to St Andrew’s Church. So I walked into it with my bicycle and discovered on either side of me tombstones in a rather well-kept grassy churchyard, with trees, palms (which seemed odd) and a forsythia coming into flower. And towards the end of this alley on the right hand side is the pre-Raphaelite tomb. A square, box-like affair supported by angels at the corners, and the angels are beautifully Rossetti with flowing hair parted in the middle. I can’t remember who is buried there. I must notice next time I visit it, for I feel sure there will be a next time. At the end of the alley one comes upon the church, a dramatically empty shell, blitz, of course.

*(VPE 115)*
What is significant is the direct contrast between the diary portraits that span the decade between 1933 and 1943 for they chart a complete shift in narrative focus.

The Victorian nostalgia still exists, but the human subject is distanced, part of a larger setting rather than the centerpiece. Mood is conveyed through shadow, light, and setting and not entirely through the pouting lips and staring eyes of a tragic female subject, adorned in vivid colors and swathed in the copper glory of her own hair. Rather, we now have a realistic setting, a Bristol graveyard ravaged by German bombs. And somewhere among the headstones and the daffodils, on the far periphery, is a rather plain, tired-looking woman (approximately thirty years old) pushing her bicycle. Life is no longer an epic saga, a tale of lust and treachery played out between humans of almost divine beauty. Instead, it is a quiet yearning for atmospheric beauty and emotional peace with glimpses of Arnoldian “sweetness and light” to burn off the fog of war, loneliness, and the passing of exhilarating and tumultuous youth into quotidian and sometimes painfully introspective and isolated middle-age:

*Tuesday, 23 March.* . . . I often pass the pre-Raphaelite tomb, or rather the path leading to it, but I have never been there again. But I will go one day. You (reader) may say, Why do you make such a thing of it all? To which I will snap (like *Trivia*) Well, what about your own life? Is it so full of large, big wonderful things that you don’t need tombs and daffodils and your own special intolerable bird, with an old armchair or two and occasional readings from Matthew Arnold and Coventry Patmore? (VPE 118).

Clearly, the 1943 diary entries are very different in tone from the Gleadow and Harvey entries written in the early and mid 1930s. The war has cast a dramatically somber mood to the landscape, but what has affected the writer even more has been a compounded romantic isolation, an increasing sense that her fate and gift is the solitary one of composition, not the traditionally interactive one of successful courtship, marriage, and motherhood. Despite the fact that Pym always lead a social and far-from physically solitary existence, one of the primary themes of her ouevre—from her earliest diaries and correspondence to her writing notebooks and published novels—is the realization of a
fundamental emotional isolation with which every individual must grapple. Romantic
success, usually leading to the culturally desirable state of marriage, becomes the subject of
ironic and even quietly scathing scrutiny. And aloneness, an ontological constant, can be
subdued and displaced at least temporarily by fancying and "finding out" about new people
in one's life, reading poetry, becoming involved in the intrigues and activities of the
existing communities surrounding one (often centering around the local parish), cooking
and serving an elaborate meal, or sharing a family-sized container of Nescafe in the office.
The act of recording these mundane attempts to cope and get on with life becomes
fundamental to Pym's own means of interacting with a fragmented and isolating modernity.
The imagined reader acts as a channel of direct communication prompting further attempts
at clarity and humor. And writing, when rhetorically addressing some unknown reader of
posterity, provides a direct link from one ironically observant mind to another (no matter
how private and unread by others said diary may in reality be during the author's lifetime):
"Thursday 11 February. This evening there was a pre-Raphaelite sky. Bright blue with
orange clouds like Thermogene wool. And a monkey puzzle dark against it, and none of
us getting any younger" (VPE 116).

Photographs of Pym from 1930s and 40s show a tall, smartly turned out, cheerful
young woman whose smile reveals high cheek bones and an open, trusting manner. Her
ready smile and her reverent laughter are in keeping with the ironic narratives she writes
first about her own days and later about the days of fictional characters. But, at least
physically, her smile was also a point of vulnerability: "30 May [1935]. J.B. [John
Barnicot] thinks it would be better if I were a little ruder with Henry. Consequently when
we met him I tried to be rude to him and he was also rude to me, which made me annoyed.

* At no point in her life did Pym ever live completely alone. During the thirties she
moved back and forth between collegiate, group existence in Oxford and her family in
Oswestry. In 1938, she and her sister Hilary shared rooms in London, and in 1941 both
moved to Bristol where they lived at The Coppice, a communal home which also included
Honor Wyatt, Wyatt’s children from her brief marriage to the already mentioned Gordon
Glover, as well as several other adults and their children. In 1944, she went to Naples
with the WRNS (Women’s Royal Naval Service). And after 1946 she and Hilary, recently
divorced from the husband she married in the early years of the war, took a flat in Pimlico,
London. The sisters then lived together—moving to Queen’s Park in 1961 and to Barn
However it was difficult to be really effective in public and the afternoon was rather futile and pointless. . . . Henry was rude about my teeth, which always makes me unhappy” (VPE 51-52 emphasis added). Holt describes Pym in the 1930s as “handsome, with bright hazel eyes and thick wavy brown hair.” However, “her front teeth were rather large—a source of embarrassment to her all her life—and because of this she developed a kind of lopsided smile that was curiously charming” (ALIA 26). Physical revision of one’s body or dentistry can only be taken so far. Cosmetics and charmingly crooked smiles can hide or alter all manner of “defects,” but the physical body must still interact socially and the self-conscious super-ego must still worry about being ineffective in public. On the other hand the discursive body, especially when it inhabits the private world of a diary, has no such worries to stop it from exploring the spectrum of contradictions between and around which gendered identity is based. As Brooks explains in Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative (1993), the passage of the body into writing through signing or marking “depends on and produces a story” (3). In providing herself in her diaries with a body inscribed as Sandra or as an eccentric spinster, Pym can create at once a sense of self and a fictional character who is as flirtatious and hilarious, or as diffident and prim as she wants or needs to be at any given moment. A textualized body—or any number of them in a given text (be it a diary, a letter, or a novel)—provides an armor of sorts, an armor that provides the writer with a certain emotional invulnerability. Once a body is entered into writing, the field of desire in which the unified physical body is at odds with a chaotic emotional existence is displaced into literary narrative.10 And though the flow of discourse onto the page may be no more controllable than the libidinal throes of physical desire, the objectification provided by paper and ink makes “the story of the body’s entrance into

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10 I am of course referring obliquely to Brooks’ evocation of Lacan’s mirror stage: “The infant perceives his or herself in the mirror and perceives it as unitary, whole, while the infant’s inner sense of self remains incoherent, unformed, incompletely separated from its surroundings. The ego recognized by the infant is not identical with the self; it is an imaginary identity, founding a system in which the ego is always other, and the other always an alter ego. Identity is thus alienated, the product of the gaze. The self-reflexive moment founds the imaginary order, or of deceptive specular identities. In other words, our early experiences of our own bodies may be not necessarily those of oneness or unity, but rather those of otherness and alienation: our selves as they are for others, a relation of displacement which notably affects relations of erotic love to others” (14).
meaning” an “epistemophilic’ project” rather than one that is immediate and emotionally and physically overwhelming (Brooks 8).

Though it may, at first, be tempting to think of the high emotional and aesthetic value Pym places on detached spectatorship and retrospective textual re-creation as a means by which she can remove herself from the complications and awkwardnesses of existing in a physical, sexual body, I prefer to read her ironic reconstructions of physical and emotional events and, later, her fictional revisions of certain aspects of her own character and the characters of those around her as a mode of embodiment rather than one of disembodiment. In 1985, five years after Pym’s death, Henry Harvey himself acknowledged the extent to which her infatuation was an act of artistry, an attempt to recreate life, love, and even lust on her own terms: “In spite of chasing people who took her fancy and having no apparent inhibitions, Barbara was no houri, she wasn’t voluptuous. She was without sensuality. Her passions, in so far as they were not kept back to being pretend play passions, stayed in her head and in her heart” (ALT A 49). In the gap between physical life and mental life, there is textual life, where words and images are even more voluptuously malleable than the bodies and passions they re-create and enhance. Pym’s is a discursive sensuality, a love for the weighty textures of language, for the images and feelings that only a few black lines scrawled across a page can convey.

In December 1937, Henry Harvey married a Swedish woman whom he had met and fallen in love with while teaching at the University of Helsingfors, Finland. Robert Liddell, who was in Finland with the newlyweds, wrote the initial letter to Hilary Pym to ease the breaking of such potentially traumatic news. Though Pym’s romantic connection with Harvey had long since been in a decline that was the result of general antagonism, sexual incompatibility, and the distance between Scandinavia and England, the necessary cognitive shift from tragically mismatched lovers to friends who have recovered from and are stronger for their past intimacy was neither easily nor automatically made. The saga of Sandra and Lorenzo had come to a full stop, and it was necessary for Pym to revise her notions of Harvey and of herself in a discursive way, as the primary impetus of her attraction had always been the addictive narcotic of narrative. From Sandra and Lorenzo
she extracted the fictional characters Belinda and the married Archdeacon who are still peacefully connected thirty years down the road. But before achieving Belinda’s admirable placidity, she had to plunge into and ultimately extricate herself from the emotional crucible formed by Henry’s final and most significant refusal to be Lorenzo. The group letters that she wrote to Jock, Henry, and Elsi embody her attempt to write Henry out of her system and to change the trajectory of the autobiographical plot in which she had so entirely implicated him (despite his often more than evident reluctance). Significantly the style in which these letters are written display Pym at her most experimental; they are a collage of James Joyce, Ivy Compton-Burnett, and Stevie Smith written in the first and second person yet often depicting herself and her three audience members as third-person characters in a whimsical, lyrical dream-state.

The first letter from Oswestry to Helsingfors written in the early weeks of 1938 begins narratively rather than epistolarily, with an epigraph rather than a direct appeal to her readers: “Spring, the sweet spring, that season wherein everything reneweth itself, even the unhappy lover, Miss Pym” (VPE 65). According to Michael Cotsell, Pym’s Finland letters are a clever, busy subterfuge in which she turns to pastiche in order to “pour out her hurt” and simultaneously “attempt to cover it. And, though he is correct to read pain in the third-person self-mockery of said epigraph, he does not give enough credit to the parodic energy with which these pages of densely packed run-on sentences crackle. Not only is Pym satirizing herself and Harvey, she is also taking on the romance plot that put her in the position of “unhappy lover,” ‘the spinster lady who was thought to have been disappointed in love,” in the first place:

And you will be coming back to England, and you will be meeting this so dull spinster which is like the old brown horse walking with a slow majestic dignity, and you will be saying Well-fer-goodness-sake, Miss Pym, like they say in the films. But this spinster, this Barbara Mary Crampton Pym, she will be smiling to herself—ha-ha she will be saying inside. But I have that within which passeth show—maybe she will be saying that, but she is a queer old horse, this old brown spinster, so I cannot forecast exactly what
she will be saying. (VPE 68-69).

Pym addresses her audience in an aggressive tone that is at once scathingly critical and mockingly deprecating: "And she is hoping to see dear Henry and darling Elsie if they come to England in the summer, and she is hoping that marriage has improved dear Henry, and that he will not any more be rude to her. For this Miss Pym, this spinster, she is getting to a good age now, and she is got very touchy like and crabby" (VPE 71). She follows this rhetorical attack with a peroration in which she comments on and laughs at what she imagines her audience's reaction will be:

And then everyone is angry with her because she says these things, and is not like the old brown horse I was telling you about, but she is not minding that everyone is angry, no not at all. She is thinking of herself eating dinner in St Hilda's College on the last night of last term, wearing a green chiffon dress and pearls and diamonds. And she is feeling oh so happy because why? . . . Well, you will never know now, because this old brown horse spinster is all shut up like oyster, or like clam. And she is an old stuffed-shirt is this gnädiges Fräulein Pym vacker—no sir, no how, but she is a devoted friend, oh yes, she is so devoted. And she is sending so much love to Finland, to dear Jock, to the dear Harveys. Oh, she is so loving. (71)

Pym's narrative flights and emotional rants are grounded in her emphasis of her physical body, as in the preceding passage when she makes sure to leave her readers with a dual image of her dining elegantly in a chiffon dress and jewels and of an undesirable plodding horse and a chastely clenched shell-fish. The dual persona is a pattern throughout these letters as we also get a detailed image of the protagonist sitting in a green deck chair knitting a pink jumper in the sun, reading Don Juan, smoking a Russian cigarette ("she is quite a dog, this old spinster"), falling asleep in the warmth, and then gazing happily at the resultant freckles.

What is so mesmerizing about these letters, and what makes them so difficult to quote with any sort of brevity, is the back and forth movement of contradiction that builds with every phrase. The narrator (for she is telling a story and creating a mood far more so
than she is imparting the sort of information one might expect to find in a letter) assures her readers that she, the protagonist, is a dull, dry spinster. But image after image assures us that, no matter how semantically proper this categorization of her unmarried status might be, Miss Pym is just as vivacious as ever: “And this Miss Pym is—oh-so-pleased, and she is looking in the glass, and thinking how her face is a little brown, and she is singing a song ho–ho, and it is a song about somebody who is tall and terrific—you know how, like those so glamorous American playboys are that you see when you are in the Ritz in the two shilling seats” (70). And this vivacity, though she hints obliquely at a new romantic intrigue, is poured primarily into literary endeavor:

And this Miss Pym is very pleased and happy and she has just had tea and when she finished writing to her dear friend Mr Liddell she will be writing that oh so dull and full of nothing novel I was telling you about in our last. And she is writing it in a fine book with a marbled cover, like I don’t know what unless it is a fine pulpit in the House of God. (70)

Section IV. What we see in Some Tame Gazelle (the novel on which Pym is working) or at least in Pym’s initial, admitted reason for writing it, is an attempt to exorcise her sense of the pathos of her situation with Harvey by painting it in full walking, talking form for all the world (or at least her immediate circle) to read. By writing her pain into fiction she is able to displace it onto her characters, to make it something outside of herself, the stuff of art to be molded and shaped as the story demands. We see Belinda struggling with this same desire to objectify her emotion, yearning to be something other than human, an object incapable of emotion: “I wonder what it would be like to be turned into a pillar of salt?”, said Belinda surprisingly, in a far-away voice. . . . “I should imagine it would be very restful,” she went on, “to have no feelings or emotions. Or perhaps,” she continued thoughtfully, “it would have been simpler to have been born like Milton’s first wife, an image of earth and phlegm.” (80). To be a statue or image constructed of base materials is to be able to escape the misery of rejection and loneliness, of knowing what might have been but will never be. Pym creates herself in Belinda who then imagines herself as an
inanimate figure: thus, Pym is really effecting a double displacement in which she is able to build a layer of images between herself and her emotional reality. In this way, the autobiographical becomes indistinguishable from the fictional. That Pym is able to carry Belinda out of her misery and into self-affirmation bodes well for her own state of mind, but somehow the artist's psychological well-being is no longer the point. What matters is the self-contained world of the fictional artifact in which "real" life and imagination are symbiotically merged.

*Some Tame Gazelle* is, very much like her letters and diary entries, a highly choreographed montage of poses. Each of the characters lives at the center of her or his own fiction which determines the method by which she or he engages the world. Harriet Bede is obsessed with fashion and the impression she will leave in any kind of social interaction involving an eligible bachelor. Her life is a continual run-way show in which she casts off suits trimmed in monkey fur to don creations from Goringes that emphasize the ample bosom to which she nurturingly clasps one underfed curate after another. She realizes she cannot shed her girlhood image of herself as the wife of "a tall, pale man" and decides that the role she has created for herself, "a life of comfortable spinsterhood in a country parish, which always had its pale curate to be cherished," is far preferable to "the unknown trial of matrimony" (136).

The entire village is peopled with posers. Count Ricardo Bianco exists in a suspended, "gentle state of melancholy" in which he alternates between mourning his inability to convince Harriet to be his wife and the untimely death of his friend John Akenside who has been dead for twenty years. The Count thrives in his mild dejection and is really only happy, ironically enough, when reminded of the acuteness of his losses. Thus he takes on the life-long project of editing the letters of Akenside, an inconsequential political chameleon, and thrills beneath his sighs of melancholy "enriched by Harriet's attentions to Mr. Mold and the curate" (129). Then there is Connie Aspinall who, treasuring her back issues of *The Gentlewoman*, clings to her role as Lady Grudge's companion despite the fact that her rough-and-ready accommodations with Edith Liversidge are worlds away from the pomp and elegance of Belgrave Square. But, Archdeacon Henry
Hoccleve, with his "affected eighteenth-century melancholy" (96), his inflated sermons, and his beleaguered insistence that he is over-worked (despite his obviously excessive free time), brings the normal, harmless pretension out of which all identity is constructed to a new level of absurdity.

At the center of this game of charades is Belinda Bede, and it is around her perspective that the narrative unwinds. She too assumes one pose after another, but, unlike the others, she is more self-aware, constantly analyzing various images of herself as they are mirrored back to her in the comments and actions of her companions. Belinda is as conscious of her appearance as her sister, but, not possessing Harriet's self-assurance that she is causing a stir, Belinda is usually more aware of being distinctly ineffective. Whereas Harriet is always swathed in the fullness of her various costumes, Belinda is forever conscious of what hers lack. In the opening scene, before she has time to complete her blue marocain with her seed-pearl brooch, she must hurry downstairs to greet the curate feeling "flustered and incomplete" (10). And later, when she reminds Harriet of the folly in wearing high heels to a garden party at the vicarage, she succeeds only in eliciting her sister's opinion on the unattractiveness of low-heeled shoes and thus affirming her drab self image: "She glanced down at her own—long, English gentlewoman's feet she always thought them, sensibly clad in shoes that were rather too heavy for the printed crepe de Chine dress and coatée she was wearing" (32). "Conscious that she...[is] wearing dowdy shoes," she sets out for the vicarage again unsettled by her awareness that she is somehow askew.

Just as there always seems to be something missing from or off-kilter about Belinda's sense of her physical appearance, she is even more aware of the absence at the center of her emotional identity. Despite the happiness she has found making a home with her sister, Belinda lives with the constant knowledge that the man to whom she has devoted thirty years of unwavering love is married to another, very able woman. Agatha, though a poor housekeeper, makes up for her inability to keep the moths out of her husband's suits by possessing the admirable qualities of being a bishop's daughter and an "efficient wife and good philologist" (152), whose dresses come "from the finest houses." Far from blind
to absurdities of the Archdeacon’s character, Belinda is conscious that she loves him in spite of them: she placates his childish outbursts with a patience Agatha refuses to extend, loyally refrains from laughing at his eccentricities with the rest of the congregation who have secretly named him “the venerable Hoccleve,” and struggles to admire his obscurely esoteric sermons, pushing back “the feeling that it was not quite the thing to read bits of Restoration drama in church” (113).

Belinda often rues the fact that Henry is not hers: silently wishing, “If only one could clear out one’s mind and heart as ruthlessly as one did one’s wardrobe” (220). But she also admits to herself the possibility that it is not being married to Henry that allows him to remain so attractive. Imagination is key, for only under its influence can one escape the unromantic tedium of real life. Ultimately, she realizes she wouldn’t marry Henry now even if she could: “For now she was a contented spinster and her love was like a warm, comfortable garment, bed socks perhaps, or even woolen combinations; certainly something without glamour or romance” (157-58). This epiphany does not, however, mean that she must give up her fantasy. Belinda is not deterred by the knowledge that she is as much in love with her dreams as she is with the object of them: “All the same, it was rather nice to think that Henry might prefer her to Agatha, although she knew perfectly well that he didn’t. It was one of the advantages of being the one he hadn’t married that one could be in the position to imagine such things” (158).

Belinda swings back and forth between the consciousness that she doesn’t really want Henry and genuine sadness that she must always remain on the periphery of his life: “I loved you more than Agatha did, Belinda thought, but all I can do now is keep silent. I can’t even speak to Florrie about the dusty mantelpiece, because it’s nothing to do with me. It never was and it never will be” (150). But, gradually, she realizes the absence she has mourned so steadfastly for thirty years is really not an absence at all. The first time she ruminates on her favorite lines, “taken from the works of a minor English poet,” “Some tame gazelle, or some gentle dove: / Something to love, oh, something to love!” (17), the reader is informed of her loss:

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

Subdued as her passion might be, Belinda cannot help feeling the pain of her loneliness most acutely at times, particularly when Agatha leaves town and she experiences what it might be like to spend a lifetime of twilights with Henry reading poetry to her in the vicarage drawing room. By the novel’s end, however, she realizes the value of what she actually possesses: “Some tame gazelle or some gentle dove or even a poodle dog—something to love, that was the point” (251).

At one point, Belinda wonders at the capacity of the human heart to mend itself: “Here Belinda realised how well her own heart—broken at 25, had mended with the passing of the years. Perhaps the slave had grown to love its chains” (130). Yet, what she realizes by the end of the novel is that the ability to love is a gift, not a torture device: it is what keeps one alive. By the time the final chapter closes on the “authentic ring” of the new curate’s voice gallantly responding to Harriet’s coquetry, Belinda has realized that authenticity is what matters. No matter what poses one might strike for the rest of the world, it is imperative to be honest with oneself. Hardly the “romantically tragic figure,” she had occasionally imagined herself to be, about whom passersby whisper in hushed tones “She never married” (234), Belinda realizes fully the pathos of her position. But such an insight is far from defeating; rather, it is a moment in which she can be most fully authentic. In accepting her pathos she can dispel it, for true pathos can only be rooted in self deception: “It was Belinda Bede who was the pathetic one and it was so much easier to bear the burden of one’s own pathos than that of somebody else. Indeed, perhaps the very recognition of it in oneself meant that it didn’t really exist” (248).

Pym’s first novel is, in many ways, a map of her quest to become a novelist. In it we see her wrestling with several seemingly contradictory impulses. She sets out to write Henry Harvey out of her system, to see both herself and him stripped bare of any illusions. To dispel her pain, though, she must first validate the need to love that is at its root. And
she must first create a situation and characters, as she did with Sandra and Lorenzo in her diaries, over which she is the master. Her task is simultaneously one of exposure and concealment. She takes this first crucial step when she changes the name of her heroine. When Pym first mentions *Some Tame Gazelle* in her diary, she calls her heroine Barbara, but the fact that she eventually changes her name to Belinda is significant. The names have the same number of letters and both begin with “B” and end with “a,” but the difference in between is an important one, for it automatically displaces identity.

Belinda, Harriet, and Mr. Donne discuss the rupture of self one experiences when one’s name is altered: “It makes one feel quite odd to have one’s name mispronounced or misspelt,” said Belinda evenly. “Almost like a different person” (12). Harriet explains she has always been Miss Bode to Gorringe’s catalog because of a typographical error she never bothered to correct: “So now I have a dual personality. I always feel Miss Bode is my dowdy self, rather a frumpish old thing” (12). So too for Pym, Belinda is another self: dowdy, frumpish, middle-aged, even pathetic: at once herself as she may be in thirty years but still not herself.

