

## CLAIRE TYLEE

### **The Self and Others in 1950s England: Anthropology and the Literary Imagination in Barbara Pym's *Less Than Angels***

There are two critical clichés prevalent about the novels of Barbara Pym: that they are “comedies of manners” that resemble the novels of Jane Austen, and that to achieve this social satire, Pym employs the method of an anthropologist, i.e. dispassionate social observation, a technique which she gained through her years of working as a research assistant and editor at the International Africa Institute in London. Like most clichés, these contain grains of truth; however, by simplifying our perceptions of Pym’s writing through such readymade templates, critics have not helped us to appreciate the originality, creativity or intelligence of Pym’s work. These clichés obscure the distinctiveness of Pym’s literary imagination. I would argue that it is more insightful to place Pym’s work in the genre of the Woman’s Novel (as defined by critics such as Nicola Beauman, Olga Kenyon and Alison Light) rather than to consider it as social comedy. To be sure, the Woman’s Novel finds its roots in the achievements of Jane Austen, with her wit, moral discernment and focus on female protagonists—especially along their path to self-knowledge. However, the Woman’s Novel arose in the twentieth century when women began to benefit from secondary and higher education, and it is essentially written by, for and about well-educated, intelligent women. As Clare Hanson and Hilary Radner have demonstrated, its authors have used the Woman’s Novel to negotiate their contradictory position astride two worlds: the “feminine” world of domesticity and the “masculine” world of intellectual competitiveness.

Pym was an Oxford graduate in English literature who for nearly thirty years helped edit scholarly monographs, the academic journal, *Africa*, and over sixty volumes of the *Ethnographic Survey of Africa*. It is to underestimate her to suppose that her literary technique of ironic detachment, the aesthetic method of Flaubert, James and Joyce, is simply the result of a superficial encounter with the scientific objectivity of anthropologists and/or an attempt to emulate Jane Austen. Furthermore, her chance as a woman to study at university level was, as she would have been aware, the result of feminist campaigning to achieve equal status and opportunities for women. Her sustained if amused examination of the world of women and their response to socially constructed femininity and “the woman’s role” is clearly informed by an understanding of how patriarchal control constrained women. Pym stood astride the male-



trained social anthropologists. (These were now likely to be grammar school products such as Mark and Digby.)

Yet, however empirically based Pym's writing was, informed by a kind of detective field-work, note-taking and participant observation that seems to mimic anthropology, her writing is not pseudo-scientific social-realism. (That is, her focus is not on explaining social behaviour in terms of kinship groups, technical change or the economic power structure.) Her work is definitely opposed to that kind of scientism. On the one hand she was quizzical about what could be learned from detached observation; on the other she was interested in people's *inner* life, their spiritual state. In *Less Than Angels* people find themselves at a spiritual loss. I shall argue that *Less Than Angels* displays the limitations of objective observation in providing an understanding of human beings in general, English society in particular, or the specimen of the Englishwo/man, especially as regards their existential state. Pym's writing is intrinsically Christian. In it she demonstrates that literature can respond to people's spiritual needs, their inner life, whereas

and decorous as Austen's, Pym's central *leitmotif*, of "civilized" versus "primitive" behaviour, gestures to a more extreme savagery and irrationality latent in mid-twentieth-century British society than was to be found in Jane Austen's world (despite what D. W. Harding called its "regulated hatred").

Pym's comedy may be just as disarming but it is more ruthless than Austen's. Pym and Austen were both Christian writers. However, where Austen satirised the snobbery and religious hypocrisy of her world, Pym emphasises the male egoism and the spiritual hollowness of hers. At one point she breaks her ironic detachment and specifically quotes at length from the great passage addressed to men in Austen's *Persuasion*—"we certainly do not forget you so soon as you forget us"—to show that for some women a life of passive heartbreak had not changed much (186); literature might enable men to recognise that and take it to heart. Yet the economic independence of Catherine Oliphant, "Catty," Pym's central character in *Less Than Angels* through whose imaginative consciousness much of the novel is narrated, enables Catherine to assert a corresponding sexual independence that marks a great change in the position of women. It would not be too much to claim that Catherine's strength of character stems partly from her ability to use literature to come to terms with life. For her, literary language and imagination mediate experience. When the loss of her lover threatens despair, her intuitive grasp of religious symbolism helps her to renew her hope in life.

The complexity of Pym's project in *Less Than Angels* is mirrored by the novel's complexity of structure: it has a double plot. The two main storylines concern primarily Catherine, an eccentric writer in early middle-age who throws out her younger live-in lover, Tom Mallow, when he cheats on her, and who eventually gains herself a new man-friend with whom she has more in common; and secondarily Deirdre, the *ingénue* who first falls for Tom before being courted and won by a "more suitable" man, Digby Fox. The character of Tom links these two romance plots and he has received considerable critical attention as Pym's representative anthropologist. He is a brilliant graduate who gained a fellowship to undertake field work in Africa on kinship structures and he completes his thesis in the course of the novel. Tom is not insensitive, but he dismisses rather than cultivates his sensibility. His replacement in Catherine's affections by the older ethnologist, Alaric Lydgate, and in Deirdre's by the third-year anthropology undergraduate, Digby, indicate that Pym's acerbic treatment of Tom's self-centredness, scientific detachment and 'detrribalization' should not be taken as her whole account of contemporary anthropology. Both Alaric and Digby share Catherine's imaginative feeling for art, and Digby finally accomplishes Esther Clovis's plan for the future of British anthropology (64) by leading Deirdre out to Africa so that they can study another culture as a married couple. They will, presumably, be like the American anthropological couple, Brandon and Melanie Pirbright who "set out for the field to gather material about the married life of primitive people, giving in exchange generous information about their own, which filled the natives with delight and astonishment" (186). Pym seems more in sympathy with this generous egalitarian approach. If Tom is the hare, Digby is the tortoise. He sees himself as "worthy, painstaking and biding his time" (223) and, as Professor Mainwaring assessed him, "very conscientious and will probably make an excellent husband and father" (217). Digby shares Pym's own wit—it is he who sums Tom up as "detrribalized" (160), cracks jokes with his fellow student, Mark, and who sings an air from







details of the Mau Mau atrocities against women were concealed from the British public and Pym does not mention them. However, she does show Deirdre's Aunt Rhoda, "in common with a good many people from all walks of life" (37), avidly reading about the murder of women whose bodies had been secreted in a London house. English society is shown to be just as "primitive" and "uncivilised" as it considers African society to be.

