How pleasant to know Miss Pym

ROBERT SMITH

BETWEEN 1950 and 1961 Barbara Pym published six novels.[1] All enjoyed a mild success with reviewers and the public. But for nine years now no book by this writer has appeared, and the time seems suitable for a provisional assessment of her small but consistent body of work. Never commanding much attention, her books are becoming lost to sight amid the constant press of new novels of an outlook and genre very different from her own. Yet she has her enthusiasts, who each week read the reviews in the hope of finding that 'a new Barbara Pym' has been published and wonder who on earth can be brought to buy and read the often alarming and ill-mannered fiction of the present day. To these enthusiasts Barbara Pym has been a provider of the very best sort of 'books for a bad day'. This is to give a great deal of praise, but perhaps not quite enough.

Naturally there is great diversity among books chosen to solace a bad day (a day when, for example, one is feeling rather ill or the news is especially disturbing or troubles rend the household), but two characteristics distinguish all such books: they must take the reader into a different, pleasanter world, and they must make his escape easy. The present writer counts E. F. Benson's *Mapp and Lucia* books very high in this class, but when an assessment of Miss Pym is to be embarked upon, a greater name is usually invoked (sometimes apologetically, but apparently irresistibly) — that of Jane Austen. Can Miss Pym be claimed as the Jane Austen of our times? In some ways, of course, this seems presumptuous, but in other ways it is too modest since, though her canvas is small, her range and scope are considerably wider than those of Jane Austen. But the comparison remains valid. There is the same woman's view, dealing sharply but on the whole good-humouredly with the closely-observed minutiae of middle-class

[1] *Some Tame Gazelle* (1950); *Excellent Women* (1952); *Jane and Prudence* (1953); *Less than Angels* (1955); *A Glass of Blessings* (1958); *No Fond Return of Love* (1961). All were published by Cape and seem now to be out of print, though there have recently been limited reprints of the first two.

daily life, always enlivened by the needle of wit. Barbara Pym's novels are indeed, as a reviewer once wrote, 'small beer', but as the reviewer added, it is beer from an Oxford brewery.[1] It is unlikely that the taste for this has disappeared with the closing of Messrs Boots's admirable libraries, nor is this taste confined to the lady-shoppers of provincial High Streets.

Barbara Pym's world, and this is its charm, is a closed one: an enchanted world of small felicities and small mishaps. Yet it is also real and varied in theme and setting. In *Some Tame Gazelle* we are immersed in the society of a village or small provincial town; *Excellent Women* is set mainly in the inner residential parts of London — Pimlico, perhaps — and one form of middle-class society is confronted by another, the Bohemian-academic; much the same sort of confrontation occurs in *Jane and Prudence*, which combines London and the country; *Less than Angels* centres round that academic life which goes on in the heart of London unsuspected by those who do not penetrate the mysteries of Bloomsbury or the Inns of Court; *A Glass of Blessings* is London and the country again; the last, *No Fond Return of Love*, observes with an anthropological eye the ways of a cheerful Thames-side suburb. The themes are universal: love thwarted or satisfied (even fashionable homosexuality is here, just under the surface in several of the books); worldly ambition, nearly always academic ambition, and the complications which ensue; the challenge of the daily routine — and Miss Pym was first in the field in the pre-occupation with the kitchen sink, over which her female characters so often come into their own. Here is the narrator in *Excellent Women* 'coping' with the kitchen of Helena Napier, the anthropologist:

> I noticed with distaste and disapproval that the breakfast things and what appeared to be dishes and glasses from an even earlier date were not washed up. The table by the window was also crowded; there were two bottles of milk, each half-full, an empty gin bottle, a dish of butter melting in the sun, and a plate full of cigarette stubs. I felt very spinsterish indeed as I stood there, holding the burnt saucepan in my hand. (p. 153)

[1] From a review of *Jane and Prudence* in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 2 October 1953.

The delineation of character in these novels is as exact as the observation of life's small chores. Miss Pym's most notable creation is a new kind of heroine, the 'excellent woman': good aunt, good Churchwoman, informed spinster, conscientious social worker, meticulous housekeeper. The catalogue of these virtues may sound dreary, and the type, as we all know, and as the novels show, too easily inclines to bossiness. But Miss Pym's heroines are redeemed by their modesty and sensitive wit. To quote again from the narrator of *Excellent Women*, 'I was now put in my place as the kind of person who would have an oven cloth hanging on a nail by the side of the cooker' (p. 189), and again:

> 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, as if I personally had been found unworthy of a bathroom of my own. (p. 6)

These women, mending surplices, sewing on a manly button, disbursing small but effective charities, providing timely cups of tea, or just doing the washing-up, are foils to a host of others of different calibre — glamorous Prudence Bates in her tiny, fashionable flat, Helena Napier writing up her field notes on African tribes — but above all they are foils to the great (not monstrous, but half-caricatured) race of Men — bearably selfish, charmingly abstracted, unconsciously demanding, always calling for, and usually receiving from some woman somewhere, devotion and service. ' "Of course, a man must have meat," ' pronounces Mrs Mayhew, the proprietor of the tea shop in *Jane and Prudence*,[1] and in the same novel an elderly spinster comments:

> 'They say, though, that men only want *one thing* — that's the truth of the matter.' Miss Doggett again looked puzzled; it was as if she had heard that men wanted only one thing, but had forgotten for the moment what it was. (p. 70)

A passage in the last novel, *No Fond Return of Love*, illustrates neatly a difference between the sexes:

> 'Yes, after breakfast is an awkward time in a hotel,' Dulcie said. 'One has no right to exist between the hours of half past nine and twelve. So much work is going on that it makes one feel guilty.'
>
> 'I suppose women — nice women — feel guilty. Men are only irritated,' said Aylwin. (p. 221)

[1] *Jane and Prudence*, p. 30.