It is in these terms of self-restoration, of a sort of existential recovery, that Pym’s project of turning her life into fiction, her self into a character, and her love into a comic plot can most profitably be seen. In *Some Tame Gazelle*, she effects, by means of the masks she creates for herself—as a novelist, as Belinda, as a pillar of salt—what Paul de Man calls “the delicate art of transition” in which the gross divisions between opposites are gradually transformed in such a way that “feelings [that] seem opposite to each other have another and finer connection than that of contrast” (926). Her fictional narratives are what Shari Benstock calls “the strip of pavement over the abyss of self” (1053). Though the unnatural bridge may, as Benstock indicates, act as a denial of the “primordial split subject,” it is also a place of strength and stability, on which the subject can find solid footing. Therefore, “writing the self is . . . the process of simultaneous sealing and splitting that can only trace fissures of discontinuity” (Benstock 1054). Pym’s youthful personal writings and their discursive merging into the fictional narrative of *Some Tame Gazelle* act as such a bridge made up of many smaller bridges connecting countless
seeming incompatibilities. Belinda affirms her pathos and in the same moment dispels it, while Pym strips the veil of romance from the object of her love in an attempt to deconstruct it while simultaneously creating a monument to it out of her words.
CHAPTER II

THE REALISMS OF PYM, AUSTEN, AND WOOLF: A LOOK AT EXCELLENT
WOMEN AND THE TRADITION[S] OF PERSUASION AND MRS. DALLOWAY

Section I

Forgive a total stranger writing to tell you how much he enjoys your books.
I have read Excellent Women before with great pleasure and admiration.
You have so much sense of reality and sense of comedy, and the people in
your books are living and credible and likable. I find this rare in modern
fiction. Thank you very much.
(Letter to Pym from Lord David Cecil, written in 1953 after the publication
of Jane and Prudence)¹

In a 1997 New Yorker “Life and Letters” article devoted to the marriage and
intellectual partnership of Iris Murdoch and John Bayley and their respective careers, Ian
Hamilton refers to the “English rumpus” Bayley created in 1994 when, as chairman for the
Booker Prize committee, he bemoaned the lack of entertainment available in recent novels.
As an example of the type of authorial voice and vision for which he yearns as a reader
Bayley cited Barbara Pym and spoke of her fiction as “soothing.” In an age when literary
novels—even the comic ones (i.e. the fiction of Martin Amis, Will Self, Fay Weldon)—tend
to be apocalyptic deconstructions of identity, truth, love, and comfort, to be remembered as
soothing by one of Oxford’s most vociferously anti-theoretical critics might be considered a
dubious sort of praise, of the kind that cements the headstone on the grave of an oft
disputed literary reputation. To be soothing is to be a lightweight, to laugh and write about
tea-parties, church bazaars, and the cosmetics counter at Selfridges when the most obvious
and serious option is to weep in one’s sleep, lose one’s hair, submit to radical plastic
surgery, or turn to homicide for fun in the face of so much human ugliness, poverty, and

¹ Correspondence with Lord David Cecil, Pym Papers. Bodleian MSS 148.
despair as it passes one on Oxford Street (that false glittering mecca of desire and perpetually deferred satisfaction). To write of the vicar and the milk jug and to be prone to silliness and vague recollections of English poetry in contextless scraps and bits is to pander to the popular, to the yearning inside readers to not have to despair, to find instead something to laugh about, to sip a mug of Ovaltine and forget about the human melee outside one’s own four cozy walls.

Or is it? The motivation behind this chapter and the three that follow is an attempt to push the critical evaluation of Pym’s work beyond thematic analysis and into a literary and socio-historical contextualization of her place as a late twentieth-century novelist who deploys realism as a vehicle for her emotional and quasi-philosophical explorations into the nature of identity with as much persistence and subtle innovation as her more obviously experimental and overtly philosophical contemporaries.²

That Pym is a great favorite of such arm-chair humanist dons as Bayley and Lord David Cecil—whose above letter is quoted again and again by Pym scholars as a short-hand indication of how and why she is a realist as opposed to a late modernist or postmodernist—has been a mixed blessing in terms of the legacy of her critical placement in the history of the novel in post-war England. Without Cecil and Philip Larkin, another infamously reactionary humanist, who independently of one another listed her among the most underrated novelists of the century in a special 1977 issue of the *Times Literary Supplement*, Pym’s six out-of-print novels and her three as yet unpublished and heretofore unpublishable novels (*An Unsuitable Attachment, The Sweet Dove Died, Quartet in Autumn*) might have passed quietly into oblivion. For years, friends and fans of Pym had been trying to get her republished, the most popular tactic taking the form of an arguably

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anti-modernist appeal to the exhaustion contemporary readers might feel in the presence of novels by such narratively calisthenic anti-realists as Kurt Vonnegut, Alain Robbe-Grillet, John Barth, John Fowles, Martin Amis, or Doris Lessing. Bayley's 1987 essay, "Where, Exactly, Is Pym's World," written in honor of the tenth anniversary of Pym's rediscovery provides a perfect example of the sort of neo-Edwardian realism that was being offered by Pym advocates as a daringly old-fashioned selling point in the supposedly cynical, anti-narrative, emotionally depleted 1970s and 80s.

Bayley critiques the current literary standard in which "the modern novel has become a totally self-conscious and wholly homogeneous work, in which the method, the purpose, technique, setting and author are all one and the same, and equally identified with what can be spoken and written about them" (52). Contemporary novelists, from Bayley's perspective, write novels as though they are putting themselves, their characters, and their readers through an aesthetically necessary obstacle course, as a result of which readers will be more enlightened, if exhausted, for having endured. Thus he continues: "I quote at random from a review of a recent succès d'étéime: 'It is an exciting and demanding work by an author who remains laudably determined to make the novel do something.' Exactly" (52). What then makes Pym by contrast so delightfully readable, what makes her prose style and her traditional narrative structure so penetrable, is exactly that which in 1962 made her unpublishable.

Pym is a novelist who offers her readers a soft chair and a cup of tea, and introduces a party of characters talking about who took umbrage at the alter-decorating committee meeting, complimenting the tea while quietly thinking it stewed, and conversing in easy platitudes as they daydream about their spring wardrobe and worry about whether to knit a sweater for the curate or sew him flannel pajamas. For Bayley, "the novel is no longer an unconscious extension of his eye, mind, wit" (52). And what makes Pym stand out in this crowd of excruciatingly self-conscious athlete-artists doing narrative pull-ups, is the quality in her fiction of "unconscious selfhood" which experiences the dual realities of pleasure and pain and does its best to focus on the former in order to avoid the inevitable depression of wallowing in the latter. To use his terminology, "the unconscious selfhood
of a Pym novel is clear and open" (52). And this openness, this lack of a precise authorial consciousness is "why and how she is different, and why (without meaning to) she discredits and diminishes much of the outlook in novels today which are highly praised and considered important" (52). Because the attitude and tone conveyed by her novels is persistently and even stubbornly optimistic, in spite of the constant acknowledgement of the darkness and loneliness lying at the edge of the warm glow of the electric fire, there is then room for a narrative duality of the sort inevitably nullified by novelists more interested in what life cannot be. Her refusal to deny any possibility of happiness even a momentary consideration is, for Bayley, "truer to life than the appearances of living laboriously assembled in other modern novels" (52-3).3

Bayley is making several arguments here. Most obviously he is feting a favorite novelist, but his argument weaves together many threads of the modernist, anti-modernist, postmodernist engagement and revision of the tradition of realism in the English novel. If modernism was about finding new narrative forms by which to imitate more closely and evoke human consciousness, then Bayley is suggesting that the rejuvenating experiments of the high modernists have in the post-war period gone too far and become so conscious that all life has fled the words on the page. The earlier twentieth-century attempts at precise, physically and emotionally energizing verisimilitude have thus ended in an enervatingly elaborate, substanceless pantomime which becomes increasingly impossible to follow. For Bayley the beauty and brilliance of a Pym novel is that it is not demanding, either epistemologically or ontologically. And her novels are bittersweet mimicries of life as it is lived by average people in mundane circumstances. Pym's characters may live with an acute awareness that their lives are light years away from the sort of characters who usually populate contemporary novels. But they ultimately take comfort from simplicity and boredom, and in doing so comfort readers in their own smallness rather than challenging them to change their lives, let alone the state of England as the millennium approaches. The problem, then, for Pym's reputation has been that the very qualities Bayley vociferously

3 In Chapters III and IV, I examine more closely the aesthetic and philosophical implications of these points of Bayley's that Pym's novels seem narratively unconscious and that they doggedly pursue optimism, often in between shudders of despair.
celebrates are interpreted by many of Pym’s fiction-writing contemporaries as epitomizing the very sort of anti-socialist, anti-intellectual, tweedy, middle-class conservatism that kept Margaret Thatcher in 10 Downing Street for a decade.

Pym is a writer who has inspired as much enmity among her fellow novelists as she has praise among reviewers and academics. In my Introduction, I argue that Pym is in moments not unlike John Fowles in her narrative intrusions into the world of her characters and I then hold her up as an exemplar of the sort of discursive eclecticism that A. S. Byatt promotes in her 1979 discussion of post-war realism and experimentation published first in the Malcolm Bradbury/David Palmer anthology, The Contemporary English Novel. I am not unaware, however, of the incongruity of using Fowles and Byatt to help me articulate and thus defend the relevance (as opposed to outdatedness) of Pym’s particular sort of realism in the latter half of the twentieth century. In fact, each of these writers has been far from shy about denouncing Pym as nostalgic and even despicable in terms of the conservative provincialism with which her name is often discursively linked. For Fowles, she represents a certain death or at least stagnation of English fiction in this century. Whereas Bayley and Cecil have lauded her as a savior of the comic novel of manners, Fowles sees her optimistic provincialism as political and aesthetic puerilism.¹

And Byatt even goes so far as to turn Pym’s readability against her. In her review of the posthumously published amalgamation of manuscripts that form An Academic Question (revised and edited by Hazel Holt and published in 1986) she briefly acknowledges the moments of “innocent vision of the transience of human life that is Pym at her best.” But Byatt quickly makes it clear that Pym’s real appeal lies in a petty malice that comforts her readers in their cultural and class privilege: “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” (267). Thus the attention of the likes of Lord

¹ Fowles’s views on Pym come from a two personal conversations I had with him in March and May of 1998. In a letter dated May 1, 1998, he explains with some humor the gut-reaction Pym’s name evokes for him and other unnamed contemporary English novelists and critics: “For us over here her fiction does seem supremely middle-class funny and wet—sort of P G Wodehouse without any real humour . . . the sort of thing we expect effete American critics to like and be amused by. That’s why we grind our teeth when we hear you approve. I’m afraid I don’t like P G Wodehouse either.”

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David Cecil, who was “followed by 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, or anyway England’s certainty of its own cultural identity,” is evidence that in English culture “Malice is all right, as long as it is unpretentious and not too loud” (267-8). Byatt is especially at a loss for the reason behind the many Pym dissertations, articles, and academic conferences. The blame seems to lie in the “new philistinism” created by the “feminist-academic seriousness” over works that are little more than “good reads” (268). While, by Byatt’s standards, Pym is at best a good read, Margaret Drabble, Doris Lessing, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, and Fay Weldon are by contrast metaphysically substantial and often satirically witty examiners of “moral and spiritual inadequacies”: “She appears gentler than Spark or Weldon but is infinitely less generous, humane, and imaginative” (268-70).

Both Fowles and Byatt use the cliches of Pym’s reputation and oeuvre against her. Whereas Fowles is speaking in sweeping historical and contextual strokes (and I suspect has not read a Pym novel since the 1950s . . . if he ever bothered at all), Byatt begins her attack on Pym’s reputation with a justifiably harsh review of a novel Pym never finished, let alone attempted to publish in her lifetime. And it is my simple purpose in this chapter to establish that a close examination of the larger aesthetic vision and moments of tactical realist revisionism that shine out of Pym’s most well-known and widely read novel, Excellent Women, tell a markedly different critical story.

That Pym has been promoted since 1977 and even earlier as a writer of pleasant yet poignant novels has won her, despite the dismissal of her fellow novelists, an

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5 Another telling bit of minutiae regarding the lack of interest Pym holds amongst her contemporaries is the brevity of the entry on Pym in Margaret Drabble’s revised fifth edition of the Oxford Companion to English Literature (1995). So short is the entry that I will quote the bit regarding her literary activity (as opposed to the sentence of biography) in its entirety: “Her novels include Excellent Women (1952), Less than Angels (1955), A Glass of Blessings (1958, described by Larkin as ‘the subtlest of her books’), and Quartet in Autumn (1977). They are satirical tragicomedies of middle-class life, and contain some distinctive portraits of church-going spinsters and charismatic priests; many of the relationships described consist of a kind of celibate flirtation” (810). No mention is made of Pym’s odd publishing history or of her Booker Prize nomination. Though such conciseness might be insignificant if it were uniform, Drabble’s lengthy and detailed entries on herself, her sister, Murdoch, Lessing, Spark, and Brookner make it clear that Pym has been cursorily dismissed as little more than a celebrant of what Byatt labels “school-magazine jokiness” (269-70).
unwaveringly loyal readership. But the discourse of pleasure and narrative ease that has surrounded her ever since has also prevented critical probing of the ways in which Pym’s specific sort of realism is so much more than, as Bob Smith articulated in 1971, “a valuable record of our time” and a “sponge cake of so delicate a taste” (58, 63). This is not to say that a solid body of criticism regarding Pym’s fiction does not exist. On the contrary since 1987, an ever-growing population of scholars have turned the pleasure that Barbara Pym’s novels have given them into dozens of books and articles exploring her portraits of spinsters drinking Ovaltine, attending Lenten services, and questioning what it means to be alive and in search of happiness in an age when the comforts of religion, family, and romantic love are continually held up to the light and exposed as little more than the wishful thinking of a beleaguered populace. What has, however been missing from the critical discourse surrounding Pym is an examination of just what is meant when her novels are described as “realist” or the larger critical ramifications of so consistently likening her style to that of Jane Austen.

If literary realism is an attempt to linguistically represent through description, dialogue, character, plot, and narrative structure a vision of life “as it really is,” then analysis of the “reality” of Pym necessitates a comparative study of the realities offered by the likes of Austen and Woolf. My choice is hardly original. The comparison with Austen has been printed on so many Pym book-jackets that it has become as much a marketing scheme as a scholarly cliche. Woolf is another story entirely. As Margaret Diane Stetz has pointed out, the Jane-Austenesque platitudes of reviewers and critics alike have obliterated any real probing into the ways in which Pym’s realism crackles with the residual discursive energy created by modernist experiments to energize the bloated corpse otherwise known (thanks to Woolf’s scathing aesthetic polemics) as the Edwardian novel. My Victor-Frankenstein metaphor is not so far removed from the dramatic arterial image with which Stetz begins her article:

Clichés about novelists and their art are like bloodstains; once they have been allowed to stand, they are almost impossible to eradicate. Among the most common and persistent errors in criticism today is the assertion that
Barbara Pym’s books are “just like” Jane Austen’s. Critics point to their shared interest in comedy of manners, their wit, and most of all their style, implying that Pym makes little or no use of literary techniques devised since Austen’s time. (24)

The following twelve pages of Stetz’s argument are thus dedicated to exploring the ways in which Pym’s *Quartet in Autumn* shares the modernist fascination with consciousness as well as some of Woolf’s stylistic means: “The methods used by Pym to convey a character’s consciousness are not exclusively those of an Austenian novelist of manners (i.e. gesture and dialogue) but those of a modernist—simultaneity, association, imagery, memory, and dreams” (24).

Stetz’s essay provides an important rereading of Pym, one which I would like to expand into a prolonged comparative examination of just what fashions “reality” in a Pym novel versus the realities offered by Austen and Woolf. Rather than pitting the styles of Austen and Woolf against one another, I will in Section II look briefly at the syntax by which each of them transcribed external and internal life into words on a page. Then, once I have at least provisionally pinned down these ancestral realisms which would have fed Pym’s reading imagination since childhood, I will, in Section III, conduct a similar examination of the ways in which “reality” and consciousness are accessed by Pym in *Excellent Women*.

**Section II**

First, Jane Austen. As in the Introduction and Chapter One, my method of contrast will be the simple one of looking at sentences in *Persuasion* that act as brick and mortar in the construction of a representation of human identity and social interaction. I will begin with the first sentence of Austens’ first chapter:

Sir Walter Elliot, of Kelvynch-hall, in Somersetshire, was a man who, for his own amusement, never took up any book but the Baronetage; there he found occupation for an idle hour, and consolation in a distressed one; there his faculties were roused into admiration and respect, but contemplating the
limited remnant of the earliest patents; there any unwelcome sensations, arising from domestic affairs, changed naturally into pity and contempt, as he turned over the almost endless creations of the last century—and there, if every other leaf were powerless, he could read his own history with an interest which never failed—this was the page at which the favourite volume always opened: (1).

I end the above quote with Austen's original punctuation, for her sentence does not come to a full stop until the very paragraph, headed "Elliot of Kellync-hall," that so fascinates Sir Walter has been provided in full. And the next sentence explains the emendations that have been made in ink to the printed original as the family dynamic has changed over the years. Sir Walter is obsessed with the exact details of his social standing and personal bearing, and Austen emphasizes his precision and accuracy in this matter if in no others, and her length and the halting, cataloging nature of these introductory sentences (note that, excepting the Baronetage entry, there are seventeen commas, three semicolons, one colon, and two sets of dashes in the first two sentences, which also comprise the first two paragraphs) is a syntactical lead-up to the already unsurprising proclamation: "Vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot's character: vanity of person and of situation" (2).

Chapter One continues with a review of the names that appear immediately under Sir Walter's heading. From the perspective of the patriarch's concern with the looks of others in addition to his own, we learn of the disappointed, striving beauty of the eldest sister Elizabeth and of the increasing coarseness of the youngest, Mary; the crows feet creasing the temples of his old friend Lady Russell; and in a brief phrase buried in a sentence concerned primarily with these others, of the haggardness of his middle daughter, Anne. Of Anne, the protagonist of the novel, we get no real information or introduction until several pages into chapter two, when we begin to learn of her retiring, compassionate nature and embattled family position (if not of her consciousness) via reference to her desire to not have to move to London or Bath, where her father and sister are thinking to relocate in a family effort to live within their dwindling means:
There had been three alternatives, London, Bath, or another house in the country. All Anne's wishes had been for the latter. A small house in their own neighborhood, where they might still have Lady Russell's society, still be near Mary, and still have the pleasure of sometimes seeing the lawns and groves of Kellynch, was the object of her ambition. But the usual fate of Anne attended her, in having something very opposite from her inclination fixed on. She disliked Bath, and did not think it agreed with her—and Bath was to be her home. (11)

In this subtle, always externally preoccupied fashion, we begin to learn of Anne's conscious preoccupations and aspirations. Not until Chapter Four does the narrator give an exclamatory overview of Anne's unmarried situation and long-standing romantic sorrow. And the self-righteous voice is that of Lady Russell: "Anne Elliot, with all her claims of birth, beauty, and mind, to throw herself away at nineteen; involve herself at nineteen in an engagement with a young man, who had nothing but himself to recommend him, and no hopes of attaining affluence, but in the chances of a most uncertain profession, and no connexions to secure even his farther rise in that profession; would be, indeed, a throwing away, which she grieved to think of!" (22). Only after the voice of persuasion has exclaimed again and again, do we learn from the calmer omniscient narrator that Anne, "young and gentle as she was," may have done battle for her love against her father and sister. But the life-long, tender, steady guidance of Lady Russell was a force against which she had no strength: "She was persuaded to believe the engagement a wrong thing—inconsiderate, improper, hardly capable of success, and not deserving it" (23). And once the breach is affected, her only consolation is that her love is probably better off without her:

But it was not a merely selfish caution, under which she acted, in putting an end to it. Had she not imagined herself consulting his good, even more than her own, she could hardly have given him up.—The belief of being prudent, and self-denying principally for his advantage, was her chief consolation, under the misery of a parting—a final parting; and every consolation was required, for she had to encounter all the additional pain of
opinions, on his side, totally unconvinced and unbending, and of his feeling himself ill-used by so forced a relinquishment.—He had left the country in consequence. (23)

What is to be made of the voice or voices inserted and set off by dashes? It seems to be Anne’s because we are being given her perspective, but since she is referred to with a third-person, possessive pronoun the information about her conscious and unconscious motivations is, as always, filtered through the narrator’s omniscience. We do get close to character’s psyches, but only in moments, when Austen elides her narrator’s observation with bits of emotional perspective, a technique often referred to in contemporary academic parlance as free-indirect style. Such is the case when Lady Russell’s reasons for persuading Anne to break off with Captain Wentworth are presented in monologue form as well as when we are given the perspective of the jilted suitor: “He had not forgiven Anne Elliot. She had used him ill; deserted and disappointed him; and worse, she had shewn a feebleness of character in doing so, which his own decided, confident temper could not endure. She had given him up to oblige others. It had been weakness and timidity” (53).

And here we arrive at Woolf. Of course, my above references to the unconscious and the psyche, made so freely and automatically post-Freud, are anachronism in Austen’s age. She did not have a name, beyond spirit and emotion, by which to call that ineffable essence of being which modernists attempted to tap into directly. The penultimate sentence of Joyce’s A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man is the most obvious reference here: “I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (253). Like Joyce, Woolf was after internal detail, and though she often gives scintillating exteriors, they are concisely charged only with details that impinge directly on her character’s modal fluctuations. Hence the third paragraph of Mrs. Dalloway:

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her, when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm stiller of course, the air was in the early morning; like the
flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of
eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the
open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the
flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising
and falling; (3).

As with my first long quotation from *Persuasion*, I end this one with Woolf’s original
semi-colon, for the sentence continues on to introduce Peter Walsh and his idiosyncratic
conversation. Two exclamation marks, eight commas, four semi-colons, one period, and
three question marks: the sentence even ends with a question mark, of the sort that indicates
not conscious interrogation so much as it emphasizes that the preceding fragments comprise
the emotionally tangential nature of the consciousness the narrative will attempt to chart. Of
this protagonist, this Clarissa Dalloway, we have as yet learned no real-time external
information beyond the fact that she is on her way to buy flowers and that it is a lovely,
warm morning.

The capacious length of Woolf’s paragraph is reminiscent of Austen’s style, as is
the barrage of immediate detail regardless of just how much the reader will, upon opening
to the first page, immediately be able to take in. But the sort of detail and the narrative tone
are a world and a century apart. Whereas Austen begins by relaying all that is known about
Sir Walter and his family, Woolf immediately plunges into a sea of intangible memory and
the unknowability of the self. Thus the above sentence, question, paragraph, and
introduction to Clarissa’s psyche and Peter Walsh’s attractions and annoyances continues,
at once illuminating and inscrutable:

standing and looking until Peter Walsh said, “Musing among the
vegetables?”—was that it?—“I prefer men to cauliflowers”—was that it? He
must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out onto the
terrace—Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June
or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his saying
one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and,
when millions of things had utterly vanished—how strange it was!—a few
sayings like this about cabbages. (3-4)

*Mrs. Dalloway* is in many ways a tribute to Austen's evocations of English upper-middle-class society. The mere fact that the narrative hovers back and forth between an idyllic prewar Edwardian summer spent on a family estate and Clarissa's Twenties-era party is a return to Austen's small precisely drawn world. It is a well-known fact that Woolf was a great fan of Austen's perfect, minute canvases which she describes in *A Room of One's Own* as "incandescent" in their ironic expositions on the heights and pettinesses of human intercourse. What makes Austen so perfect is her unerring ability to adapt external detail, dialogue, and syntax to a fictional discourse on societal mores. And for Woolf what is interesting about Austen's last novel, *Persuasion*, is that it comes at a point at which Austen knows her medium so well that the narrative is perfectly executed, and emotionally poignant, yet vaguely dissatisfied with what is known and therefore transcribable: "She is beginning to discover that the world is larger, more mysterious, and more romantic than she had supposed. . . . She dwells frequently upon the beauty and the melancholy of nature, upon the autumn where she had been wont to dwell upon the spring. . . . But it is not only in a new sensibility to nature that we detect the change. Her attitude to life itself is altered. . . . Therefore the observation is less of facts and more of feeling than is usual" (119).

This passage, taken from the essay entitled "Jane Austen" and published in the first of Woolf's *Common Readers*, leads up to the final, significant speculation that had Austen lived long enough to explore her new sensibility, her irony might have been "shaken" but her style would have blossomed with the potential of a more inward focus: "She would have devised a method, clear and composed as ever, but deeper and more suggestive, for conveying not only what people say, but what they leave unsaid; not only what they are but what life is" (120). What Woolf is describing is literary modernism, and she even goes so far as to suggest that Austen "would have been the forerunner of Henry James and of Proust" before calling herself up short, declaring "but enough. Vain are these speculations" (120), and ending her essay. Woolf may have wanted in fanciful moments to yank Austen's sensibility into the post-Impressionist, post-trench-warfare era of Freudian
unconscious neurosis and desire, about which she claims in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," "on or about December, 1910, human nature changed" (96), but the fact remains that Austen's realism never delivered immediately felt emotion or attempted to simulate the meandering perambulation of the human psyche in the way that Mrs. Dalloway does.

In a 1922 letter to an aspiring writer, Woolf explains her sense of wonder at the unknowability of any sort of generalized human reality: "The human soul, it seems to me orientates itself afresh every now and then. It is doing so now. No one can see it whole, therefore. The best of us catch a glimpse of a nose, a shoulder, something turning away, always in movement" (VWL II 598). Her vision for her art is post-impressionist in that she wants the impressions she records to convey certain truths, despite her understanding that whatever nugget may be unearthed from the montage of sensual perception is as mutable and partial as the sensation by which it was detected and the impulse upon which it was recorded. "Recorded" is not a precise enough word, however, when speaking of Woolf, for she is all too aware that reality can only be approximated by art, never reproduced. Thus, her recurrent polemic against Edwardian realism reappears as she continues her letter: "Still, it seems better to me to catch a glimpse, than to sit down with Hugh Walpole, Wells, etc. etc. and make large oil paintings of fabulous fleshy monsters complete from top to toe" (598).

Woolf saw her own project and that of her contemporaries as that of making the novel a genre of continuing relevance in a quickly changing world: "This generation must break its neck in order that the rest may have smooth going for I agree with you that nothing is going to be achieved by us" (598). And though the task of revising the means by which life and identity are knowable and thus representable was certainly a daunting one, Woolf was successful at recording what she saw to be the irrevocable changes in what she called human nature, which I will deuniversalize and specify as a shift in awareness, imagination, and aesthetic methodology. And even if all of human nature was not changed in December 1910, realism in the novel certainly was irrevocably altered, not beyond recognition but certainly made a more porous medium wherein plot and character are transformed into explorations of the nexus of the conscious and unconscious in particular
individuals.

To return to Pym and the post-World-War-II era, I want to emphasize realism as that quality of fiction most sought-after yet, when so named, also generally despised and targeted by writers who want to make their version of “the way life is” truly novel. The irony of this push for novelty and invention by post-war writers in the so-called postmodern era (if they want to be considered writers of literary as opposed to popular novels) is that they have the historically unique task of at once acknowledging and defying the maxim of “the failure of the new.” And Pym serves as an apt case study in that she blends Austen’s ironic attention to conversation and manners with Woolf’s sense of the mutable nature of reality and identity when filtered through individual perspective. But whereas Austen is focused on the external world and Woolf on the internal, Pym focuses equally on both. She is a writer often characterized as obsessed with the external world, with clothing, meals, decor, pets, conversational platitudes, and gossip. But in the next section I will make the case that it is through attention to the minutiae of exterior life that Pym denotes the interior lives of her characters. Pym is not a pioneer when it comes to such a technique; George Eliot and Henry James certainly opened the horizons of the Anglo-American novel by moving fluidly between their characters’ contexts and consciousnesses. My point, then, in the following section and chapters is to argue that Pym gleaned her idiosyncratically eclectic narrative strategy from the likes of Austen, the Brontës, Eliot, James, and Woolf.

Section III

Excellent Women begins with an idiosyncratic social exchange between a minor character and the novel’s first-person narrator and protagonist, Mildred Lathbury:

‘Ah, you ladies! always on the spot when there’s something happening!’ The voice belonged to Mr. Mallett, one of our churchwardens, and its roguish tone made me start guiltily, almost as if I had no right to be discovered outside my own front door.’ (5)

The conversation continues with Mr. Mallett “pompously” ribbing Mildred for neighborly
nosiness, not that he has any real proof that she is spying: "New people moving in? ... I expect you know about it." Her response attempts to affect disinterest at both his teasing and in the furniture van parked at the curb: "Well, yes, one usually does," I said, feeling rather annoyed at his presumption. "It is rather difficult to not know such things." Thus the reader is given the details of Mildred's immediate surroundings as well as an immediate, ironic commentary on her position in regard to those around her. Just before Mallett walks off smiling to himself at having caught Mildred out—with no regard for his own annoying, unwanted interest—Mildred offers an Austen-like observation of her social milieu: "I suppose an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone and has no apparent ties, must expect to find herself involved or interested in other people's business, and if she is also a clergyman's daughter then one might really say that there is no hope for her" (5).

The tone and content of Mildred's introduction to her world are not so far off from the famous opening sentence of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife" (5), but the words are those of our protagonist, not witticisms from an unknown omniscient storyteller. And herein lies the departure from Austen and a movement toward Woolf, for the reader is immediately offered an open portal into Mildred's point-of-view. But the differences from Woolf's immediate leap into the mind of Clarissa Dalloway are also marked. Mildred's psyche is presented in linear, completed, comparatively brief, self-reflexive sentences and she is primarily interested in telling a story about a particular period in her life. The reader's level of engagement is less one of immersion into a pool of memory and desire than it is of detached, amused attention to a narrative voice similar to Austen's in its quick, detached wit, but modern in its references to and assumptions about the nature of the self as an amalgamation of hungers, denials, and small satisfactions. So Mildred begins the story of her struggle against the social predestination with which Mr. Mallett has confronted her, that of being an excellent woman always putting the interests of others above her own and in doing so suffocating herself and others.
The opening scene continues with Mildred meeting her new neighbor, Helena Napier, by the dustbins. Their coincidental disposal of rubbish is at once embarrassing to Mildred's social fastidiousness and revealing of the detached irony with which she relays details about her character:

The dustbins were in the basement and everybody in the house shared them. There were offices on the ground floor and above them the two flats, not properly self-contained and without every convenience. 'I have to share a bathroom,' I had so often murmured, almost with shame, as if I personally had been found unworthy of a bathroom of my own. (5-6)

Again the attention to mundane detail is pronounced, and the narrative tone is one of self-deprecating, amused detachment. Even Mildred's description of herself is permeated with journalistic distance, for what the reader knows of Mildred's external demeanor is always delivered in contrast to the women around her. First, we learn of Helena's easy beauty and, secondly, of Mildred's continually reified sense of her own comparative dowdiness: "She was fair-haired and pretty, gaily dressed in corduroy trousers and a bright jersey, while I, mousy and rather plain anyway, drew attention to these qualities with my shapeless overall and old fawn skirt" (7).

Mildred's self-consciousness extends itself, as well, to the narrative upon which she is embarking. Her admission that she is hardly the sort of pretty, twenty-year-old, self-confident heroine that can be found in, say, Pride and Prejudice or Emma reminds her that her tale has a dangerous precedent in Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre. Though the sum total of Mildred's story depicts her not quite conscious cravings for romance and intrigue which she has heretofore pacified with endless comforting cups of warm, watery tea, she is adamant that her story is in no way to be likened to that of Jane Eyre: "Let me hasten to add that I am not at all like Jane Eyre, who must have given hope to so many plain women who tell their stories in the first person, nor have I ever thought of myself as being like her" (7). Mildred's rejection of Jane Eyre as a model autobiographical text is as pragmatic as it is self-protective. She believes that life is rarely a sweeping melodrama on the scale of forbidden love in a gothic mansion housing both the object of one's hopes and passions.
and his deranged and vengeful first wife. When melodrama does occur, as it does with Helena and Everard or Julian and Allegra, it is exhausting and ridiculous rather than passionately turbulent.

Though Mildred is never able to quell her curiosity, she does her best to keep her distance. She watches those around her fall in and out of infatuations and barely acknowledges to herself, let alone to her readers, that her interest in Rocky and later Everard is anything more than neighborly kindness and Christian charity. Mildred is comfortable in her position as observer and, though always ready to comfort others, she is deeply hesitant about the ramifications of needing or wanting emotional intimacy with others. As she reflects after spending an evening in the company of the squabbling Napier’s and the ubiquitously uncomfortable Everard Bone:

Love was a rather terrible thing, I decided the next morning, remembering the undercurrents of the evening before. Not perhaps my cup of tea. It would be best not to see too much of the Napiers and their disturbing kind of life, but to meet only people like Julian and Winifred Malory and Dora Caldicote, from whom I had had a letter that morning. (100)

Yet, William Caldicote’s statement over luncheon a few weeks back of her skilled detachment—“We, my dear Mildred, are the observers of life. Let other people get married by all means, the more the merrier. . . . Let Dora marry if she likes. She hasn’t your talent for observation” (70)—also causes Mildred a certain amount of consternation. Though William is to some extent correct in his interpretation of Mildred’s primary method of social interaction, and though he is attempting to compliment Mildred for avoiding the sort of irrational and embarrassing “unpleasantnesses” his sister Dora often becomes involved in, Mildred is more taken aback by this offered similarity with the prissy William than she is complimented: “I was somehow irritated. In any case, it was not much of a compliment, making me out to be an unpleasant inhuman sort of person. Was that how I appeared to others? I wondered” (70).

But as Mildred follows William back to his office, where he introduces her to the pigeons toward whom he devotes all his bottled-up affections, she realizes that desire is a
product of distance. While William and his colleagues rush off to the tea cart with their mugs, she remains in their office gazing out the window into another office which, despite its dreary similarities, is transformed by her voyeurism into an infinitely nuanced spectacle:

I went on standing by the window and looked out at the view which was of another office building, perhaps the same Ministry, where there were rows of uncurtained windows and the activities of the rooms were exposed as if it was doll’s house. Grey men sat at desks, their hands moving among files; some sipped tea, one read a newspaper, another manipulated a typewriter with the uncertain touch of two fingers. A girl leaned from a window, another combed her hair, a third typed with expert speed. A young man embraced a girl in a rough playful way and she pulled his hair while the other occupants of the room looked on encouragingly . . . I watched, fascinated, and was deep in contemplation when William and his underlings came back with their steaming mugs. (73)

Rather than being inhuman, observation is a direct connection to the fascinating drama of life and it is in noticing and studying each other that human relationships begin. We each live a life full of mundanity, but fitting such details into a context in which we see others performing similar tasks and roles is the process by which meaning is made. When Mildred breaks her mesmerized gaze to ask William if the windows look onto another ministry, he responds, with a fanciful insight surprising in so heretofore seemingly unromantic and detail-obsessed a man: “‘Ah, yes, the Ministry of Desire,” said William solemnly. . . . ‘They always look so far away, so not-of-this-world, those wonderful people,’ he explained. But perhaps we seem like that to them. They may call us the Ministry of Desire’” (73).

The detachment from immediate embroilment allowed by a pane of glass, pen and paper, and an actively cultivated social reserve belying real inner turmoil is an aid to irony and a mystifying screen of sorts which allows the observer to romanticize the lives of others. For if anyone or anything is studied too closely in Mildred’s (and by extension Pym’s) narrative world, the pathos of the ordinariness of any life is all too readily apparent.
Such respect for the enhancing possibilities of artistic perspective is a theme of all Pym’s novels, but is perhaps articulated earliest and most clearly in *Excellent Women* as Mildred struggles to come to terms with what she sometimes feels to be her abnormal interest in the affairs of others. But Mildred’s attention is not only directed at human objects; her consciousness and her narrative are also filled with the details of the inanimate objects around which her domestic and social rituals and her identity are formed. Mildred fills her external life and her imagination with a clutter of teapots, hand-me-down clothes, Victorian snowstorms, unappetizing meals, and details about the emotional lives of those around her.

To return to the issue of Pym’s style—to her means of conveying theme and emotion through the crafting of sentences, paragraphs, and chapters—Mildred’s internal ruminations and external geography intermingle in sentences that are deceptively simple in their tone of gently comic reportage. As she leaves William to his voyeurism and his pigeon-feeding, she walks through corridors and down the streets just off Trafalgar Square and waits for a bus, all the while carrying the sprig of mimosa she bought earlier in the day in a rush of spring-like optimism. Her delight at William’s love for his pigeons, an appealing side of him she had not before seen, and her fragrant sprig intermingle as she is reminded of Everard Bone and his mad mother:

> I thanked him for my luncheon and walked away, carrying my bunch of mimosa down the bare corridors. Of course, I remembered as I waited for a bus, Everard Bone and his mother lived in that street, that was why the address had seemed familiar. What a good thing I had not said anything to William about Helena Napier and Everard Bone, though it was unlikely that he would know them. *My son is at a meeting of the Prehistoric Society.*

...I heard again Mrs. Bone’s querulous voice and smiled to myself. (74)

I quote the paragraph in its entirety in order to convey the subtle flow of minute detail, memory, and emotion that emerges along with the running external scene. The next paragraph is comprised of only one sentence, which initiates a conversation with Rocky, whose charm surpasses the curmudgeonly St-Francis-like appeal of William and the terse handsomeness of Everard:
When I reached the front door of my house I saw Rocky Napier approaching from the other side of the street.

‘Mimosas!’ he exclaimed. ‘Why didn’t I think of that?’

‘I couldn’t resist it,’ I said. ‘It makes me think . . .’

‘Of Italy and the Riviera, of course.’

‘I’ve never been there,’ I reminded him; ‘it’s just that it seemed such a lovely day and I felt I wanted it.’

‘Yes, that’s a better reason.’

Rocky’s appearance marks a third emotional shift in the chapter which mounts toward a brief apex as Mildred offers him half of her bouquet and they go out to tea where she is taken out of herself by the undercurrent of flirtation that runs through all of Rocky’s conversation:

We went out again to a cafe he knew, a place I had never discovered, where they had good cakes. But it hardly seemed to matter about the cakes. Perhaps because I had had a large and rather late luncheon, but I didn’t feel very hungry. He was so gay and amusing and he made me feel that I was gay and amusing too and some of the things I said were really quite witty. (75)

What is important here is that Mildred mentions the cakes, and offers a plausible reason for not caring about them, and her romantic delight in Rocky’s company is, as she seems to know, implicit in her self-confident assertions of her own wit. But then the quick and by this point expected denouement into self-doubt is sparked by her memory of Rocky’s career of being charming to dowdy Wren officers in Italy.⁶

Thus the last paragraph of the chapter begins with Mildred being drawn up short in her post-Rocky, pre-supper afterglow with a few terse reminders:

It wasn’t till afterwards that I remembered the Wren officers. By

⁶ My discussion of Pym’s style as a flow of emotions anchored to external detail is indebted to Jean Kennard’s charting of the emotional pattern of the chapters of Excellent Women as a schema of Mildred’s emotional state: “Whenever Mildred is tempted into romantic ideas, the chapter ends by bringing her—and the reader—firmly back to what we take to be reality” (55-56).
that time it was evening and I was back in my own kitchen, wondering what to have for supper. I suddenly realised, too, that we had left all the mimosa in the Napier’s kitchen. (75)

She is stopped from going down to collect her flower by social nicety and by the fact that the ever-daunting Helena has returned and can be heard laughing with Rocky downstairs. And then she notices the vase of dead twigs in her sitting-room which leads to a vague memory: “‘Oh, the kind of women who bring dry twigs into the house and expect leaves to come on them!’ Hadn’t Rocky said something like that at tea?” The shift in mood is stark, though still darkly comic, and the next chapter begins its emotional tumescence from the low point of Rocky’s returning the withered mimosa the next morning and Mildred’s realization that her crush on him is treading on emotionally treacherous territory: “On the bus I began thinking that William had been right and I was annoyed to have to admit it. Mimosa did lose its first freshness too quickly to be worth burying and I must not allow myself to have feelings, but must only observe the effects of other people’s” (76).

My point here is that Pym is creating a realism continuum on which her narrators and characters freely move between Austen-like incongruous juxtapositioning between social expectation and individual motivation and a Woolfian immersion in an emotional and physical sea of desire and self-doubt. Desire is troubling because it causes a questioning of and encourages a terrifying movement beyond the status quo, and it is at this juncture that each of Pym protagonists find themselves. They are each on the verge of recognizing and pursuing the romance or excitement that life has promised, but which most feel has passed them by. And so they cling to what they know, which often entails an almost obsessive attention to minute material details of their external lives and the external presentation of self made by those surrounding them. And even when desire is embraced and pursued—as opposed to being hidden from—the narrative outcome is rarely expected to change very dramatically. Thus, Mildred knows that her introduction to a more intimate knowledge of Everard’s private life and domestic affairs might entail marriage, but, once the change has occurred and its emotional wake has subsided, what remains is the individual’s relationship to the external world as mediated by domestic ritual and social discourse. As we see in the
final sentence of the narrative, Mildred’s romantic fantasies are on the brink of being
simultaneously fulfilled and mundanely demystified altogether as she pictures her future as
Everard’s academic helpmeet and backbone of the parish:

And then another picture came into my mind. Julian Malory,
standing by the electric fire, wearing his speckled mackintosh, holding a
couple of ping-pong bats and quoting a not very appropriate bit of Keats.
He might need to be protected from the women who were going to live in
his house. So, what with my duty there and the work I was going to do for
Everard, it seemed as if I might be going to have what Helena called ‘a full
life’ afterall. (256)

In short desire and daily quotidian reality fuel one another and ultimately cancel out any
propensity for real change of one’s external circumstances or internal sense of identity. In
Pym’s narrative world there is always room for an optimistic upswing of emotion that
makes day-to-day reality bearable and even enjoyable, but aside from a fluctuation of mood
and perspective there is no real escape or even a necessity for one. And this is what makes
her as existentially aware as Sartre or as nihilistic as any of her more overtly post-modern
contemporaries. And this is what makes her as nihilistic or as existential a writer as any of
her more overtly experimental contemporaries.7

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7 The following summary of Sartrean existentialism is taken from Jacques Harché* and
George Daniel’s Introduction to the 1962 edition Meredith edition of Huis Clos (No Exit)
which was originally staged in France in 1943:

Man is a free and responsible being who must in a Godless world, create
his values for himself. Sartre rejects the Christian doctrine of creation,
redemption, and salvation and, of course, eternal damnation. The
traditional image of Hell, as a place where the damned go to suffer torture
for their sins is in Sartre’s opinion a false image, a myth. The only
punishment there is, is that meted out to the individual here on earth by
Others. They see him not as a free self but as a static one, an object. They
label him as being this or that, thus denying him his liberty of becoming
something else (xiv).