In form and style these novels are equally well-bred. They are of unvaried classic proportions: some 70,000 words in length, arranged in twenty to twenty-five chapters, an arresting phrase or idea reserved for the beginning and end of each. The last sentence of *Some Tame Gazelle* is particularly rewarding:

'Oh, *come*, now,' laughed the curate, and although his voice was rather weak as a result of his long illness, Belinda was overjoyed to hear that it had the authentic ring. (p. 252)

The style seems at first flat and rather featureless, like a Midland landscape of tame hedgerows and copses which only on closer acquaintance reveals its subtle charm and interest. Occasionally there are lapses into the idiom of the Woman's Page (there are too many cosy 'It so happened that's), and references to foreign literature, philosophy and other esoteric matter are sometimes awkward. But though Miss Pym is soon out of her depth, she quickly returns to the shallow placid waters of which she is mistress.

Consider, for example, her treatment of religion. Her books are indubitably 'churchy', partly in the sense that church-going frequently occurs and clergymen are among her best characters, and partly from the tacit and unproselytizing assumption that the world divides into those who do and those who do not attend their parish church. The ethos is always decently Anglican, but this too is taken for granted and no hint of doctrinal or emotional problems is intruded upon the reader. Religion, for Miss Pym's characters, involves no anguish of conscience ('social' or personal), no dark night of the soul, but decisions about what vestments should be worn on Mid-Lent Sunday, what shall be served for luncheon on Fridays in the clergy-house, who is to query that enigmatic entry in the Church accounts, and 'that rather delicate affair of the altar brasses and the unpleasantness between Miss Jenner and Miss Beard'.[1] It would be priggish and silly to exalt one approach above the other, and neither Miss Pym nor her enthusiasts are this sort of prig or fool. Her treatment of religion suggests, in fact, a rather unusually strong, though reserved, religious sense. Similarly her treatment of love's troubles and delights seems to derive from a firm emotional base. Dulcie, in *No Fond Return*, says, sadly but sensibly:

[1] *Some Tame Gazelle*, p. 64.

'People blame one for dwelling on trivialities . . . but life is made up of them. And if we've had one great sorrow or one great love, who shall blame us if we only want the trivial things?' (p. 167)

The academic world is subjected by Miss Pym to the same detached dissection as the more familiar parts of the middle-class social field. There is a revealing account in *Less than Angels* of the writing of one of those vituperative reviews in which scholars sometimes vent their ill-temper, and of its subsequent reception:

He drew a heavy line on the paper, folded the sheets and put them into an envelope. In a day or two the editor of the journal, who was a gentle patient man, would set to work to improve the English and tone it down a little. 'It is a pity,' he would say to himself, 'to have three consecutive paragraphs beginning "It is a pity" '. He might even remember that Alaric Lydgate had once been refused a grant from the reputable institution whose limited funds had been squandered to no purpose. He might then go on to ask himself whether funds can be *squandered* to no purpose, whether indeed they can be squandered to *any* purpose. Certainly, as editor, he would feel none of the exhilaration which Alaric felt on finishing his review. (p. 59)

Another passage in the same book deals with the distribution of that well-known dust-gatherer on bookshelves, the offprint of the scholarly article:

It was thought by many to be 'good policy' to send an offprint to Esther Clovis, though it was not always known exactly why this should be. In most cases she had done nothing more than express a polite interest in the author's work, but in others the gift was prompted by a sort of undefined fear, as a primitive tribesman might leave propitiatory gifts of food before a deity or ancestral shrine in the hope of receiving some benefit. (p. 63)

These novels are something more than simply books for bad days. Their acute observation of a limited social scene makes them a valuable record of their time, perhaps more valuable than anything an anthropological research team set to work in Surbiton could produce. As to art, Barbara Pym has evolved and remained close to a formula which has won her devoted readers, a small but select band, and she has made one area of life her own domain. Her works are miniatures, exquisitely, nearly perfectly, done. But beyond this, it is her wit and her sense of the ridiculous which make her books both delicious and distinguished. Above

all, they must be ranked as comic novels, but the comedy is realistic and demonstrates again and again the happiness and merriment which can be found in the trivia of the daily round — that 'purchase of a sponge-cake' about which Jane Austen felt it proper to write to Cassandra. They can be read again and again, and at each re-reading unnoticed felicities come to light. It is too soon to attempt any solemn judgement on this slender corpus, this 'sponge cake' of so delicate a taste. But, meanwhile, bad days come to us all, and we cannot anticipate their ever not coming. Let us hope that Miss Pym will begin again to help us deal with them.

Cry

Breathe
My breath
And let me
Breathe yours,
Bodies
Savouring
Phenomena,
Sifting
Passion
To the fine
Point
Of penetration,
Luminous
Obscene
Noumena,
Breath
Of my
Breath of my
Being.

NISSIM EZEKIEL