Pym’s characters frequent churches, but rarely do they talk about God or Hell. Fear of
Judgement Day even becomes an object of satirical juxatpositioning, when for instance in
Some Tame Gazelle Archdeacon Hoccleve gives the original version of his densely allusive
Easter sermon (the same sermon given in Excellent Women—see page 104 of my text)
threatening fire and brimstone to elderly women nodding off into their pink cardigans and
pimpled alterboys thinking about ping-pong. So without Hell or a fear of God’s
judgement, Pym’s self-deprecatig protagonists’ senses of self are largely developed
against the humorous hubristic self-absorption witnessed in those around them.
Among Pym’s protagonists, Mildred is not alone in her obsession with minute and quotidien detail, nor in her propensity to probe beyond the obvious jumble of trivia to wonder about the nature of reality, truth, love, and death. Pym’s characters continuously ask and provisionally answer the question: how can I be happy and have meaning in this petty, paltry daily shuffle? And their spiritual quandaries and stop-gap conclusions are not always conscious, indeed usually they are not. But as the reader enters a department store with Mildred and savors with her the ludicrous frustration and embarrassment inherent in the act of purchasing a tube of Hawaiian Fire lipstick, Pym makes it clear that the minuitiae with which we clutter our lives also gives them substance. As she hurries from the cosmetics counter, Mildred’s amusement over her impulse purchase—“Hawaiian Fire, indeed! Nothing more unsuitable could possibly be imagined.” (131)—quickly changes to concern over Julian Mallory’s impending marriage to Allegra Gray and his sister, Winifred’s, domestic future. And by the time she enters the ladies room, she is profoundly sobered by the sight of “women working at their faces with savage concentration, opening their mouths wide, biting and licking their lips, stabbing at their noses and chins with powder puffs. Some, who had abandoned the struggle to keep up, sat in chairs, their bodies slumped down, their hands resting on their parcels. One woman lay on a couch, her hat and shoes off, her eyes closed” (131). Mildred tiptoes past these human shells, reawakened to the mortal exhaustion inherent in the human condition, thinking of “the futility of all things and of our own mortality. All flesh is but as grass . . . I thought” (131). Upon leaving the store she goes to tea in the department-store restaurant where the facially, if not emotionally, refreshed women are reviving themselves with the oxymoronic caffeinated comfort of the mid-day ritual at the center of English culture. But temporarily Mildred finds herself beyond revival, for she has made an absurd purchase rather than a practical or aesthetically pleasing one. Again we are given a contrast of her emotional state and physical demeanor against that of the women in her immediate vicinity: “Many had the satisfaction of having done a good day’s shopping and would have something to gloat over when they got home. I had only my Hawaiian Fire and something not very interesting for supper” (131).
Not for nothing do Pym's protagonists collect and sort jumble and then arrange social events around its redistribution from one owner to another. Jumble is the essence of lives lived in a bourgeois society based on the consumption and display of goods. It is, in its various forms, the medium by which we attempt to make our inner lives known to the external world. Mildred reflects on the subtle nuances of her friendship with Dora and her own suppressed anarchic tendencies against common sense and for reckless abandon as symbolized by a beaded milk-bottle lid:

The jingle of the little beaded cover against the milk jug reminded me of Dora and her giggles, her dogmatic opinions and the way she took offense so easily. The little cover, which had been her idea, seemed to symbolize all the little irritations of her company, dear kind friend though she was. 'It keeps out flies and dust,' she would say, and of course she was perfectly right, it was only my perverseness that made me sometimes want to fling it away with a grand gesture. (19)

And just as Mildred wants in moments of rebellion to fling away her status as a thoroughly sensible woman whose most vital interests revolve around protecting the milk from flies and dust, she also begins to feel animosity toward the image of herself as a "splendid" woman forever putting water on to boil at necessary and dramatic occasions. In a later chapter, she even goes so far as to suggest to Miss Statham that a tea-break during an evening parish meeting might be unnecessary:

Perhaps there can be too much making of cups of tea, I thought, as I watched Miss Statham filling the heavy teapot. We had all had our supper, or were supposed to have had it, and were met together to discuss the arrangements for the Christmas bazaar. Did we really need a cup of tea? I even said as much to Miss Statham and she looked at me with a hurt, almost angry look, 'Do we need tea? she echoed. 'But Miss Lathbury . . . .' She sounded puzzled and distressed and I began to realise that my question had struck at something deep and fundamental. It was the kind of question that starts a landslide in the mind. (227)
As Miss Statham’s mind boggles at such blasphemous denial of her own established role as an excellent woman who nullifies her spinsterish redundancy by clinging to domestic ritual and always interesting herself in the dietary satisfactions of others, Mildred backs down in her inquisition. She may be willing to peer and may even yearn to cast herself into the swirling vortex of an existence devoid of recognizable patterns and roles, but Mildred also realizes that her own ironic awareness and rebellious impulses do not give her the right to inflict her doubts on the more obtuse, though possibly more genuine Miss Statham: “I mumbled something about making a joke and that of course one needed tea always, at every hour of the day or night” (227).

Not surprisingly, it is this very quality of comfort, of willful attention to the quiet joys and reliefs available in this chaotic life and away from the abyss of nothingness that often prompts critics to discuss Pym as a nineteenth-century revivalist of the the realistic novel of manners rather than a twentieth-century writer who challenges identity, truth, and art by prompting herself, her characters, and her readers to peer beyond the bounds of culturally given realities. Pym’s characters are much more invested in keeping their identities in-check and tightly raveled than in delightedly allowing their sense of self and truth to spool away wildly into postmodern meaningless and disorder. Nevertheless, Pym’s ironic imagination searches for the cracks in traditional identities and realities and then pries the edges back just far enough to glance into the abyss swirling beneath what most of her characters consider to be the unquestionably solid ground of a reality based in common sense and physical comfort. As we see in the brief moment with Miss Statham, Mildred acknowledges the white-lies out of which her daily fantasies and rituals have been woven.

Likewise, Mildred is unable to ignore the flurry of constant, alternately saddening and laughable social activity as men and women push past her in the cafeteria line, cough demurely in the church pew behind her, and move into and out of the flat beneath her own. And though this compulsory attention causes her a certain amount of anxiety it also gives her a sense of purpose and necessity which checks her equally pervasive sense that life will always disappoint if one’s expectations are too high: “I forbore to remark that women like
me really expected very little—nothing, almost” (37). Mildred constructs a meaningful identity for herself through a sense of social and spiritual duty to the immediate community in the midst of which she lives her life. The challenges offered by her group of intimates who take umbrage easily and impose their own expectations and idiosyncrasies onto every interaction are certainly intimidating, but equally imperative and taxing is the challenge posed by the extended community of strangers amongst whom she moves with falsely insulating anonymity. Everyday this seething mass of new faces, moods, desires, and needs must be met as part of her job, as she journeys daily through streets and coffee shops.

This human mass is dauntingly but at the same time humorously brought to the reader’s attention by Mildred as a lunch-time cafeteria scene turns dizzyingly surreal: “We settled ourselves and our food at the table and I paused for a moment to draw breath before eating. The room was enormous, like something in a nightmare, one could hardly see from one end of it to the other, and as far as the eye could see was dotted with tables which were all full. In addition, a file of people moved in through the door at one end and formed a long line, fenced off from the main part of the room by a brass rail” (77). Contemplating her Christian duty to each of these “neighbors,” Mildred is overwhelmed to the point of emotional exhaustion: “‘One wouldn’t believe there could be so many people,’ I said, ‘and one must love them all.’ These are our neighbors, I thought, looking round at the clerks and students and typists and elderly eccentrics, bent over their dishes and newspapers” (78). Mildred’s frustrated recognition of the imperative for mass compassion is certainly a manic-depressive tendency, one which she must balance by taking comfort in her lunch companion’s happy, “sensible” knowledge that one cannot possibly be expected to love so many: “[Mrs. Bonner] looked up from her chocolate trifle, rather shocked. ‘Oh, I don’t think the Commandment is meant to be taken as literally as that,’ she said sensibly” (78). As they hurry off to a Lenten Service at St. Ermin’s to hear Archdeacon Hoccleve deliver the same absurd Judgement-Day sermon he delivers in Some Tame Gazelle—“‘Some of the things he said were really quite abusive’” (79)—the cafeteria scene, hinting as it does at the desperation of the human situation, becomes increasingly comic in the face of Hoccleve’s
hyperbolic denunciations of the sinfulness of the dutifully dull lunch-time congregation of secretaries, housewives, and civil servants:

I felt that I had made a slight advance, that an infinitesimal amount of virtue had gone out of me, and although I did not really like [Everard] I did not feel so actively hostile to him as I had before. . . . The grey March day, the hurried unappetizing meal and the alarming sermon made it more suitable that I should think of the stream of unattractive humanity in the cafeteria, the Judgment Day, even Everard Bone. (80)

The cameo appearance of the absurd Archdeacon in Mildred’s narrative is the beginning of an important trend which ultimately becomes a narrative device in Pym’s fictive world. All of her characters are part of a small yet elastic community of churchgoers, academics, and gossips who visit one another’s parishes, attend anthropological lectures, and talk to and about one another all the while. Each subsequent novel after Excellent Women expands this intricately strung web of human connection, and, in Chapter III, I will look at Pym’s stylistic and thematic use of the tension between the need for community and the simultaneous and seemingly contradictory yearning for detachment from the emotional fray of life lived among others. Pym is particularly interested in the role of the observer/artist who is immersed in a mundane world of quotidian detail and petty parish drama. But her narratives are never just unsympathetic, tongue-in-cheek, tabloidesque renderings of the small lives of absurd characters. Like Mildred, the protagonists of Jane and Prudence, Less than Angels, No Fond Return of Love, and A Few Green Leaves examine their consciences with as much deprecating scrutiny as they examine their underclothes: “Then I went back to my flat and collected a great deal of washing to do. It was depressing the way the same old things turned up every week. Just the kind of underclothes a person like me might wear, I thought dejectedly, so there is no need to describe them here” (EW 85). And though Pym’s protagonists work on or at least fantasize about improving both their generosity and lingerie, there remains a constant fatalistic undercurrent that acts as a reminder to all that life is never so virtuous or glamorous as the Church Times or Vogue magazine might encourage us to believe.
CHAPTER III

PYM'S AESTHETIC OF IMPRECISION, ELLIPSIS, COMMUNITY, AND THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST AS SPY

Pym is a writer who defined her aesthetic in connection with those writers she admired rather than in contrast to them. Instead of diagnosing the sickly literary history of the last fifty years, and attempting to prescribe a cure, Pym looks to her predecessors as sources of inspiration, helpful forebears with whom she can share a trait or two that will help her bring her own creative impulses to narrative fruition. By continually mentioning throughout this study Pym's immediate forbearers and contemporaries, I am emphasizing (and to a certain extent attempting to mirror) her aesthetic of self-definition as a matter of association rather than a process of individuation rooted in contrast and negation. In the course of the close readings that will follow in this chapter, I will briefly turn to Iris Murdoch's treatise "Against Dryness" as a means of articulating the ways in which Pym's novels of manners make subtle forays into a philosophical realism in which gossipy laughter and teatime rituals accrete into a subtly barbed commentary on the state of human relations and the creative imagination in the late Twentieth Century.

Murdoch would not use the term postmodernism, but the return to myth and the imaginative examination of being that she incites is not far off from Brian McHale's definition of postmodernism as the exploration of what it means to exist. David Lodge's metaphor of the novelist at the crossroads is crucial here, for it is exactly at this sort of narrative intersection that the realist tradition, modernist experiments in epistemology, and postmodern acknowledgments of splintering ontologies converge or at least appear to before exiting on their expected, predetermined paths. This last sentence is a blending of Lodge and McHale, who concedes that his own exploration was inspired by Lodge's typology. I will quote Lodge's 1971 analysis first:

We seem, indeed, to be living through a period of unprecedented cultural pluralism which allows, in all the arts an astonishing variety of styles to
flourish simultaneously. Though they are in many cases radically opposed on aesthetic and epistemological grounds, no one style has managed to become dominant. . . . For the practicing artist . . . the existence of a bewildering plurality of styles presents problems not so easily solved; and we should not be surprised that many contemporary writers manifest symptoms of extreme insecurity, nervous self-consciousness and even at times a kind of schizophrenia. (Bradbury 100).

And then McHale’s postmodern spin on it sixteen years later:

Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they tip over into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions—the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional and reversible” (11).

Pym inserts pluralism, contingency, and ambivalence into seemingly traditional realist forms and in doing so dismantles categories by making connections where contrasts and juxtapositions are the general intellectual *modus operandi* for carving up knowledge into memorable and (to change my metaphor) even digestible chunks.

Working from a generalized definition of metaphysics as concerned with the fundamental nature of reality and being, both Pym and Murdoch can be described as metaphysical realists who inject new life into a tired form by paying attention to and creating characters around that in life which is unknowable, unsayable, and uncomfortable. But Murdoch is suspicious of such labels because helpful linguistic designations can easily become philosophical prisonhouses (i.e. the institutionalization of negative capability as a definable, testable concept): “We need more concepts than our philosophies have furnished us with. We need to be enabled to think in terms of degrees of freedom, and to picture, in a non-metaphysical, non-totalitarian, and non-religious sense, the transcendence of reality” (29). Unlike Murdoch, Pym never wrote an aesthetic treatise of her own so one must turn to her notebooks and letters in order to find commentary on her aesthetic motivations and
alliances. And the result of such critical pilfering is a collage-style, meandering discourse in which the writer engages literature, popular culture, romantic love, and gendered identity construction with a sporadic, elliptical rush between the gaiety and despair of life as it is daily passing through her consciousness. Rarely does she define herself in opposition to others: whether writers, lovers, or friends. Rather Pym’s aesthetic is motivated by a desire to connect with and to console others as well as herself. But whereas Murdoch warns of the dangers of consolation, the soporific effect that a willfully manufactured, cowardice-driven comfort has on consciousness, Pym presents us with the life-affirming possibilities of willed optimism in the face of ubiquitous negation.

Pym’s “bidirectional” interest in detachment and community/textual connection is key. What makes her use of detachment unique is the way the skin of protective discursive activity is also for her characters a means of reconnecting, of acknowledging the potential horror of too much detachment and the healing balm contained in the endless possibility embodied in other human beings. Pym’s protagonists continually strive for an emotional detachment by which life may be lived in the midst of fellow, fallible beings and simultaneously ameliorated by recasting experiences and acquaintances as scenarios and characters in a humorous act of narrative distancing. By exploring Pym’s presentation of the romantic psyches and artistic motivations of her protagonists in Jane and Prudence, No Fond Return of Love, A Few Green Leaves, and Less than Angels, I mean to emphasize the thematic and stylistic means by which Pym predicates detachment as necessary to the psychological balance each of her protagonists so continually strive to maintain. In order to build toward the thesis of Chapter IV in which I will discuss the way in which Pym’s ontological forays into postmodern questions of identity disguise themselves as comic novels of manners, the purpose of this chapter will be an elastic and encompassing attempt to foreground Pym’s fictional world as a place where a sense (if not always the reality) of community acts a hedge against the always imminent threat of disunity and dissonance contained within the protective buffer of detachment. Pym’s characters flirt continually with their sense of their romantic isolation. They are as energized as they are made melancholy by a bittersweet sense of the impossibility of the
romance plot which has formed their heterosexual, feminine psyches. And the same tension exists in their relationship to and sense of the suffocating and sustaining possibilities of the community, an entity which forms the foundation of Pym’s fictive world. The office tea rituals, the academic conferences, the church meetings, the rides through London atop an omnibus, the hurried and unpalatable meals in crowded cafeterias: each contains the ugliness of mundanity and the poignant beauty of moments shared or the tragedy of moments lost. This tension is particularly apparent in Pym’s style, in the way she often constructs her sentences into meandering, vague representations of the unconstructed, undeliberate psyches of her protagonists and their internal relationship to the external world.

Pym’s writing operates as a sort of literary landscape on which the profuse interactive possibilities between life as it is lived, life as it is textualized, and life as it is fictionalized are given the human shapes of many precisely drawn characters who populate the individual novels devoted to telling their stories and later casually move in and out of those narratives belonging to others. What I am referring to is a phenomenon common to the Pym universe; coincidental meetings and acquaintances and seemingly peripheral conversations bring sightings and news of the lives of characters from previous books. Holding together this English landscape—dotted as it is with parish churches, academic societies, suburban bus routes, sea-side hotels, and widely connected gossips—is an elastic sense of community, commonality, and coincidence: a world in which the reader is as readily counted on to remember faces as the characters are to notice and to listen to the seemingly insignificant details from the lives of those living, vacationing, or merely dining in proximity to them. It is easy, too easy really, to slip into talking about Pym’s various characters as if they all live in the same time and place, as if they all know each other. They exist as protagonists and comic foils in individual texts, but the overall effect of the Pym canon creates the impression of a self-effacing opus in which single novels, that can and do make sense independently of one another, act also as chapters in a larger quasi-philosophical intimate history of an era, an extended community, and a way of engaging life.
Section I

For all of Pym’s attention in her narratives to the slightest of external details, her fictive world rarely seems claustrophobic, suffocating, narrow, or dull. This surprising emotional and intellectual spaciousness is due in large part to Pym’s elliptical style, what John Bayley refers to as her perpetual refusal to be exact. Her protagonists move vaguely between living in the world and living in their far less restricted and rule-bound imaginations. Jane Cleveland and Prudence Bates, the dual protagonists of *Jane and Prudence*, provide a helpful example of the nuanced range that imprecision can take in a Pym novel. So distracted is Jane by her internal preoccupations that the more externally grounded, pedestrian members of her husband’s rural parish often find themselves wondering if she is entirely sane as she walks about town with the hem of her slip showing and wearing a tattered coat that looks as if she should be out feeding chickens instead of on her way to tea. Though the always impeccably dressed and socially proper Prudence may at first glance seem more grounded than her absent-minded friend, she lives as much in her mind as Jane does and maybe even more so. For, whereas Jane has a family and a parish to anchor her in the world of church politics and matchmaking, Prudence’s entire emotional existence is constructed around fantasy love affairs that have little or no existence in the real world:

Laurence and Henry and Philip, so many of them, for she had had numerous admirers, all coming up the drive, in a great body, it seemed, though in fact they had come singly. If she had married Henry, now a lecturer in English at a provincial university, Prudence thought, or Laurence, something in his father’s business in Birmingham, or even Philip, small and spectacled and talking so earnestly and boringly about motor cars . . . but Philip had been killed in North Africa because he knew all about tanks . . . Tears, which she had never shed for him when he was alive, now came into Prudence’s eyes. (13-14)
In the novel's first chapter, which takes place during their college's annual Reunion of Old Students, the friendship of Jane and Prudence is established as a fondness developed between tutor and pupil a decade earlier and maintained by both as a connection to youthful Oxford days when poetry and learning were the focal point of every day, and love (as unrequited or unsatisfactory as it might have been) was naturally heightened by the "idyllic surroundings of ancient stone walls, rivers, gardens, and even the reading-rooms of the great libraries" (13). Jane, who once guided Prudence in her reading of metaphysical poetry, now spends her time wondering about Prudence's improbable infatuations with married men and scouting possible potential husbands for her single friend. Jane may feel herself to be a failure in terms of the standards of Victorian womanhood, which she gleaned from "the novels of Miss Charlotte M. Yonge," for she is a terrible housekeeper, a far-from-splendid first lady of the parish, and the mother of only one child. Nevertheless, her relationship with her clergyman husband, Nicholas, remains emotionally fulfilling even though the initial romance and passion have long-since been replaced by "mild, kindly looks and spectacles." It is this pillow of domestic security that Jane wants for her friend; to her mind, if Prudence could replace her absurd crushes with the single unromantic focal point of a husband, she would be able to relax and learn the joys of digging in the garden rather than worrying about the perfection of her manicures. At first the friendship between Jane and Prudence may seem improbable, but the smooth alternation between their perspectives in this third-person narrative establishes a rhythm by which they are annoyed, intrigued, and vicariously fulfilled through the contrasting realities they have each constructed for themselves in opposition to one another. Jane has her parish intrigues and Prudence "her love affairs," which in Jane's eyes are more of a career than her actual job as an editorial assistant to her latest unsuitable object of romantic speculation, Arthur Grampian: "And Prudence's love for Arthur Grampian, or whatever one called it—perhaps love was too grand a name—just went hopelessly on while time slipped away...." (11-12)

With the above ellipsis Jane's thought trails off into an inarticulate void of feeling and memory, and it is in such an instance that Pym sets into motion an inexplicit narrative
exploration of the vague ways in which characters try to define their imprecise thoughts and yearnings through obfuscating allusions to poetry and meandering conversations with others who are far too rooted in their own impulses and associations to really understand what the speaker is attempting to express. Chapter One closes with such a miscommunication as Prudence attempts to explain to Jane her attraction to Grampian which, as she well knows, has little substance outside her own imagination: “‘It isn’t so much what there is between us as what there isn’t’ Prudence was saying; ‘it’s the negative relationship that’s so hurtful, the complete lack of rapport, if you see what I mean.’” Not surprisingly, Jane has no idea what Prudence means, so she attempts to draw an analogy to her own experience: “‘It sounds rather restful in a way,’ said Jane, doing the best she could, ‘to have a negative relationship with somebody. Of course a vicar’s wife must have a negative relationship with a good many people, otherwise life would hardly be bearable.’” Prudence, however, is determined to articulate the colliding molecules of emotion and intellect into a palpable, crystalline utterance: “‘But that isn’t quite the same thing,’ said Prudence patiently. ‘You see underneath all this, I feel that there really is something positive...’” (14-15). Of course, after invoking so profound a contradiction as the emotional fulcrum of her reality, Prudence cannot help but trail off into a conversational lacuna where ideally Jane would help fill in the blank. But by this point Jane, instead of jumping into the gap with her own affirmation that multiple negatives do result in a positive, is out of the conversation entirely and concentrating only on fighting off sleep. So instead of pondering what Prudence has attempted to express she grasps onto what she knows, that Prudence needs something definite to occupy her mind as well as her hands. Gardening will not do, but maybe a widower will.

Prudence’s explanation of the positive negativity of her interactions with Grampian serves as a muddled attempt at the crystallization of self, art, and love that must end in an ellipsis as rational articulation breaks down in the face of irrational attraction. “Crystalline” is a term Iris Murdoch uses in her 1961 essay of philosophical literary criticism “Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch” to describe what she sees as the often barren symbolism to which much twentieth-century fiction has been limited by authors attempting to encapsulate
in the novel their analysis and critique of modern civilization. Prudence’s vague invocation of Keatsian negative capability as a means of articulating and mythologizing her monadic emotional impulses is very much in keeping with what Murdoch might call the impulse to describe one’s own experience in terms of the larger human condition. Thus when Prudence’s attempt at self-allegorization and communication with Jane reaches a conversational impasse, it is possible to read Pym’s use of vagueness as a foundation for character development as very much in keeping with Murdoch’s own aims for a return in the novel to a realism founded in contingency, ambivalence, miscommunication, and an emotional discomfort eased only by willful obfuscation. If negative capability has, by association with nearly two hundred years of canonical authority, become an institution in its own right (often used to test the sophistication of a university student’s erudition and memory) and a crystalline example of poetic genius, then Prudence’s exhausted resources of emotional explication shatter the perfectly frozen and preserved entity into splinters of doubt, unknowability, and impulse. The ellipses at the end of Prudence’s sentence—You see underneath all this, I feel there really is something, something positive. . . .” (15)—is, in Pym’s round-about way, an invocation of Keats’ own original attractions to the negative, to the freest and most irrational associations: “Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—” (letter Dec. 1817, Drabble 700).

Pym is an author who relishes the endless possibilities of lacunae as she throws herself and her characters into them and then delights in the way in which emotional and intellectual inexactitude continually vacillate between certainty and craving, assertion and hint. I place Pym with her protagonists in this buoyant sea of wavering speculation because in the personal writing of her notebooks and letters she continually and contradictorily reaches for crystallization of self, art, and love by invoking positive, free-form connections in what many would define as negative relationships. She does this romantically in her love affairs with Henry Harvey and Gordon Glover, which expire physically long before she has quit exploring their emotional ramifications in both her notebooks and her fiction. And she does it artistically in terms of her definition of herself
as a certain type of writer. As I have discussed in Chapter II, Pym’s fiction shares little with the formal experiments of Virginia Woolf. Her early manuscripts are a far cry from the sparse, modal fluctuations of To the Lighthouse, but this does not stop her from declaring in 1942 the Woolfian qualities of her work: “14 August. Oswestry. I have been reading Virginia Woolf’s To the Lighthouse. Although I have read her before this is the first time I have really taken note of her special technique. It is one that commends itself to me—I find it attractive and believe I could do it—indeed I already have in a mild way” (VPE 107).

“In a mild way” is a useful phrase, for it can be used as a template for understanding Pym’s relationship to many contemporaries with whom she is sharing, bending, and refurbishing the tradition of emotional realism in the novel. Woolf’s focus in To the Lighthouse on the quiet intimate violence and the ravages of time and mortality on brief, only momentarily consequential lives is translated by Pym into an aesthetics of minutia in which the chaotic world is at once acknowledged and made ironically humorous in the face of each day’s physical annoyances and joys. For instance, in a similar act of textual interpretation and reflexive self-fashioning as a result of seeing simultaneously in another qualities one admires and rejects, Pym mentions in a letter to Philip Larkin her admiration for Iris Murdoch’s prolificness and her attention to external detail and internal mood. But in a casual sentence that many would reject as a facile and unsophisticated interpretation of Murdoch’s novels, Pym praises them for containing “no philosophical stuff, just real nitty gritty” (VPE 303). Indeed, Murdoch’s novels have been read by many as the quintessence of philosophical realism, and her unabashed pursuit of ideas in a fictional medium is particularly highlighted when read against the meandering flow of barely articulable feelings in the proximity of which Pym’s characters live their lives. Nevertheless, I find Pym’s contrariness in regard to traditional literary categorizations useful, for it gives further emphasis to her disregard for the obvious in favor of her own imaginative impulses and associations.

Though Pym does not go on to explain in her letter to Larkin just what she means by saying that the fiction of Iris Murdoch contains “no philosophical stuff, just real nitty-
gritty," her tone is complimentary and even a bit reverential as she is also commenting on Murdoch's ability to write and publish one densely humane book per year. For Murdoch's fictive worlds are as dense with humanity as they are replete with an external realism comprised of large casts of characters interacting with one another and with their painstakingly detailed surroundings. Thus the "nitty gritty" content can be ascribed to Murdoch's fascination with the attractions and repulsions of the soul and the intellect as human beings interact with one another. And if, from Pym's Christian/liberal humanism point of view, Murdoch seems not at all philosophical, I interpret her to be using the term in its analytic, symbolic-logic sense. In "Against Dryness" Murdoch presents a non-specific defense of her own deliberate return to realism in a century of formal experimentation and increasingly lifeless symbolism. In this way her argument for a return to "real people," "contingency," and "imagination" is not so very different from John Bayley's defense of the "unconscious selfhood" that makes Pym's narratives so much more than morality plays about the abysmally depleted condition of humanity at the end of the millennium.

Her protagonists breathe in an atmosphere of palpable disappointment, rejection, loneliness, and boredom, yet each in her own way decides to see the good, to see a multitude of possibilities in a severely restricted set of circumstances. Mildred Lathbury (Excellent Women) humorously decides that the importunities of the selfish, incapable men in her life upon her time and good graces can give socially-condoned purpose and fullness to her already full life. Wilmet Forsyth (A Glass of Blessings) realizes that her boredom and loneliness have been a selfish preoccupation distracting her from the real blessings of her very full life as a friend, wife, and churchgoer. Jane Cleveland's faith in romantic relationships between women and men is reaffirmed as she realizes that "love and imagination" transform crude, often unattractive human beings into desirable, interesting romantic partners (217). And Prudence Bates finally receives a dinner invitation from Grampian, which she wisely turns down: "She stooped to turn out the gas-fire and then began tidying his desk. Let him go among the bishops tonight, she thought, suddenly overwhelmed by the richness of her life. We have many more evenings before us if we
want them” (222). The upshot here is that with each act of Sartrean negotiation Pym’s characters wrest their idea of themselves away from the reflective surfaces of the equally selfish Others around them. Instead of searching for the non-existent exit from an absurd of nausea and defensive fear, they reimagine their spiritual prison cells as cozy domestic spaces in which emotional monasticism is humored into existence by tea and biscuits. The back and forth tension of the individual who is at once attracted to and repelled by community is at once the action and demographic landscape of Pym’s novels. Her protagonists are charitable churchgoers and academic helpmeets, but they are also isolated watchers who simultaneously connect and disconnect with each act of voyeurism.

Section II

Pym’s intricate fictional tissue of community and charity begins in each novel as a neighborly nosiness that gradually grows into an ironic sense of one’s duty to others. For instance, in Less than Angels Rhoda Wellcome and her sister Mabel Swan stare out of an upstairs window at the goings on in Alaric Lydgate’s yard:

‘The rugs are all out on the lawn,’ said Mabel Swan. ‘I suppose Mrs. Skinner is going to beat them.’

‘The morning is really the time to do that,’ said Rhoda Wellcome, her sister. Mr. Lydgate must realize that he isn’t living in the African jungle now. One doesn’t want to be narrow and suburban, goodness knows, but if everybody were to beat their rugs in the evening, just think of the noise!’

‘It would be like native drums, I suppose,’ said Mabel mildly.

‘Poor Mrs. Skinner, I think she has a difficult time,’ said Rhoda. ‘Probably Mr. Lydgate won’t let her do things when he’s in the house. I suppose he may have gone out now and she’s making the most of the opportunity.’

While Rhoda feels a certain amount of embarrassment about her spying and a need to dissemble as to the full extent of her knowledge about Alaric’s movements, Mabel embraces her own interest as “healthy curiosity”: “Why couldn’t Rhoda say right out that
she knew he had [gone out]? thought Mabel with a flash of irritation. During the afternoon she herself had heard the click of the next door gate and she knew that her sister had been standing in the dining-room window. So she must have seen him go out. What was the point of living in a suburb if one couldn’t show a healthy curiosity about one’s neighbors?” (33).

Spying alone is not, however, terribly fulfilling and can actually become even more alienating if the expected and unexpected movements of the object of interest are not fitted into a context in which the object can become a fellow subject (i.e. an emotionally complex being whose motivations and responses are recognized as being not so different from one’s own). In the case of Alaric Lydgate, Rhoda’s distant knowledge increases her curiosity about and even compassion for this strange man and ultimately leads to more personal interest and a humanizing interaction:

‘I’m so pleased,’ said Rhoda, taking Deirdre aside. ‘I’ve managed to persuade Mr. Lydgate to join us this evening.’

‘However did you do it?’ Deirdre asked.

‘He came out into his garden this morning and I happened to be working in the herbaceous border—he was quite near the hedge, so I called out ‘Good morning! Isn’t it a lovely day’, then I said that the hot sun must remind him of Africa and he agreed that it did.’

‘Well, I suppose he could hardly have said that it didn’t.’

‘No, though he did say that the African sun was even hotter and not so pleasant as this. Then I made a remark about it being nice to be able to have meals out of doors and then—well, I can’t remember exactly how the conversation went on, but I seemed to find myself inviting him to supper this evening, and he seemed quite pleased to come.’ (143)

The result of reaching out in this impulsive, as opposed to a premeditated, attempt to find out about him reveals Alaric to be quite ready to accept such gestures. He may stalk about his garden scowling as he composes yet another scathing book review and he may sit in his house after dark wearing an African mask, but his shyness and his paranoia about people
only talking to him because they want access to his trunk full of notes on Africa have not put Alaric entirely out of reach.

As we learn upon first meeting Alaric, he considers himself a failure in many arenas, common social interaction not being the least of them: “He had been invalidated out of the Colonial Service, where he had not been awarded the promotion he felt he had earned. He had achieved nothing in the fields of anthropology or linguistics, and the trunks of notes up in his attic, which he had never even sorted out, were a constant reproach to him. He felt also that he was unable to make small talk or even to bring out the pleasant harmless little insincerities which help everyday life to run smoothly” (58). Rhoda punctuates her description to Deirdre of the interaction over the herbaceous border with her discovery that he is not nearly as neurotic nor alarming as their distant observations had suggested he might be: “‘He even smiled through the leaves, I mean, I could see through a sort of gap that he was smiling, and then he came and looked over the top of the hedge, he’s so tall, you see. And he’s really quite good-looking when he smiles’” (143).

Such a mixture of neighborly interest and burning curiosity keeps readers in touch with characters whose lives go on after the final pages of their own narratives. Dulcie Mainwaring, the protagonist of *No Fond Return of Love* is particularly useful to both author and reader in this respect. Though neither a novelist nor an anthropologist who must watch people and record their actions in order to further her career, she still devotes almost all of her energy to finding out about those who strike her fancy: cultivating an interest in someone and then pursuing the fascinating details of who they know, where they live, where they grew up, what they like to eat. Her current subject is the handsome and aloof Aylwin Forbes, but her sleuthing brings her into casual contact with many new people, people who though they mean nothing to her primary search provide information about other Pym characters. In this way we find out from *Less than Angels*’ Rhoda Wellcome at a parish jumble sale where Aylwin’s estranged wife is working a stall that her niece Deirdre has married Digby and is pregnant. And, when Dulcie and Viola journey to Taviscombe in order to investigate Aylwin’s family origins, we learn that Wilmet, Rodney, Piers, and Keith from *A Glass of Blessings* are vacationing together in the West Country.
Wilmet and Keith meet Dulcie and Viola as they all tour the rooms of the same local castle which, Wilmet informs Dulcie, used to be the estate of a family named Forbes. As they chat and Dulcie reaches the realization that “Marrying beneath them seemed to be a characteristic of the Forbes family” (192), they are briefly joined by Rodney and Piers who have brought the car and are ready to leave:

‘Ah, there you are darling,’ said the husband. ‘I’ve brought the car up the drive. We thought you’d probably be worn out after all your sightseeing, didn’t we Piers.’

Piers, thought Dulcie, with an envious glance at him.

‘Do you know, said the dark young man, ‘they never take those curtains down to wash them? Would you believe it!’

They seemed to melt away, the young woman throwing a vague smile towards Dulcie and Viola as, cherished and secure with her three men, she moved away from them.

‘No wonder she’s tired in those ridiculously high heels,’ said Viola sourly, as they waited for the bus back. ‘What odd people they were! Like characters in a novel.’ (193)

Dulcie responds to Viola’s criticism by claiming that she too feels like both a character in and a reader of a Victorian novel of class-crossing and marital intrigue: “‘This whole afternoon has been rather like a novel,’ said Dulcie, ‘I feel as if I’d been rushed through to the end without having read the middle properly’” (193). They are both having a hard time imagining cranky old Mrs. Forbes, who currently runs the Eagle Hotel and rues the messes her two handsome sons keep making of their relationships with women, as a beautiful young woman wooed by the Forbes boy from the castle whose mother had much higher hopes for the social connections his marriage would bring: “‘It’s impossible to imagine some things,’ said Viola wearily. She was thinking of the little bottle of gin in the bedroom cupboard.” Dulcie who is certainly the more imaginative of the two feels a giddy connection with “the fourth dimension” rather than a need for the relaxing, piney acidity of a glass of gin. Thus she begins to speculate:
'The extraordinary thing is,' Dulcie went on, 'that these things have always been so, and yet it's only our knowing about them that has made them real.'

'You could say that about anything,' Viola objected.

'It's the fourth dimension, isn't it, or something like that. I wish sometimes that I knew about philosophy. Did you see that portrait on the staircase?' Dulcie was quickly down to earth again. 'Couldn't you see a likeness to Aylwin there?' (193-94)

Like Dulcie who regrets her ignorance of philosophy, Pym is not in the strictest sense of the term a philosophical novelist in the way that, for instance, Murdoch is. Whereas Murdoch uses realism as a narrative springboard from which her characters can leap into mystical explorations of "truth" and "reality" while at the same time remaining anchored in a believable and readily accessible "story," Pym relies almost entirely on an external realism that takes as its focus the documentable behavior and conversation of human beings as they respond to the minutia of daily life. But the absence of Plato, Kant, and Sartre from her repertoire does not prevent Pym from creating in Dulcie a character who wonders, however momentarily, about the nature of reality and of truth as those terms apply to her lived experience. And even though Pym's career is marked by her struggle to detach her fictional worlds from the discourse of academic, aesthetic, and political sophistication, her effort to not allow herself to be articulated is in effect a form of cultural articulation. Dulcie is not created in a cultural vacuum; all of the history of the world and of the Twentieth Century is hammering at the walls of her consciousness and at the feeble construction of her identity.

As is the case with all of Pym's protagonists, Dulcie is a quasi-artist figure whose humane impulse to understand and to create finds fruition as she notices and interacts with the world around her: "'People blame one for dwelling on trivialities,' said Dulcie, 'but life is made up of them. And if we've had one great sorrow or one great love, then who shall blame us if we only want the trivial things?'" (167). As she compiles the far-from-spectacular facts about Aylwin's external life, Dulcie begins to imagine for him an internal
life that gives dimension to his cool, if often befuddled, handsomeness. But less than Aylwin’s creator she sees her role more precisely as that of a reader of the Forbes-family saga. And as she becomes increasingly caught up in the narrative twists she crosses the boundary of mere observation to take her part in the drama of Alywin’s family and his life by falling in love with him and ultimately, if ironically, attracting his notice through her steadying presence in his chaotic emotional and professional life:

What a surprise it would be, not least to his family and to Dulcie herself, who had so often urged him to make a ‘suitable’ marriage, if, when he was free, this very marriage should come about! Yet here he was being true to type after all. For what might seem to the rest of the world an eminently ‘suitable’ marriage to a woman no longer very young, who could help him with his work, now seemed to him the most unsuitable that could be imagined, simply because it had never occurred to him that he could love such a person. It was all delightfully incongruous. Just the sort of thing Aylwin Forbes would do. (253)

There is certain emotional exile in only remaining a watcher; hence my rather grand description of Pym’s protagonists as “quasi-artists,” a term that I also apply to Pym herself. Detachment can bring delight but it can also seal the observer away into an artistic alienation of sorts. Early on, indeed in the first chapter of No Fond Return of Love, Dulcie describes not only her passion for observation but also the emptiness that can be the reward of ruthlessly successful sleuthing. Thus she begins describing the joys and comforts of her hobby: “I love finding out about people, said Dulcie, ‘I suppose it’s a sort of compensation for the dreariness of everyday life.’ . . . ‘Perhaps other peoples’s live are a kind of refuge,’ she suggested. ‘One can enjoy the cosiness of them.’” To this seemingly naive optimism Miss Foy says: “But they aren’t always cosy.” And Dulcie responds with grim self-analysis: “‘No, and then one finds oneself looking at the horror or misery in them with detachment, and that in itself is horrifying’” (18-19). For Dulcie, watching Aylwin with detached amusement is not enough, and not surprisingly she falls in love with him, in spite of what she knows to be his very obvious foibles. And this caring is what saves her
from the pathos of total detachment which she knows ultimately threatens both the observer
and the observed: "One goes on with one's research, avidly and without shame. Then
suddenly a curious feeling of delicacy comes over one. One sees one's subjects—or
perhaps victims is a better word—as being somehow degraded by one's probings..."
(171).

Dulcie's ellipsis at the end of this statement reveals the vague meandering style of
her attempts at philosophical questioning by which Pym hints at a meaning deeper and
darker than the light comedy of eccentric interaction with which she is most commonly
associated. Similarly, Pym's interest in spying acknowledges the potential (though never
irrevocable) horror of isolation, the lonely disconnection of a life lived in emotional exile
from others. Her protagonists' vaguenesses, and there are many instances when this word
is used to describe not only a specific statement made by a character but also a general
demeanor and way of engaging (or not engaging) "reality", exist as the sort of gap many of
us have learned to span with the consistent, confident strides which symbolize the degree to
which life in a bourgeois society promotes continual forward movement and discourages
looking down at or falling into the cracks in the moral pavement of modern life. For the
most part, Dulcie too has learned to traverse the emotional fissures and chasms that can
disrupt and even disable social byways. She plods forward in her rather boring suburban
life finding happiness where she can, but every so often she stumbles into the rift between
high expectation of life's possibilities as they are embodied by the glamorous or
comfortable surface images projected by other people and the eventless pathos against
which most human life is weathered.

Dulcie's dismay at the human lot is not, she realizes, to be reserved only for her
subjects of research. As dehumanizing as turning anothers' life into a mystery to be solved
is the realization that often comes with increased familiarity with those one has befriended.
But maybe "dehumanizing" is the wrong word, for the realization that someone wants
nothing more interesting out of life than to be loved is probably the most humane realization
one person can make about another. Dulcie sees that her acquaintance with Viola will never
develop into a friendship, as neither of them has the ability or the desire to bring such an
entity to life. And, as the novel finds its primary sympathy in Dulcie perspective, we learn of her feeling of authorial disappointment: “Lately she had begun to admit to herself that Viola had turned out to be a disappointment. In a sense, Dulcie felt as if she had created her and that she had not come up to expectations, like a character in a book who had failed to come alive, how many people in life, if one transferred them to fiction just as they were, would fail to do that! So perhaps it was not so surprising after all. Viola was just a rather dull woman, wanting only to be loved” (167-68).

Just as Viola, from Dulcie perspective, is a failed creation, a female bit-character who can never rise to the noble and desirable status of heroine, so too is Dulcie a failed artist and heroine in her own right. Her interactions with Viola never yield nobility of character or exhilaration of any sort for either of them. They each remain “rather dull woman, wanting only to be loved,” but what sets Dulcie apart for the reader is her ability to see this invisible pathos and to reconcile it as maybe not so dismaying or depressing after all. If Viola finds pleasure in the attentiveness of Bill Sedge, the knitwear window-dresser whom she claims makes her “feel that she [is] a woman” (169), the ridiculous, coincidental nature of their meeting and falling in love is justified by the transformation it has wrought in Viola’s usually surly demeanor: “Really, she looks almost beautiful, thought Dulcie, with her rather gaunt features softened by love. And the whole thing is so incongruous, unsuitable, almost. If we hadn’t gone to Neville Forbes’s church that evening, we shouldn’t have seen Bill Sedge arranging knitwear in the window . . .” (234). Again the ellipsis is Dulcie’s, who specializes first in noticing life and only secondarily, if at all, in philosophical pursuit of its many implications. She rarely finishes such thoughts and never commits them to paper though she often thinks of her life in novelistic terminology. She is a novelist who never writes. Unlike other Pym protagonists who share her curiosity about the lives of others (Mildred Lathbury, Wilmet Forsyth, Catherine Oliphant, Emma Howick), she has no aspiration to record the world round her.

Section III. For most of Pym’s major characters observation of and participation in life is always given precedent over recording it, as if the textualizing process were an
afterthought. And though this may not be true for the many spying and scribbling anthropologists who thickly populate but are often minor characters in this fictional world, it does describe the dilemma of Emma Howick of *A Few Green Leaves*, who finds objective, detached observation of the English village that she is studying ultimately impossible. In fact, she has come to the village in order to write up her notes about the difficulties of living in a newly established town, but once she arrives in West Oxfordshire she realizes that this ancient community has much greater appeal:

There was already a page in the typewriter but she felt disinclined to go on with her work. Sitting looking out of the window, she could see people going about their business in the village and she began to wish that she had chosen a rural setting for her fieldwork rather than the arid new town with its too obvious problems and difficulties. She removed the half-finished page from the typewriter and put a new one in. ‘Some Observations on the Social Patterns of a West Oxfordshire Village,’ she typed. Wouldn’t something on those lines be acceptable and certainly more interesting? But ‘village’ was wrong, somehow, too cosy—the jargon word ‘community’ would be more appropriate. Or, again she typed, ‘The Role of Women in a West Oxfordshire Community.’ Couldn’t she work out something like that? Inspired by the idea, she began to consider all the inhabitants of the village, as she knew them so far, and to make notes. (38)

When she has finished her page of notes about her new neighbors, Emma feels a satisfaction that any amount of work on writing up her “new town” could never offer, and though she feels that her afternoon of writing is not ‘work’ pers se, it is vital if only because it engages her curiosity: “Emma took the page out of the typewriter and laid it aside. This hardly counted as ‘work’, she felt, this idle speculating on the people in the village. Further research seemed to be needed in a good many directions, and who knew what might come of it” (41). And what does come of it is Emma’s conviction that her interest in humanity is from the perspective of a fellow participant in the fray of life rather than from that of scientific analysis. Irresistibly, Emma is drawn into village life and into a
love affair with the town vicar, and in the last lines of the narrative we learn that she has indeed decided to write a novel instead of a case-study. The difference between an anthropological examination of social interfaces in such a complex microcosm of English society and a novel taking inspiration from the personal histories of the parish’s more colorful or eccentric inhabitants and the frictions that occur on a daily basis is, she realizes, in the warmth of the observer’s/author’s engagement with those she is studying.

From as early as the first paragraph of chapter one, we see Emma struggling with her yearning for detachment and her irrepressible desire to participate. As the traditional post-Easter village walk through the park and woods of the nearby manor begins, Emma finds herself unable to remain in her cottage, peeking at life from behind a pane of glass: “She had not been sure whether to come on the walk or not. It was her first weekend in the village, and she had been planning to observe the inhabitants in the time-honoured manner from behind the shadow of her curtains. But seeing the party assembling outside the pub, wearing tweeds and sensible shoes and some carrying walking-sticks, she had been unable to resist the temptation of joining in” (1). Emma realizes that staying in the village and writing a novel is more valid an option than leaving and finding another place on which to take notes, notes that her boredom will never allow her to write up into a scientific study. And this new self-knowledge coincides with her equally life-changing epiphany that falling in love need not end in misery. To pay attention to the lives of others is important, but equally so is taking an active part in and a creative attitude toward one’s own emotional destiny: “She could write a novel and even, as she was beginning to realise, embark on a love affair which need not necessarily be an unhappy one” (250 emphasis Pym’s).

Among Pym’s characters, Emma Howick is by no means alone in her ambivalent attitude about what it means to be a writer (or even a reader of novels). Catherine Oliphant of *Less than Angels*, a professional writer, knows that life in its rawest form can often be unpalatable. And she sees it as her duty to tenderize the gristly bits as they appear, as it were, on her imaginative plate. The meat metaphor is hers for she thinks about both the content and the process of her writing in kitchen terminology: “She felt no guilt, sitting idly at her table in the window, watching the sun streaming through the amethyst and gold
stained-glass borders, while everyone around her gulped and hurried to catch trains home, for she earned her living writing stories and articles for women’s magazines and had to draw her inspiration from everyday life, though life itself was sometimes too strong and raw and must be made palatable by fancy, as tough meat may be made tender by mincing” (7). As Pym’s only character who identifies and supports herself as a writer, Catherine’s conversations with others and her own inner dialogues concisely express an aesthetic philosophy in which the trivial, the dull, and the unremarkable are found to be events full of interest, humor and even unexpected beauty. As she explains to Mabel Swann:

“‘I’m so glad you write happy endings,’ said Mabel. ‘After all, life isn’t really so unpleasant as some writers make out, is it?’ she added hopefully.

‘No, perhaps not. It’s comic and sad and indefinite—dull, sometimes but seldom really tragic or deliriously happy, except when one’s very young’” (89).

Casually eavesdropping and spying as she makes her way through the world, she is as often inspired as she is hindered by reality, for reality and formula romance are usually at odds: “She reached for her note-book and jotted down the little simile; these odd details often came in useful. There was a page in her typewriter, half-typed, and she sat down, hoping to finish the story she was writing. But the inspiration seemed to have gone and the falsely happy ending she had planned seemed unbearably trite and removed from life” (27). However hindering real life might be from time to time, Catherine still cannot help weighing almost everything she sees for its fictional worth.

The irony of applying a term such as “aesthetic philosophy” to the ponderings of a writer who writes formula melodrama and advice articles about tablesettings and smoothing one’s elbows with lemon-halves should not be lost here, for Pym chooses as her mouthpiece a journalistic hack. Of course, “hack” is too pejorative a word to describe the sensitive and intelligent Catherine who knows that her writing is a very long way from anything resembling literature. Her real act of creation, she well knows, is the persona she has created for herself. Tom and Deirdre have a conversation about exactly this as they justify hurting her for the sake of their own union:
‘After all Catherine isn’t so very young, and she has lots of interests and her writing.’

Tom’s face cleared, ‘Ah, yes,’ he said with an air of relief, ‘she has her writing. Of course she isn’t really a very good writer.’

‘That doesn’t matter,’ said Deirdre with unusual firmness. ‘When people write, they feel they’re doing something creative and worth while and that’s supposed to make up for everything else. Perhaps she doesn’t really care about anything but that.’

‘No, I don’t think she does,’ said Tom more comfortably. All the same, I shall worry about her a little.’

‘Oh, naturally,’ said Deirdre, feeling it a little unfair that to the worry of Tom’s thesis should now be added the worry of Catherine, abandoned and perhaps lonely. ‘But she’s such a strong character.’

‘Yes, she’s certainly that.’ Tom agreed. (122-23)

Catherine’s primary engagement with life is detachment, a detachment she has to literally shake herself out of at times. When she stumbles upon Tom and Deirdre holding hands in the restaurant she had always considered to be hers and Tom’s, she is as stunned by her immediate reaction as she is by the fact that her lover is with another woman: “Deirdre’s hand still lay on Tom’s; their moussaka would be getting cold, Catherine thought, and then pulled herself up, horrified at the sardonic detachment with which she had been watching them” (107). It is only on her triple take that her response becomes “properly” emotional: “When her change was brought, she hurried away and back into the flat, where she put down her shopping and the wine and then ran out again with no very clear idea of where she was going. I’m not one of those excellent women, who can just go home and eat a boiled egg and make a cup of tea and be very splendid, she thought, but how useful it would be if I were” (107-8).

Even at what seems to be the height of chaotic emotion, Catherine is still examining herself with an objective, writer’s eye. For this reason, she finds writing to be as much an introspection of self as it is a vehicle of escape into the lives of other people: “Writing is
such a comfort, isn’t it, that’s what people always say—it really does take you out of yourself. I sometimes feel it lets you more into yourself, though, and really the very worst part” (234). The result is that she is simultaneously aware of herself as a rounded personality and as a flat stereotype:

Even when she was dressed up there was usually some detail of her appearance that was not quite right, but although she was often conscious of this it did not disturb her unduly. She was too much aware of herself as a personality to make much effort to change, and she had become so used to writing about such things that she could have summed herself up very quickly in her bright, magazine style—‘red skirt and black top (could be velvet), long jet ear-rings (not if you’re five feet two or under), and (oh dear!) those shabby blue espadrilles bought in the market in Perigueux on a fine June morning’” (70).

For Catherine, detachment is as much a blessing as it is a curse, for while it allows her to gain a certain objective perspective when dealing with her emotions, it is also constantly forcing her beneath her own microscope.¹

Pym ends Less than Angels in 1957 and A Few Green Leaves in 1980 as she ended her first novel, Some Tame Gazelle, in 1950, with final pronouncements of love as entirely possible when the emphasis is placed on the mundane human yearnings for partnership, comfort, and secure routine rather than on the unsettling melodrama of the stereotypical romantic narratives detailed in A Very Private Eye (see Chapter I) driven by an insatiable

¹ In A Glass of Blessings Wilmet and Rowena sit in beauty parlor reading women’s magazines discussing the realistic merit of a scene written by one Catherine Oliphant and hypothesizing that romantic melodramatic narratives are more often drawn from the fantastic flights of imagination to which they imagine elderly spinster are prone rather than from the life experience of a woman like themselves:

‘Sunday Evening, by Catherine Oliphant,’ she read out. ‘It begins rather well with a young man and girl holding hands in a Greek restaurant, watched by the man’s former mistress—unknown to them, of course.’

‘But what a far-fetched situation,’ I protested. ‘As if it would happen like that! Still, it must be dreadful to have to write fiction. Do you suppose Catherine Oliphant drew it from her own experience of life?’

Rowena laughed. ‘I should hardly think so! She’s probably an elderly spinster living in a boarding-house in Eastbourne—or she may even be a man. One never knows.’ (153)
passion for cinematic poignancy and glamour. As Barbara Brothers has remarked on what she defines as Pym’s “focus on the nexus between the individual and his society” and the “problem of selfhood” as it has permeated twentieth-century aesthetic pursuit: “Life is not a love story nor an ethical problem. For Pym’s characters it is frequently a drama of tea, pigeons, and gossip” (79). And my argument in this chapter and the next takes its cue from and expands upon Brothers’s interest in Pym’s depiction of her character’s “psychic landscapes”. Each of her novels conducts a subtle ontological exploration that probes the possibilities of existential meaninglessness but resiliently insists upon individual salvation via a larger world of interconnected communities.

In other words, Pym’s particular brand of comic realism operates simultaneously as a means and a message. Life must be inspected with care; individual people must be looked at, spoken to, humored, comforted, jotted down in personal diaries, and remembered with a humor that for all its irony is not devoid of fellow feeling. And by sticking to minutiae, by peering into the tiniest crannies of the human routine, there is no way that laughter will not come eventually. The author is not a comedian or an ironist, per se, rather she is a noticee, a reporter, a sympathizer who finds pleasure amidst pathos, and who uses love to hedge loneliness. In Pym, the most common type of love is that which is unrequited, the kind which is generally considered ridiculous or tragic. And the laughter and the comfort she finds in such ubiquitous situations are the result of the continuously repeated realization that life is neither so bad nor sad as it is often made out to be. Love need not be a melodrama; even if nobody gets married in the end, love is the stuff of comedy. And when there is marriage, joy and disappointment are no differently distributed. Love has many faces, and romantic love wears more masks and hides more cultural deception than any of the other forms of love combined. Whether it is returned or not, love is a skill, a habit of the mind and of the spirit. It is the Christian imperative that runs through every Pym narrative, no matter how silly or selfish her individual Christian churchgoers may seem.

From a twentieth-century perspective, intellect, emotion, and identity are fluctuating, fragmented, ever-shifting abstract conglomerates of impulse, ego, desire, and
sensation. And while Pym acknowledges the tumultuous sea of uncertainty in which her protagonists are afloat, she offers as an anchor the "realities" and rituals of daily physical life which ground the mind and the imagination in certain patterns of acknowledgement and security. The clothes, cosmetics, sitting-rooms, manners, acquaintances, attachments, flowers, and animals with which we surround ourselves lend substance to the Cartesian abstractions "life" and "self." Pym may not overtly plumb the depths of Descartes or Sartre, but she does work up a detailed catalog of the accoutrements through which being is concretized and realized. And here I return to Brian McHale's metaphor for postmodern fiction as doing ontology in a teacup, which connects neatly with the realization that Pym affords Less than Angels' Catherine: "The small things of life were often so much bigger than the great things . . . wondering how many writers and philosophers had said this before her, the trivial pleasures like cooking, one's home, little poems especially sad ones, solitary walks, funny things seen and overheard" (LtA 104). It is the sort epiphany that Catherine acknowledges to be hardly original or profound; nevertheless, it is the sort of almost embarrassingly quotidian daily aphorism that can act as a life raft against the inundation of postmodern uncertainty and narrative unraveling. In Chapter IV, I will look at the way in which Pym mixes the comedy of relying on self-help-book cliche's about life with an increasingly overt acknowledgement that happy endings and comfortable, well-earned retirements are no longer acceptable narrative mainstays in a world where tea is drunk from environmentally toxic, non-decomposing styrofoam cups purchased from multinational franchized food chains more often than it is from solid, utilitarian enamel mugs or delicate, inherited Victoria china sets.
CHAPTER IV

PYM AS POSTMODERN ONTOLOGIST

Section I

To turn briefly to the question John Bayley poses in his essay title “Where, Exactly, is Pym’s World?” (1987), his answer is that it is everywhere and nowhere for she has “none of the modern compulsion to be exact” (53): “The unseen cartilage running through the tissue of each fiction is itself illustrative of what is indefinable in her novels, and resistant to conventional terms of praise. Our feeling for them, our addiction to them, is in the end as indefinable to ourselves as is the interest her heroines begin to take in one of the male characters. . . . Each is unaware of the movement of the soul, the movement of faith as it were which is drawing them towards each other” (54). It is precisely in their imprecise yearning toward ineffable states of sincerity and contentment that Pym’s narratives are at once deeply and not at all philosophical, offering a counter to realism based in imprecision and connection which acts as a balm of sorts to ease the angst of life in the post-war, postmodern era. Her settings and characters are grounded in realism through the use of precise external detail which anchors an internal meandering in which all of her protagonists indulge as they drift back and forth between moments of nostalgia, utter cynicism, and buoying optimism. This morass of contradiction, of vague if overpowering emotions paired with obsessively detailed meals and wardrobes gives the reader, Bayley admits, “a feeling that the author is not manipulating, is not in charge; that she gives herself up to the sensation of living, the mysterious prompting of the soul, as much as her characters do, living in them as they do in her” (54). But, whereas such a “surrender on the part of the author might seem a sign of weakness, of an inferior type and genre of fiction” (54), it is my argument that this quality of surrender makes Pym’s novels contemporary (as opposed to nostalgic) and even post-modern.

Bayley, who is something of an anti-modernist, is interested in recuperating Pym’s
reputation from what he sees as the stylistic and philosophical calisthenics of anti-realist novelists whose authors seem to him perpetually “determined to make the novel do something” (54). And, while I have found Bayley’s discussion of Pym’s imprecision invaluable to my own project of contextualizing Pym’s narrative style on a continuum with other realisms being explored by her post-war contemporaries (rather than as an ultimately unpublishable anomaly), I want to be careful not to reproduce his assumption that the majority of novels written between 1960 and the present replace human feeling and character-centered narratives with post-structuralist hat-tricks. In the opening sentence of Postmodernist Fiction, Brian McHale pronounces the infinite slipperiness of the adjective in his title and the narrative category it putatively describes: “‘Postmodernist’? Nothing about this term is unproblematic, nothing about it is entirely satisfactory” (3). Nevertheless, it is this very open-endedness, this malleable vagueness that simultaneously makes the term so useful.

As Bayley makes clear, Pym’s authorial strength and originality lies in her apparent resignation of narrative control over the thoughts and desires of her characters. I might include characters’ actions in that sentence as well, but, as any Pym reader knows, her characters do very little, almost nothing in fact aside from eating, drinking, spying on one another, and talking. Though the seeds of contention, emotional violence, and general interpersonal nastiness are continually sown, potential drama is perpetually uprooted and dispersed. In other words, her narratives are heavy on exposition, but development of characters and plot is watered down and eventually lost to her interest in quotidian detail and human inquisitiveness about the actions of others, as opposed to introspection about their own motivations. Pym’s characters talk and talk. Speculation and gossip abound, and the biggest events of life are continually glossed over with easing cliches. Mildred Lathbury explains on the second page of Excellent Women, when she catches herself chatting easily with the taciturn Helena Napier about the annoyances of moving and the way in which “some essential thing like a teapot or a frying pan is always lost”: “Platitudes flowed easily from me, perhaps because, with my parochial experience, I know myself to be capable of dealing with most of the stock situations or even the great moments of life—
birth, marriage, death, the successful jumble sale, the garden fete spoiled by bad weather. . . .” (6). And here I return to McHale’s ontology-in-a-teacup metaphor and to my own Introduction. In Pym’s novels ontology is conducted through conversation; to be is to speak and speculate and gossip amidst the domestic accoutrements and rituals that define ones culture and identity. And the casual, comic submission to impulse and comfort that Bayley describes Pym as giving both herself and her characters up to is, then, what makes her narratives flirt with what critics call postmodernism. And this ties directly into the question of realism, for Pym delays and even denies full narrative emotional exegesis in an overall flow of trivial detail and seemingly superfluous conversation in the interests of providing the reader with the sort of rush of tragicomic mundanity that simulates life in the post-war era of consumerism and information overload.

For instance, in *Less than Angels*, Tom Mallow, who is the romantic interest of the two major female protagonists as well as the former fiance of one other minor character, is one of two major characters in Pym’s oeuvre who dies within the narrative in which he figures prominently. Much of the narrative revolves around his return from his field work in Africa, his live-in relationship with Catherine, his quick defection to the arms of Deirdre once he has finished his thesis, and his second departure for Africa. But when he is killed in a political riot, the narrative barely takes time to reveal the details of his demise let alone the emotional impact one might expect his death to have on Catherine, Deirdre, Elaine, or his several male friends. In fact the news is buried in an off-hand narrative comment tacked onto a conversation between Catherine and Deirdre about Tom’s letter-writing style and the slowness of mail to and from Africa:

‘Don’t forget that you must send Christmas greetings horribly early, almost now I believe.’

‘Yes, I know,’ said Deirdre a little stiffly.

‘Tom always sends such curious cards, scenes of African life, that only make him seem even farther away and they always arrive weeks before Christmas.’

Catherine did not know, indeed how could she, that before Tom
could post his Christmas cards, he would be lying dead, accidentally shot in a political riot, in which he had become involved more out of curiosity than passionate conviction. (231)

This conversation and revelation are placed toward the end of Chapter 20, and Pym finishes off both the chapter and Tom, with a catalog of his personal effects and the distress of the man who found them:

The harassed young administrative officer, who had been in charge of the proceedings, had quite enough to worry him without the added anxiety of protecting anthropologists who meddled in politics. But he had liked Tom Mallow—they had often had an evening’s drinking together—and it was he who found the Christmas cards, stamped and ready to be posted, lying on the table in Tom’s hut. He had thrown them away, feeling that his friends would only be distressed to receive them now. (231-32)

There is some confusion as to which letter is for which woman and which of the three is actually Tom’s intended, so even his tumultuous romantic life becomes just another stack of papers to be sorted along with his field journals: “Well, it was none of his business, and perhaps it was better not to meddle in things that might become too complicated. So he bundled up the letter with the notes on kinship and land tenure and sent the whole lot back to Mallow’s family in England” (232).

In this chapter I will take as my focus the novels that Pym wrote between 1962 and 1977: *An Unsuitable Attachment*, *The Sweet Dove Died*, and *Quartet in Autumn*. *An Unsuitable Attachment* was the first manuscript for which Pym could not find a publisher and it remained unpublished until 1982, two years after Pym’s death. *The Sweet Dove Died* was published during Pym’s lifetime in 1978, but the manuscript had been finished since 1970 and rejected across the board by all of the publishers to whom it was sent. Once Pym had been “rediscovered,” however, MacMillan, who had earlier rejected it as too big a “risk commercially,” decided that the risk was ameliorated by so much press-attention to a novelist whose former readers were realizing that she had not been dead for the last fifteen years. And *Quartet in Autumn*, which began its futile rounds to publishers in 1976,
was only found acceptable after Larkin and Cecil had reminded the English fiction-reading public of her existence in January 1977. It was finally published by MacMillan in September of the same year and short-listed for the Booker Prize a month later. Like Pym’s novels of the 1950s, these three examine humor and sorrow, but the narrative tone and trajectory suggest that, though all of the usual comforts and emotional placebos are in place to ease disappointments over the emptinesses in the various characters’ relationships with others, life is no more delightful or humorous than each protagonist has the capacity to imagine and thus force it to be. And when imagination goes, when a sense of humor and optimism in spite of it all goes, then pouring all one’s love into a one-sided relationship with an aloof cat or polishing silver alone in one’s beautifully apportioned house is all that remains. And though these may not feel like troublingly dramatic or particularly grim existential endings, the overall impact of *An Unsuitable Attachment, The Sweet Dove Died,* and *Quartet in Autumn* is for the reader one of distinct unease.

The endings of Pym’s novels of the 1950s may suggest wry acceptance of a less than ideal situation. Mildred Lathbury’s premonition of her role as indexer and cook in Everard Bone’s life, Jessie Morrow’s inscrutable desire to trap Fabian Driver’s fickle affection, Catherine Oliphant’s cultivation of a relationship with the difficult Alaric Lydgate, or Dulcie Mainwaring’s sweet unintentional wooing of Alwyn Forbe’s ambivalence: each of these endings reflect on the viability of the romance-marriage plot. By questioning just what happiness can be found in such endings of heterosexual union when the romance has been questioned all along and sometimes even ridiculed as destined for a mundane, balding middle-age of paunches and animal-shaped soaps (no matter how physically attractive the potential husband), Pym’s protagonists each develop a resilience that keeps them stalwart when marriage inevitably disproves itself as the most automatically rewarding thing a woman can do with her life. This is not to say that Pym writes of all marriages as necessarily doomed to squabbling, secrets, and dissatisfaction or that she sees all men as weak and hardly worth the effort interaction with them demands. But she does see and continually explore the many ways in which misunderstanding can exist between the expectations that each sex has of the other. So she provides her female protagonists
with a strength of personality and a sense of the ridiculous that is so strong that each knows she will live a contented life with or without an attendant spouse. If marriage does not happen, then life goes on happily if a bit boringly at its slow, daily pace of quotidian ritual and neighborly interactions. But when and if it does, the burst of activity and desire is expected to settle quickly again into habits and casual conversations. The difference, however, is in a proximity that has the potential to both enable and thwart intimacy.

In the three novels that Pym wrote between 1962 and 1976, Pym represents intimacy as generally more thwarted and ultimately more impossible as a narrative standby than it ever has been before. In short, she examines and discards the romance plot as a narrative raison d'etre. In her novels of the 1950s, romance is possible and desirable but it is never offered as a life raft to characters who are at risk of drowning in a sea of individual, quasi-Sartrean meaninglessness. And in those novels that she wrote in the 1960s and 70s, romance is still briefly offered but its promises are increasingly unconvincing and ultimately fraught with unintentional deception for both parties. Many are the instances in Pym’s novels when her characters must confront personal mortality and pathos as they see their own futures foreshadowed in the disheveled poverty of others. The guilt-ridden momentary trauma represented by these upsetting figures troubles more than one Pym heroine, but such moments when generous impulses to reach out are nullified by embarrassed hesitation are also poignantly, darkly comic as the self-probing character cannot quite manage to cover her discomfort with a rueful smile. This is when Pym is most penetrating but when she thus joins ranks with Sartre, Fowles, William Golding, and Muriel Spark what sets her apart form these more overtly nihilistic writers is that Pym allows just enough comic relief to let her readers off the mortal and existential hook to arrive plausibly at an optimistic ending in spite of the knowledge that we must all still combat loneliness, grow old, and die.

In An Unsuitable Attachment, The Sweet Dove Died, and Quartet in Autumn the pain of life is not so easily counterbalanced by its small pleasures and light-hearted jokes. But no matter how far Pym’s protagonists slide into depression, she always allows her readers some sort or source of final optimism. And, as I will discuss in the final section of
this chapter, though that optimism may seem an empty gesture or a willful blindness in *An Unsuitable Attachment* and *The Sweet Dove Died*, it is in *Quartet in Autumn* an important philosophical move—one that is as nihilistic in its surrender to the despair of mortality in an increasingly tawdry world as it is an existential negotiation of sorts that makes daily plodding forward possible and even desirable.

**Section II**

Pym's characters cling to their bourgeois Englishness, to a memory of gentility that buoyed them to the surface in a culture changing rapidly and violently in the space of only a few decades, but they are not unaware of their illusions. In fact, they are repeatedly and all too startlingly realerted to the strangeness and the sadness of the world, a world to which they continually attempt to immure themselves. And the succeeding chapters of the novels in which they live record the precarious line each must walk between Christian charity, faith in a moral universe, and existential disillusion. As Rupert Stonebird of *An Unsuitable Attachment* recognizes, companionship and romance are not much more than surreal and even unsettling moments that never really succeed in penetrating the tissue of solitude in which each individual is wrapped, as though in an invisible winding sheet: “Oh, this coming back to an empty house, Rupert thought, when he had seen her safely up to her door. People—though perhaps it was only women—seemed to make so much of it. As if life itself were not as empty as the house one was coming back to” (43).

*An Unsuitable Attachment* is very much a novel about emotional isolation and meaninglessness. Rupert, the bachelor anthropologist, may discount what he sees as a feminine need for cozy, communal domesticity, but the image of him a few chapters later coming home to an unheated house on Boxing Day evening can be seen as an overall trope of the novel. The parish community exists, Rupert is returning from spending the holidays with the family of an academic colleague, and Penelope (who is romantically interested in him) has imagined his holidays to have consisted of sophisticated flirtations with strange, attractive women. Yet, for Pym the focus of the narrative is on what did not happen socially, and on what interested or spying neighbors did not see: “nobody saw Rupert return to his house, or standing in his overcoat in the unheated hall, opening late Christmas
cards, then going from room to room switching on electric fires" (80).

Rupert is the center of attention of the unmarried Penelope Grandison, whose clumsy sense of glamour makes her at once endearingly comic and—because she is so desperate to find love—always verging toward pathos:

Her beautiful red hair was arranged in its usual chaotic beehive, but there was something strange about her eyes which had a curious bruised look about them. Perhaps it was just purple eye-shadow lavishly applied, he decided eventually. She was wearing a navy blue duffel coat with a tartan-lined hood, black stockings, and pointed shoes with very high heels. As he had remembered, there was something slightly comic about her appearance.

(84)

Unable to remember her name, Rupert thinks of her simply as “the Pre-Raphaelite beatnik,” that is when he bothers to remember her at all. And this is just one of many relationships defined by one-sided preoccupation and indifference which continually leads the narrative back to sketching the personal isolation of each character.

Though Pym sticks to the parish community microcosm of her earlier novels, the central perspective of *An Unsuitable Attachment* is spread among several characters, each of whom are conducting muddled searches for companionship and meaning. There is very little humor in this novel because the main characters are largely loners whose detached sense of irony in no way approaches the pervasively optimistic if self-deprecating laughter that makes Mildred Lathbury, Jane Cleveland, or Catherine Oliphant such sympathetic narrative fulcrums. Sophia Ainger, Penelope’s sister, is one of the central perspectives, but her status as the vicar’s wife offers her little comfort and possibly makes her emotional balance even more difficult to maintain because of the scrutiny with which others view her position. If Jane Cleveland of *Jane and Prudence* often considered herself a failure because of her inability to organize a parish meeting or to deal authoritatively with upstart deacons and housekeepers, Sophia’s sense of misplacement is all the more intensified by her extreme consciousness that emotional connection to others is the surest route to loneliness and unsatisfied expectation. Her relationship with her aloof husband Mark is satisfying
enough when he is able to focus on her needs as opposed to his sense of obligation to his generally disinterested parishioners. But Sophia’s hunger for connection goes largely unfed, despite Mark’s efforts, as her main fixation is with her cat, Faustina. Because she takes little real interest in making the most of her human relationships, Sophia becomes consumed with what the cat cannot and seemingly will not give her. And this in turn pushes her away from those humans whom she might truly befriend.

Thus, Sophia’s relationship with the narrative’s other central female character, Ianthe Broome, is thwarted from the beginning. Sophia attempts to befriend Ianthe, a gentle canon’s daughter and a newcomer to the neighborhood and parish, but each interaction shows the women to be operating on very similar, yet directly conflicting emotional planes. One afternoon when Ianthe is returning home from work, Sophia waves to her from the vicarage window and invites her in to see a box of cast-off clothing sent by Lady Selvedge. The scene is typical Pym in many ways as the women sort through the ridiculously elaborate, sequined evening dresses and Sophia speculates about whether or not she would ever be able to wear such things without the parish blaming her for extravagantly poor taste. Ianthe responds to Sophia’s concerns by asking what Mark will say about wearing an evening gown to a church event, and the answer she gets reveals more about the marriage and Sophia’s emotional state than the always proper and restrained Ianthe is comfortable knowing:

‘Mark? Oh, he probably won’t notice. He is not of this world, you know, in some ways we’re so far apart. I’m the sort of person who wants to do everything for the people I love and he is the sort of person who’s self-sufficient, or seems to be. . . .’ she paused. ‘Then there’s Faustina.’

(99)

Ianthe is confused for a moment, not remembering who Faustina is, and when she realizes she makes a feeble reply about cats not really needing so much emotional interaction as other animals. But Sophia’s response surprises the already startled Ianthe even more because of the social incongruity and inner turmoil it belies: “But they aren’t always,” said Sophia. ‘I feel sometimes that I can’t reach Faustina as I’ve reached other cats. And
somehow it's the same with Mark’” (99).

At the forefront of Ianthe’s response is social embarrassment that the vicar’s wife should be revealing details about her marriage in this way, but Sophia’s unfulfillable desire for emotional sustenance from so disinterested a creature as her cat gives Ianthe a larger, existential twinge that makes her want to hide from life altogether: ‘Oh dear,’ Ianthe heard herself saying, feebly, she felt, but it was difficult to know best how to express her sympathy. She felt she wanted to shut herself away from life if this was what it was like” (99). Ianthe wants to believe that such statements and moods are not typical of Sophia, who she wants to see as a practical and capable parish co-leader. As the conversation and the chapter end, however, Pym leaves the reader alone with Sophia on a hard church pew awaiting Lenten evensong: “She sat humbly in the cold church, making some effort to get into the right mood for the service. God is content with little, she told herself, but sometimes we have so little that it is hardly worth the offering” (100).

The tension between Sophia and Ianthe builds, with each one’s expectations of the other getting in the way of any real understanding. And their subsequent conversations with one another only hinder whatever generous, uncritical feelings with which the acquaintance might have begun. Being a canon’s daughter, and the physical embodiment of all that is gentle and socially proper, Ianthe cannot help her feeling that Sophia’s unhappiness is a moral flaw, or at the very least an entirely avoidable wallowing in despair, the sort of behavior tiresome in anyone but particularly self-indulgent in a vicar’s wife. At one point, Rupert, the professional voyeur, and Ianthe discuss Sophia’s proclivity for sadness. Ianthe begins by admitting that Sophia defies easy characterization: “‘Yes—one thinks one knows her and then suddenly one seems not to at all.’” And Rupert responds, “‘But isn’t everybody like that to some extent?’” Thus the conversation continues touching first on the odd obsession with Faustina and then on what Rupert interprets to be Sophia’s knowledge of the darker secrets of the soul:

“I feel Sophia knows about life,” Rupert went on.

‘You mean living in this poor parish and being married to a clergyman—yes, I suppose she would know about life.’
‘Yes, that would be the conventional view of course—that a woman in those circumstances would know about life, but I meant something a little different.’ Rupert frowned with the effort of trying to explain himself. ‘Something that the pessimistic Victorians had, not the women, the men. Perhaps I was thinking of Matthew Arnold.’

‘Oh?’ Ianthe looked puzzled and uncomprehending, but he did not see her face and went on, ‘I think she sometimes feels that there really is neither joy nor love nor light. . . .’ (216)

As Rupert’s voice trails off, Ianthe jumps in “almost sharply” with an affirmation that Sophia is “‘devoted to Mark’” (216), and whether or not this is the case, Ianthe is less concerned with examining the way things are than with the way they should be. Rupert tries to incorporate Ianthe’s outburst, but he soon realizes that she is not interested in either understanding or sympathizing with Sophia’s ennui:

‘I think the feeling would go beyond a happy marriage,’ said Rupert. ‘I suppose we all experience it sometimes.’

‘I don’t think one should feel like that about life,’ said Ianthe, a little shocked. ‘A clergyman’s wife certainly shouldn’t anyway.’

Poor Sophia, Rupert thought, breaking the silence by refilling Ianthe’s glass, to be classified in this way. Ianthe seemed to be very much the canon’s daughter this afternoon. (216-17)

As it happens, Ianthe is “very much the canon’s daughter” most of the time, and she immediately develops a reputation as such in her new parish. Yet the main “unsuitable attachment” after which the novel is titled (apart of course from Sophia’s obsession with Faustina) is Ianthe’s growing infatuation with John Challow, a colleague in the library where she works. What makes John unsuitable is the slight class difference between the two of them and the fact that he is five years her junior. He is able to make her laugh at herself and at life in a way that she never learned to in her role as canon’s daughter, librarian, and always proper, relentlessly splendid churchgoer. Like Mildred Lathbury, Ianthe is an excellent woman, but incongruity shocks and upsets rather than amuses her.
And Ianthe’s triumph (and one of the few bright spots) in the narrative is that she is able to disregard what she knows will be the prejudices of those around her, admit her love for John, and accept his marriage proposal. This is in spite of her constant concern about propriety, and the tension she feels toward Sophia who never quite lives up to expectation.

On the one opportunity when Ianthe does attempt to reach out to Sophia, when the two of them are alone in Italy, by telling Sophia of her love for John, she is met with the same response she usually finds herself making. Sophia is as surprised and dismayed by Ianthe’s affection for John as Ianthe was by Sophia’s yearning to communicate more fully with her cat. And Sophia has no qualms about telling Ianthe exactly what she thinks:

‘I rather feel that you’re one of those women who shouldn’t marry,’ Sophia said.

‘I don’t suppose I shall now,’ said Ianthe. ‘But of course one never knows—people do marry quite late in life.’

‘I always think that’s such a mistake,’ said Sophia. ‘You seem to me to be somehow destined not to marry,’ she went on, perhaps too enthusiastically. ‘I think you’ll grow into one of those splendid spinsters—oh, don’t think I mean it nastily or cattily—who are pillars of the Church and whom the Church certainly couldn’t do without.’

Ianthe was silent, as well she might be before this daunting description. Yet until lately she too had seen herself like this. (194-95)

Though the reader might expect the lonely Sophia who is always matchmaking for her sister to respond warmly to Ianthe’s admission, to the attempt to communicate, even if the actual news might take some getting used to, Pym thwarts reader expectation by making Sophia as unreachable to Ianthe as Faustina is to her. Sophia quickly segues the conversation into a discussion of Faustina’s having been sterilized and wonders aloud whether or not depriving her of “the opportunity of motherhood” was a fair decision. And it is this eccentric obsession that is the last straw for Ianthe: “Somehow the mention of Faustina had turned her against Sophia; she remembered another time when the cat had been brought into a serious discussion. On occasions like this she found herself disliking
Sophia; such lack of proportion, frivolity almost, were highly unsuitable in a vicar’s wife” (195).

What Ianthe does not see is that Sophia is far from intending to be frivolous, and it is this issue of proportion that resolutely stops these two seemingly similar women from ever being friends. Sophia makes just such a realization when she learns from Ianthe’s concerned aunt and uncle of the engagement to John:

Then it occurred to her suddenly that perhaps Ianthe didn’t really like her. We assume that nice women—clergymen’s wives and canon’s daughters—who go to the same church will get on well together and be friends, that they must of necessity be friends, but why should they be. All this time Sophia had thought that she knew Ianthe and could predict how she would behave, and now she had done this. I must have left out ‘the human element’, she thought, the phrase coming into her mind as a convenient tag to explain unexpected behavior. She was still brooding over her failure when Mark came in. (226)

Each woman dislikes the other for wanting too much or for wanting in disproportionate ways. In Ianthe’s eyes Sophia has every reason to be happy and socially functional—so her preoccupation with the cat can be read as nothing but willful absurdity. And Sophia finds herself resenting Ianthe for wanting more than her splendid life as an excellent woman living alone “in her charming little house”. As she says to Mark, “‘We’ve both had this picture of her which was so pleasing and comfortable and all the time she’s been wanting something more’” (227). And as the wedding date approaches, both women find themselves reflecting on the darkness that marriage can represent. Sophia is disgusted by the sight of John and Ianthe decorating her house together and must make an effort not to wish that something dramatic might happen to expose him as some sort of narrative villain. She admits as much to Rupert at the wedding:

‘It’s all over,’ she said. ‘Wasn’t it dreadful, I almost hoped somebody might stand up at the back of the church and forbid the marriage—like in Jane Eyre—and expose John as an impostor. I wanted it to happen,
and not only for Ianthe's good.' Sophia bowed her head, a little ashamed of having confessed so much to Rupert. John was not an impostor, or no more of one than are most of the men who promise to be something they cannot possibly be. (254)

And it isn't just Sophia who is feeling mean-spirited, for in the midst of her own prenuptial domestic happiness, Ianthe learns of the marriage of her retired colleague Miss Grimes and feels despair when one might expect her to feel shared joy: "At that moment life seemed very dark: Ianthe was perhaps too rigid in her views to reflect that a woman might have worse things to look forward to than the prospect of marriage to a Polish widower and a life in Ealing, or even of a quiet drink in one's own room at the end of a hard day" (244).

Within the realm of narrative expectation for a realist text focused on the relationships formed within a small community among several characters who are looking for romance and marriage, An Unsuitable Attachment follows through in terms of offering one successful romance and the promise of another, for the last page takes as its focus Rupert and Penelope as he spots her on a lunch break in the gardens of St. Paul's Cathedral and begins his approach. Yet the trajectory of the text is one of constant narrative thwarting and deferral. A scene between Ianthe's uncle and aunt in Sophia's home over Ianthe's engagement is averted the minute that Sophia sets a jar of quince jelly out for tea:

'I hope Ianthe is all right? [Sophia] said.

'Then you haven't heard?' Bertha asked.

'No.' What could it be? Sophia wondered. Something to do with a man, perhaps, though that seemed unlike Ianthe. But what was it she had said at Ravello about being in love with somebody? Sophia had hardly taken it seriously at the time.

'She has announced her intention of marrying,' said Randolph.

'Ah, is that quince jelly, I see? How delicious!'

'A most unfortunate choice,' Bertha continued, obviously irritated by her husband's allowing himself to be diverted by the quince jelly. 'The man is several years younger than her and inferior to her socially.' (222)
The conversation continues, but its momentum has fizzled entirely. For if Ianthe is unsuitably attached to a working class library assistant, and Sophia to her cat, so is Randolph Burdon to his love of preserves. So much so that the entire question of Ianthe’s poor choice, the coldness in the marriage of Bertha and Randolph that it brings to light, and the general Anglican prejudice against Roman Catholicism is collapsed into and ameliorated by the jar of jam that Sophia sends them away with. I quote Pym’s paragraph and Bertha’s stream-of-consciousness rush at length in order to convey the sea of words, prejudices, and concerns that this conversation brings up without a thought to their relation let alone to their resolution:

‘Perhaps we shouldn’t have come,’ said Bertha, arranging her fur coat so that she should not squash the fur by sitting on it. . . . ‘Of course Ianthe was too much with her mother after my brother died—otherwise she might have got this sort of foolishness over when she was younger. But there they were living on top of each other in that flat, much too near Westminster Cathedral—I always felt it most oppressive when I went to see them, the cathedral towering over them like that. And one could even see the canons going in and out—Roman canons, of course . . .’ her voice trailed off uncertainly and she began to fuss with the pot of quince jelly which was balanced rather unsafely in the glove compartment. (225)

**Section III.** Rather than tragedies, Pym’s novels of the 60s and 70s continue to offer themselves up as comic novels of manners, but the palpable difference between these and the previous six novels written in the 1950s is that the characters are more prone to real depression because small external comforts are suddenly not quite enough for protagonists on the verge of realizing that a cup of tea and a warm cat do not stop the onward march of youth into decrepitude, of health into disease, or of simple solitary pleasures into rigid senile preoccupations. In *The Sweet Dove Died*, Pym’s one truly cold and unlikable protagonist, Leonora Eyre, finds herself increasingly and even happily removed from the lives and concerns of those around her. In fact, this novel is the closest Pym’s world ever gets to depicting relentless emotional brutality and emptiness. Even a seemingly casual
narrative observation of a day spent at an event as innocent and potentially comic as a cat show is rife with existential bleakness:

They had stopped in front of a cage where a cat-like shape shrouded in a cloth lay fast asleep. How much wiser to contract out altogether, James felt, as this creature had evidently done. Or to sit stolidly in one’s earth tray, unmoved by the comments of passers-by. Yet too often, like some of the more exotic breeds, one prowled uneasily around one’s cage uttering loud plaintive cries. (68)

Leonora’s days are consumed with the preservation of her own wrinkling beauty, the elegant decoration and upkeep of her house, and the cultivation of her acquaintance with cultured older men who give her valuable presents and are satisfied with seemingly conversations in luxuriously tasteful settings: “Leonora liked to think of her life as calm of mind, all passion spent, or, more rarely, as emotion recollected in tranquility. But had there ever really been passion, or even emotion? One or two tearful scenes in bed—for she had never enjoyed that kind of thing—and now it was such a relief that one didn’t have to worry anymore” (16).

The narrative centers around Leonora’s acquisition of beautiful things while her own beauty subtly slips away, as reflected by the antique fruitwood mirror she has borrowed from James Boyce. The twenty-four year old James is another of her beautiful acquisitions, but his presence in Leonora’s life is as fleeting as it is devastating. But “devastating” is too strong a word to apply to any aspect of Leonora’s life, for she is always in control, always seemingly, always determined to remain emotionless. And this martial law of elegance and detachment, makes her almost despicable. The reader cannot feel sympathy for her or with her, and she steadfastly refuses pathos, so all of her relationships aside from the one with James are marked by her rejection of human warmth and reciprocal feeling.

Chapter Seven of the novel is particularly biting in that it exposes Leonora’s world as completely antithetical to all that is usually important and expected in Pym’s universe, as Bayley or any other number of critics have described it. Significantly, she hates tea and
despises chats with female acquaintances: "Leonora had little use for the 'cosiness' of women friends, but regarded them rather as a foil for herself, particularly if, as usually happened, they were less attractive and elegant than she was" (53). She, nevertheless, accepts Meg's invitation to lunch because Meg is involved with a much younger gay man, and Leonora is intrigued by what she would like to believe are the disparities between Meg's tumultuous dedication to Colin and her own decorous dinners with and gifts to James. Leonora is disturbed by Meg's admission that she sees her as "living in your perfect house, leading a gracious, elegant life," but she is not troubled enough to try to change her level of emotional engagement. Rather she prefers her own interpretation: "Of course, one wasn't like that at all, cold and fossilized. It was only that all one's relationships had to be perfect of their kind. One would never have put up with anything as unsatisfactory as Colin's behavior, for instance" (56-57).

Later in the same day, Leonora has dinner with her neighbor Liz, who continually wants to talk about her ex-husband and who now directs all of her rejected romantic love toward the many cats with whom she shares her home: "It seemed that her whole day had been spent with women less fortunate than herself, she thought, as she sat in Liz's back room listening to the cats crying and wailing in their pen in the garden" (57). Even at this early point in the narrative, the reader is not surprised by Leonora's complete lack of sympathy or humor; what is most surprising is that she even bothers to see Liz at all, especially since Liz's easy readiness to indulge in her own romantic pathos makes Leonora feel almost uncomfortable in her complete lack of a response:

'All that love, wasted,' she would say. This was one of the rare occasions when Leonora would feel inadequate, having no experience of her own to match it. She had never been badly treated or rejected by a man—perhaps she had never loved another person with enough intensity for such a thing to be possible—whatever the reason she would keep silent, only observing that perhaps love was never wasted, or so it was said. (58)

The reasons that either woman might have for participating in this tete-a-tete are questioned in the next sentence which presents Liz's reciprocal boredom with Leonora's
“reminiscences of her Continental girlhood and later attachments mysteriously hinted at which never seemed to have come to anything” (58).

Pym’s narratives of the 1950s are often filled with such incompatible companionship, but the emphasis on humor and goodwill in spite of annoyance and misunderstanding in, say, the relationship in Excellent Women between Mildred and Dora or Mildred and Winifred is a crucial counterbalance. In The Sweet Dove Died, Pym allows in the last sentence of the chapter that Liz and Leonora are oddly fulfilled by their complete lack of feeling for or interest in one another: “Yet at the end of the evening each woman would feel a kind of satisfaction, as if more than just drink and food had been offered and accepted” (58). But the use of the qualifier “as if” is a significant, subtle gesture by which Pym acknowledges the total emptiness that exists beneath the sort of social interaction which has heretofore been a humanizing mainstay in her narrative universe.

The morosely emotional Liz is even somewhat delighted by the pain that she knows Leonora to be experiencing from the defection of James from her life, first with Phoebe and then with Ned. At first Liz offers her greater experience in emotional upheaval as a comforting warning to Leonora to be careful: “‘Oh, no—we’re well out of it, my dear.’ Liz spoke with the detachment of one who is past all emotional involvements, and by including Leonora with herself she was perhaps trying to warn her to draw back while there was still time” (153). But Liz is even more spiteful in her excellent-womanhood than Pym has allowed such a character to be before: “Yet another part of her wanted her to go on, to find out whether it was possible for the cold, proud, well-organized Leonora to suffer as she had suffered and so to provide an interesting spectacle, a kind of diversion from everyday life” (153).

But even if Leonora’s pain is evident to those around her she is deeply invested in not confronting the fact that James’s desertion at this time in her life is particularly painful because it highlights the solitary nature of old age and death. When she is unable to control her environment, to surround herself at all times with beautiful objects, she plummets uncontrollably into private moments of despair. The scene in a cafe in which she cannot get the elderly cleaning lady to remove a filthy tray from her vicinity is particularly painful:
There was a hostile silence during which Leonora was conscious that she herself belonged here too, with the sad jewelry and the old woman and the air of things that had seen better days. Even the cast-off crusts, the ruined cream cakes and the cigarette ends had their significance. The woman, still muttering, removed the tray and dumped it on another table where a man preparing to tackle a doughnut with a knife and fork—presumably the implements provided—caused Leonora to shudder. She turned her head away and huddled into her fur coat, feeling herself debased, diminished, crushed and trodden into the ground, indeed ‘brought to a certain point of dilapidation’. I am utterly alone she thought. (184-85)

But the potential such an admission has to make Leonora sympathetic to the reader is immediately undermined by Leonora’s reminder to herself that, “Fortunately the state of being ‘utterly’ alone is a rare one. Leonora saw it as applying to herself because James had left her. She would not have counted the friends she still had, like Humphrey and the elderly admirers who took her out to expensive meals, nor yet her women friends and acquaintances. One would almost rather not have them at all” (185).

So the narrative leaves Leonora gracefully and stalwartly alone in the final chapter joylessly awaiting the arrival Humphrey with his peonies after having refused to reignite her friendship with the bumblingly fickle James whose overtures are sincere enough if ill-executed. She realizes that her rival, Ned, “was in many ways a comic character,” but the narrator acknowledges that “the realisation had come too late,” and asks “would it have made any difference if she had seen him as such when he first came into their lives?” The question is left unanswered, but as Leonora has been singularly devoid of a sense of humor throughout the narrative, the answer is clear. Though Leonora is, in her final welcoming of Humphrey and his flowers, saved for the time being from complete isolation, it is not hard to imagine that as she ages and her gallant, flower-bearing suitors pass on, she will end up not unlike Marcia from Quartet in Autumn: rather mad and so obsessed with her object-rituals that she forgets about the cruder things in life such as eating.

An Unsuitable Attachment and The Sweet Dove Died, are generally discussed
among Pym critics as her two most fundamentally flawed novels: the former in its seeming refusal to move away from unproblematized representations of increasingly trite, increasingly humorous parish prejudices, and the latter in its assumption that Leonora’s icy, troubled gentility could possibly be of interest in the 1960s when readers were looking for reflections of the populist, youth-obsessed, civil-rights oriented social revolution in the novels they were reading. And Pym herself is cognizant of the disparity between the novels she is writing and those by others that she is reading. As she states in a letter to Philip Larkin written in May 1969, “I’ve finished a very rough re-doing of that Sweet Dove Died novel about Leonora etc, but what reader would want to identify herself with Leonora? If only I could write about Margaret Drabble-like characters! But I suppose I couldn’t have done, even when I was that age, so . . . . Perhaps the best thing to do now is to ‘write’ nothing but bibliographies” (VPE 250). My interest in these two novels and my reason for drawing out at such length their emotional subtleties is grounded in a desire to redesignate them as Pym’s attempt to address in her fiction the darker shades of existential questioning and to adapt the ironic novel-of-manners, romantic narrative formula as a potentially self-conscious forum for such philosophical questioning. And in doing so, I want to affirm Pym’s thematic and modal contemporaneity. Pym was experimenting with narrative voice and focus in these novels in an effort to record her temporal moment as well as her increasing sense of the fractious direction in which fiction was moving. An Unsuitable Attachment and The Sweet Dove Died are, in short, transitional novels in which Pym was simultaneously articulating and revising her sense of England and its middle-class, middle-age image of itself as a culture of Christian moderation and rationality. Quartet in Autumn is, then, the fruition of the attempts at self-redefinition made in the two previous novels.

Section IV. Quartet in Autumn is Pym’s most biting commentary on the increasingly decrepit state of middle-class life in England and the chasm-like holes in the net of the welfare state. Her penultimate novel follows a year in the lives of four civil servants as they approach and deal with the forced inactivity and emotional isolation of retirement. Marcia, Letty, Edwin, and Norman have worked together for an unspecified
number of years (or even decades) in a nondescript office doing a job that will be
terminated once the four of them are gone to their very separate realities: Edwin to his
parish interests, Marcia to her cloistered suburban hording of tinned food, and Letty and
Norman to indistinct days whiled away in impersonal bedsitters among indifferent
boarders. The four characters pass their office lives in griping small-talk that is very much
the same from one day to the next, avoiding intimacy with one another, and cherishing their
secret passions and rituals as if making such information public would somehow lessen the
worthiness of their small joys. Out of a combined defensive desire for absolute privacy and
a cultural reticence about inflicting themselves on the good-graces of those around them,
they each hold back details about their personal lives. Confessional conversation is thus
replaced with platitudes, complaints, and cynical discussions about the state of Britain in
the 1970s, a place where “Kill Asian Shit” decorates the subway platform and old-age
pensioners are found dead of hypothermia. As Edwin notes, pessimistic as Norman’s
constant dwelling on the gruesome tidbits in the Daily Mail may be, “there may be
something in it”: “Four people on the verge of retirement, each one of us living alone, and
without any close relative near—that’s us” (7).

In the chapters preceding Letty’s and Marcia’s departure from the work world,
many conversations return to the potential horrors that await those with no one to care
about them. Discussions of hypothermia, falling under a train, and starvation become a
conversational obsession with Norman for whom the phrase “falling through the net of the
welfare state” is a mantra by which he simultaneously accustoms himself to his fate and
attempts to comfort himself by verbally confronting his fears. Edwin snaps at Norman to
not “‘keep on about it . . . . What with being dead of hypothermia, you seem to’ve got it on
the brain” (22). And Marcia is smug in her secret knowledge that she has pamphlets in her
purse about welfare programs to which pensioners can apply for help with their heating
bills (knowledge she will never share with her co-workers nor use for herself). But Letty,
like Norman, is unable to ignore the depravity she sees on her way to the office each day.
If Edwin has the church calendar to keep him busy, Marcia her ‘twenty thousand-semi’
house in the suburbs filled with her stock of bottles, bags, tins, and pamphlets, and
Norman his obfuscating cloud of self-absorbed anger, Letty has little to distract her from seeing her fears daily embodied before her eyes in the London streets. She is particularly sensitized to misery which she thinks of as “the different stages toward death” (17). As she reflects on the pointlessness of the job she has gone to daily for the last two decades and fears the even more threatening loss of meaning once that job is no longer there to structure her days, she finds herself ruminating over the obituaries and unable to ignore the human travesties with whom she shares a bench while waiting for the Tube:

This morning, for instance, a woman, slumped on a seat on the Underground platform while the rush hour crowds hurried past her, reminded her so much of a school contemporary that she forced herself to look back, to make quite sure that it was not Janet Belling. It appeared not to be, yet it could have been, and even if it wasn’t it was still somebody, some woman driven to the point where she could find herself in this situation. (17)

Such “upsetting sights” force Letty to confront her own limited capacity for compassion and charity, and she is unable to rise to what she sees as an occasion for real human contact, something she realizes disappears just as easily and as quickly as youth: “Ought one to do anything? While Letty hesitated, a young woman, wearing a long dusty black skirt and shabby boots, bent over the slumped figure with a softly spoken enquiry” (17)

Through Letty’s eyes Pym shows us a London in the 1970s that is much grimmer, poorer, and more upsetting than it has ever been. In the years immediately following the war, Mildred Lathbury could test her convictions of common humanity by asking African and Indian students if she could share their cafeteria table, and in doing so she was able in a small way to stave off the mass of humanity obediently holding their trays and queuing for food, all of whom she feels she must do her best to love. And in 1961, No Fond Return of Love’s Dulcie Mainwaring may have obsessively noticed other human beings to the point of feeling on the verge of a perpetual low-grade depression about the “odd people” in the public library whom she suspects have no where else to go. But Letty Crowe is in her sixties, not her thirties and she is approaching retirement in a Britain so distraught by
economic woe and social tension that it is only a few years away from electing Margaret Thatcher in a desperate attempt to quell popular fears that British history is coming to an anarchic end.

Oxford historian, Kenneth O. Morgan describes the socioeconomic atmosphere of England in the 1970s:

There seemed to be a deep rot at the heart of the economy, with hundreds of thousands, many of them teenagers or other young people, doomed to perhaps years on national assistance, while public welfare services were steadily curtailed. There was evidence of decline elsewhere as well. Although the population continued to increase, from over 50 million in 1961 to over 56 million in 1981, it was noted that there was actually a fall in the period 1975-8. The birth-rate fell sharply during the recession, while a larger proportion of the population were elderly, placing strains on the social services and necessarily reliant on the wealth created by the able-bodied still in employment. (649)

This is absolutely the setting in which we meet Letty who came of age in the post-war era of Excellent Women when impoverished gentlewomen were supported and visited by the likes of Mildred, not left filthy and shouting obscenities on the Bakerloo line: “At once the figure reared itself up and shouted in a loud, dangerously uncontrolled voice, ‘Fuck off!’” Then it couldn’t be Janet Belling, Letty thought, her first feeling one of relief; Janet would never have used such an expression. But fifty years ago nobody did—things were different now, so that was nothing to go by” (17).

This example of Letty and the possible decline of Janet Belling is all by way of displaying the degree to which Pym was, for all her desire to comfort and sooth, very much in touch with the unpleasant aspects of human emotional and even socioeconomic realities. Certainly, Quartet in Autumn is Pym at her darkest and most comfortless. Marcia dies of starvation, as foreshadowed by the early office conversations, and Letty floats from residence to residence trying to find a home in which she can be unobtrusively comfortable. She is on a quest for a place where she can, at the very least, minimize the discomfort she
feels first at Mr. Olatunde’s house where the sounds of laughter and the music of joyous hymn-singing remind her of a vitality of which she in all her English insularity has never felt capable, and later at Mrs. Pope’s “bleak and silent” Victorian mausoleum where the grandfather clock ticks so loudly that it keeps her awake (77). The ever careful Letty is at loose ends because her friend Marjorie, with whom she had planned to share a country cottage, has become suddenly engaged to her vicar. If she feels an outsider among Mr. Olatunde and his extended Nigerian family the thought of living with the newlyweds is even more alienating. With Marjorie and David Lydell she would forever feel in the way, whereas Mr. Olatunde and his relatives are at least warm and friendly and invite her to join them, for at least in theory they have Christianity in common. She sees that the foundation of Marjorie’s appeal to the younger man is in her utter devotion to his easily disturbed comfort and his delicate and pampered appetite for hearty meals accompanied by fine wines. And Letty, who has always been a lukewarm devotee in matters of both religion and romance, has no interest in sharing Marjorie’s wifely workload.

Even more dismayingly, however, each option forces Letty to examine the lackluster quality of what her life has become and also of what it might have been had she, like Marjorie, discovered romantic love:

How had it come about that she, an English woman born in Malvern in 1914 of middle-class English parents, should find herself in this room in London surrounded by enthusiastic shouting, hymn-singing Nigerians? It must surely be because she had not married. No man had taken her away and immured her in some comfortable suburb where—hymn-singing was confined to Sundays and nobody was fired with enthusiasm. Why had this not happened? Because she had thought that love was a necessary ingredient for marriage? Now, having looked around her for forty years, she was not so sure. (66)

While Letty waited passively for love, Marjorie had opportunistically pursued first her late husband and now the vicar by making her abilities to nurture and protect seem a domestic haven from the exhausting masculine world of work and aggravation. Marjorie, the
pragmatist, found romance twice in her life because she created it, while Letty, the dreamer, remained alone because she had been aloof, waiting and looking, but never to any avail: "Love was a mystery she had never experienced. As a young woman she had wanted to love, had felt that she ought to, but it had not come about. This lack in her was something she had grown used to and no longer thought about, but it was disconcerting, even a little shocking, to find that Marjorie was by no means beyond it" (54).

Alone in her room Letty reflects "like a drowning man" on how the events of her life could have brought her to such moment as this, when she must work up the courage to ask her landlord to quell the exuberance of his devotion. And it is at this point that Letty closes in on the realization that the quiet, ordered, dullness of her own Christianity is possibly as bankrupt as her search for love has been: "All those years wasted, looking for love! The thought of it was enough to bring about silence in the house and during the lull she plucked up the courage to go downstairs and tap—too timidly, she felt—at Mr Olatunde's door" (66). She asks Mr. Olatunde to be less noisy and disturbing, to which he responds "'Christianity is disturbing'" and asks "'You are a Christian lady?'" (66).

Finding herself unable to respond in any way except by apologizing, Letty is catapulted by the simple question into the realization that the forms of spirituality she has assumed unquestioningly are yet another example of the passive, passionless turn her life took without her noticing: "Letty hesitated. Her first instinct had been to say 'yes', for of course one was a Christian lady, even if one would not have put it quite like that. How was she to explain to this vital, ebullient black man her own blend of Christianity—a gray, formal, respectable thing of measured observances and mild general undemanding kindness to all?" (66). Her decision shortly thereafter to leave Mr Olatunde's house for Mrs. Pope's is, she knows full well, less a matter of fear or hatred of his Africanness than it is an attempt to escape the continual physical reminder that her white, middle-class Englishness has become an emotional and cultural coffin.

Eulalia, a receptionist at the office, along with Mr. Olatunde and his welcoming wife Aladura, come to embody for Letty a possible rejuvenation of a terminally ill English culture, but for those beyond hope—which she temporarily imagines herself to be—the
potential return to vitality and ebullience is too much to bear: "it was these very qualities that she feared, the noise and exuberance, all those characteristics exemplified by the black girl in the office which were so different from her own" (59). It is easier to finish this sad, lonely life in Mrs. Pope's drafty, dark, gothic house in the suburbs: "Letty withdrew, embarrassed by the crowd of smiling faces that seemed to be pressing in on her. We are not the same, she thought hopelessly" (67). Marjorie insensitively suggests that her unattached friend move into an old people's home in her district, but Letty's choice to remain in London, despite the fact that Mrs. Pope's house is no less depressing a prospect, is a sign that though she is in a deep depression she refuses to hand her life over to institutionalized decrepitude, the irrevocable final stage toward death.

In spite of this portrayal of the near pervasive bleakness of life in postmodern England once the safety nets of youth, friendship, romantic love, and middle-class security have been slashed by the onset of comfortless old-age in an uncaring even spiteful culture, Pym refuses to leave her characters or readers vagrant, either physically or emotionally. The unbending Marcia is sacrificed to her own stubborn solitude, but the characters who still retain communal impulses are, through her death, able to reinvent their relations to one another. Each is surprised to experience a strangely emotional jolt in response to their disconcertingly eccentric co-worker's hospitalization and death, for the surge of unexpected emotion brings them together and strengthens them as individuals. Letty, in particular, is "overcome by a sense of desolation, as if by Marcia's death she was now completely alone. And it wasn't as if they had been close friends" (189). Of course, Letty is also in shock from the desertion of Marjorie to the arms of her vicar, but after Marcia's funeral Letty is pulled out of her morbidity by the thought that "while poor Marcia was no longer with them she and the others were very much alive--Edwin his usual solemn self, Norman obviously in a state of some emotion, and Father G., the efficient bossy clergyman" (191). At this crucial moment of awakening Letty looks about the restaurant in which they are lunching and notices, for the first time in a long time, life and sustenance rather than death and deprivation:

Looking round the restaurant, she noticed an arrangement of artificial sweet
peas in unnaturally bright colours, a party of 'business men' at a long table,
and two smartly-dressed women comparing patterns of curtain material.
Conscious of her own aliveness, she allowed Father G. to persuade her to
choose oeufs Florentine, because it sounded attractive, while he himself had
a steak, Edwin grilled plaice, and Norman cauliflower au gratin. (192)
The vibrantly pink sweet peas may be plastic, and oeufs Florentine no more than a fancy
name for poached eggs and spinach over toast, but the ability to notice such superficial
details and appreciate the effort of beautification behind them or the capacity of hollandaise
sauce for transforming egg and veg into a gourmet dish signifies that Letty is again able to
find comfort, joy, and hope even in her circumscribed life with Mrs. Pope: "There was
something to be said for tea and a comfortable chat about crematoria" (195).

Suddenly, the limitations of life under Mrs. Pope's unwavering gaze seem less rigid
as Letty realizes that she has options. This feeling of agency becomes especially strong
after Lydell jilts Marjorie for Beth Doughty—the warden of the aforementioned "home for
retired gentlefolk" and "the efficient woman with the rigid hair-style, who poured such
generous gins, who knew the kind of food David Lydell liked and remembered his passion
for Orvieto" (206)—because Letty's presence becomes immediately necessary to her friend.
Letty turns her thoughts to her potential new life in a parish recently electrified by the
gossip of the vicar's "romantic" change of heart. But the difference this time is that she
feels that if she does agree to live with Marjorie it will be a choice made from a position of
freedom, rather than one of inevitability or desperation: "Supposing after a few months or
years Marjorie met somebody else to marry, what would happen to Letty then? In the past
she had always trailed behind Marjorie, when the two of them were together, but there was
no reason why this should always be the pattern. She decided that she would think the
matter over, not make up her mind immediately" (209).

The emotional journey that Marcia's death and Marjorie's engagement and
subsequent disappointment forces Letty to take, finally, leaves her feeling stronger and
more optimistic than she has in years: "She took a long draught of the sweet sherry and
experienced a most agreeable sensation, almost a feeling of power. She felt as Norman had
felt when he discovered that he could influence the lives of other people by deciding whether to live in Marcia’s house or not. Letty now realized that both Marjorie and Mrs. Pope would be waiting to know what she had decided to do” (217). The “various stages of death” may be everywhere apparent in the form of old classmates under subway benches and stiff rabbit corpses decaying under shrubs, but, Letty realizes and Pym affirms in the narrative’s closing sentence that, even in the shadow of inevitable death, “life still held infinite possibilities for change” (218).
CONCLUSION

BARBARA PYM, ELEANOR RIGBY, AND THE LITERATURE OF FAREWELL

Over the country depression lay like fog . . . All over the nation, families who had listened to the news looked at one another and said, ‘Goodness me,’ or ‘Whatever next,’ or ‘I give up,’ or ‘Well, fuck that,’ before embarking on an evening’s viewing of colour television, or a large hot meal, or a trip to the pub, or a choral society evening.” (Margaret Drabble, The Ice Age ’71)

Pym’s acknowledgement, in An Unsuitable Attachment, The Sweet Dove Died, and Quartet in Autumn, of bitter meaninglessness and a cold slide into maddening isolation is emotionally of a piece with the sort of social realism found in Margaret Drabble’s The Ice Age (1977) in which she depicts the undisguisable glacial void that life has so increasingly become in a Britain:

A huge icy fist, with large cold fingers, was squeezing and chilling the people of Britain, that great and puissant nation, slowing down their blood, locking them into immobility, fixing them in a solid stasis, like fish in a frozen river: there they all were in their large houses and their small houses, with their first mortgages and second mortgages, in their rented flats and council flats, and basement bedsits and their caravans: stuck, congealed, among possessions, in attitudes, in achievements they had hoped next month to shed, and with which they were now condemned to live. The flow had ceased to flow; the ball had stopped rolling; the game of musical chairs was over. Rien ne va plus, the croupier had shouted. (72)

Pym shares Drabble’s concerns about the emotional buoyancy of isolated individuals in so cold and turbulent a cultural sea, but the contrast of Drabble’s complete lack of optimism in The Ice Age with Pym’s stubborn insistence upon offering some comfort to her characters
is just as significant. And it is this counterpoint that I find useful in predicating Pym’s ontology as that of a social realist who tempers the grimness of the external world with a steadfast refusal to let go of the optimism that keeps her characters afloat even when their lives seem most doomed to loneliness and petty annoyances that threaten to become alienating hatreds.

The moral dread of what the nation and the world are becoming is not nearly so explosively fundamental to the overall narrative in Pym as it is in Drabble. Drabble interrupts the narrative of her character’s lives with news-bulletin expostulations of “the state of the nation” and concludes her novel with a pronouncement that, though Britain will “recover”, her primary female protagonist will not. However, Drabble’s earliest disquisition of doom and disenfranchisement in the English ice age segues back into the lives of her characters with an image that is not far afield from one that might be found in Pym of a disillusioned bishop on his knees in prayer:

Pity the bishop, on his knees on the cold linoleum. His love is strained, dilute, insufficient. Could even God’s love suffice this multitude?

It must be said that even the bishop cannot find it in his heart to regret that Britain has struck oil.

This is the state of the nation.” (The Ice Age 74-5)

The difference, of course, is that where Drabble sees tragedy in the incongruity of the Bishop who finds himself reluctantly thanking God for petroleum, Pym would find the moment something to smile at in an attempt to not have to give her characters over to cultural and personal demoralization.

Even forty-odd years after her earliest novels were written, Pym’s articulations of an emotional reality embedded in a trivia-conscious physical reality of mundane daily life operate on the assumption that words, plots, and characters still have the power to evoke for the reader some aspect of her or his own present moment. For instance, rather than doubting and denying the faith in life’s possibilities that Letty regains at the end of Quartet in Autumn, we expect and are expected to find relief in the small bounce out of despair. Surely Letty will continue to struggle with disappointment and depression, as will we all,
but the fact that she still has the imagination and humor to giggle at the thought of Marjorie forming a crush on the eminently unromantic Edwin or Norman is expected to resonate. Pym is a writer so immersed in a philosophy of life and a way of living that her art is less an argument for or exploration of her beliefs than it is an enactment of them, as unconsciously simplistic and immediate as it is self-consciously deprecating and vigilantly ironic.

It is significant that Letty’s aforementioned admission that “There was something to be said for tea and a comfortable chat about crematoria” does not indicate just what is soothing. The statement is a postmodern palimpsest of philosophical possibility and interpretation. It is at once a valuation of humor, a gesture of deliberate if ironic optimism, an ostrich-like denial of or hiding from mortal bleakness, and a resignation to the fact that the narrative of life and death will continue, whether one opts for a personal ending in the form of suicide, an emotionally paralyzed continuation of the status quo, or willful momentary blindness and tenuous hope.

In a 1977 *Rolling Stone* review entitled “Johnny Rotten and Margaret Drabble,” Greil Marcus equates The Sex Pistol’s then startlingly violent and blasphemous release of the singles “God Save the Queen” and “Pretty Vacant” with the prospectless despair of *The Ice Age*: “British society seems to have come to a dead end, to have turned back on itself” (17). The similarity between these two so seemingly different cultural icons is for Marcus the fact of their shared subject-matter, “the attempt of people in present-day England to live without a belief in the future”:

Certainly there are differences between Johnny Rotten and Margaret Drabble. He’s a twenty-one-year-old punk from the lower middle class, formerly employed as a rat exterminator in the London sewers; she’s thirty-eight, a celebrated and widely read novelist writing for, and mostly about, educated people in their thirties or older. But both are scared that their culture—political, economic, and aesthetic—has collapsed around them, leaving them stranded in a society that seems not only without prospects but without meaning. (17-18)
And here is the origination of my own my similarly incongruous pairing of Pym with The Beatles’s “Eleanor Rigby” in the above heading, which circles back to the assertion in my Introduction that Pym’s mood, theme, and style is somewhere between Jane Austen and Lennon/McCartney. A decade before the all-out nihilism of The Sex Pistol’s Never Mind the Bullocks and Drabble’s The Ice Age we find in Pym’s late novels an attempt to evoke both darkness and light that is similar to the modal fluctuations throughout The Beatles’s albums beginning with Revolver (1966), which begins with a critique of the welfare state (“Taxman”), moves directly into the paean in “Eleanor Rigby” to existential displacement, and then subsequently lightens the mood by returning to the love-ballad tradition (“Here, There, and Everywhere” and “Good Day Sunshine”).

I make the above equation with the hopes of connecting the up-down-up rhythm of Pym’s realism with a narrative trend noted in the title of the Winter 1996 edition of Granta: “What Happened to us? Britain’s Valedictory Realism.” Ian Jack explains in his Editorial: “As one of the judges for the 1996 Booker Prize, I was struck by how many new English novels (and new English novelists) were preoccupied with the past; not with history—they weren’t historical novels by way of research and period detail—but with the country and people that seemed to be there a minute ago, before we blinked and turned away. . . . The 1950s was a favourite period, casually and unsentimentally evoked” (8). Another key sentence of Jack’s definition is “The surface shone; the rot was underneath” which is immediately followed by his own nostalgic concluding three-sentence paragraph: “When did we say goodbye to it? Oh, it seems only yesterday. This is the literature of farewell” (8).

Of course, Pym was writing in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, and aside from the success at the very beginning and end of her publishing career, she was marginalized for her so-called nostalgic shying away from the bitter details of contemporary urban life often depicted by her contemporaries through the defilement of traditional narrative expectations. But the question I want to posit is this: Is Pym’s seeming nostalgic atemporality an example of complacent, old-fashioned conservatism based in fear and prejudice, or is it based in an utterly contemporary, validating desire to capture her version of a world that is quickly
disappearing? The latter is in my eyes most potentially productive way of reading her. For inherent in Pym’s loving valedictions to an England she sees slipping away is a farewell gesture that avoids making a judgment about just where English society seems to be headed. Thus her *de rigueur* optimistic endings allow her characters to find footholds in a disintegrating world-view which allow them, within the deliberately narrow parameters of her fictive world, to live on and die within a novelized grandfather clause of basic humanitarian decency bolstered by physical bourgeois comforts of domestic and cultural ritual.

And here I return to the basic issue of Pym’s enduring popular appeal which has so often been the source of her devaluation as a sophisticated writer of contemporary, literary novels and one so difficult to remain true to in the tradition of academic writing of which this dissertation is simultaneously an example and a very small attempt at defiance. I will conclude with Pym’s always antithetical words rather than my own hegemonically laden, inherently categorizing ones.

*Sunday 11 April [1943]*. Rupert and Helen went to Morley College to ‘pursue the arts’ leaving me with a lovely tray of breakfast and *Tristram Shandy* of which I read a little. It seems a nice inconsequential sort of book—the sort of book one would like to have written—or might even one day write. (*VPE* 123)

*9 February [1968]*. I am still going on with something, trying to make it less cosy without actually putting in the kind of thing that would be beyond my range (keep *that* and quote it in my biography, young man from Texas!). (*VPE* 245)

*9 November [1971]*. I visit the Library at LSE. Waiting down below at the enquiry desk—the rough students with long hair and strange one-sex clothes make me feel old and vulnerable.

What is wrong with being obsessed with trivia? Some have criticised *The Sweet Dove* for this. What are the minds of my critics filled with? What *nobler* and more worthwhile things? (*VPE* 260)
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