Rhoda's newspaper is tinted rose by the stained glass window in her hallway—which image brings me back to the Kardomah café at the beginning of the novel, where Catherine saw the customers as like tourists in a church with the sunlight streaming through the stained glass. One of Pym's commentators, Michael Cotsell, has proposed that the image of peacock-worship, then prompted in Catherine's mind, "suggests both the cult of female devotion to male egoism"—the peacock being a traditional symbol of male vanity—as well as "a radiating if unperceived spiritual alternative." Although Cotsell leaves the obscure second suggestion unexplained, he provides the first with a fruitful interpretation. He offers an insightful analysis of Pym's depiction of Tom as displaying the masculine need for separateness whilst also relying on Catherine's motherliness. Part of Daphne's charm is her willing admiration for the male intellect, first of Tom and then of Digby. Her willingness to subordinate herself mirrors Esther Clovis, who devotes herself as secretary to supporting Professor Mainwaring. Nor is Catherine exempt. She romantically pictures herself as Jane Eyre, captivated by Alaric Lydgate as Rochester (who was Jane's master). Tom reciprocates by seeing Daphne and his former girlfriend, Elaine, as like faithful dogs, and Mainwaring hands Clovis the unpleasant jobs. The inequality of the typical male/female relationship where the man requires the services of a handmaiden is ridiculed by Pym when Deirdre's aunt agrees to wash the vicar's albs by hand when his wife is ill: "Why couldn't Father Tulliver send them to the laundry?" Deirdre asks (173), and Mark sarcastically describes it as a "reciprocal relation—the woman giving the food and shelter and doing some typing for him and the man giving the priceless gift of himself" (76).

The allusion to Ravenna further connects *Less Than Angels* with *Excellent Women*, and the subtextual links between the two show how Pym's imagination functioned to "radiate" the surface with an occluded spirituality. It is not only that the mosaics at Ravenna are renowned masterpieces of early Christian art by reference to which Pym ironically reveals the commercialism of twentieth-century English culture. Ravenna was also the city where Dante, in exile, completed the *Divine Comedy*. There are obvious echoes of that work in *Excellent Women*, which help explain the glimmerings in Catherine's mind in *Less than Angels*. The Kardomah café episode links to two other events. One of these took place in *Excellent Women*, when Mildred Lathbury had lunch in an enormous self-service restaurant that gave her "a hopeless kind of feeling" (73-4). It was like a nightmare where a file of people formed a long queue: "one could hardly see from one end to the other" and "one wouldn't believe there could be so many people." That epiphanic experience is emphasised by being referred to again (177), and then later she says that if she could meditate on that line of patient people it would put her in mind of her own mortality (223). This is related to her perception of the bewildered and aimless people "pushed and buffeted" at the entrance to a large store, "not knowing which way to turn" (121), and again in the rush hour at Victoria Station (151). Mildred's state of mind relates to an event later in *Less than Angels* when Catherine finds herself in a huge London eating-place, the customers lost and rudderless in the foyer. The echoes of T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland* and Dante's *Inferno* are clear. When Eliot saw the crowd flowing over London Bridge, he reflected that he had not known that "death had undone so many" (60-3), alluding to Dante's experience at the Vestibule to Hell in Canto 3 of *Inferno*: "so long a trail / of men and women I should not have



thought / that death could ever have unmade so many” (55-57). These are the apathetic souls of the lukewarm who have been buffeted by the wind of ante-Hell, those who led futile lives and, in the words of *Revelations*, blew neither hot nor cold. They were, like Tom, the uncommitted, the Hollow Men of *The Wasteland*.

It is here in *Less than Angels* that Pym makes one of the key observations of the novel, through Catherine’s consciousness: the café will supply people’s material wants, but they need a guide to the deeper or higher things in life... who was to fulfil [that need]? The anthropologist, laying bare the structure of society, or the writer of romantic fiction, covering it up? Perhaps neither, Catherine thought (194-

with his wife Deirdre, returns from Africa to give the address at Clovis's memorial service.

If Darryll Forde was the original for Professor Mainwaring, it seems likely that Edwin and Shirley Ardener inspired Pym's characters Digby and Deirdre Fox. As Edwin Ardener recalled after Pym's death, he had known her since he was a newly graduated anthropologist at London University in 1948, about to embark on fieldwork in West Africa. Edwin and his wife Shirley continued to see her regularly and would entertain her at their London flat in the mid-1950s on their return from Africa. The Ardeners became famous in feminist circles way beyond anthropology for the work they published on muted and dominant groups, which outlined a model of women's culture. They emphasised the incompleteness of androcentric models of culture and showed how women, constrained by men, have to mediate their ideas through ritual and art. That cultural expression, in the words of Elaine Showalter, can only "be deciphered by the ethnographer, either female or male, who is willing to make the effort to perceive beyond the screens of the dominant culture," for instance by decoding "feminine" euphemisms, metaphors, allusions and symbols that "mince" raw reality. Showalter suggests that feminist critics must therefore address women's writing as a "double-voiced discourse" that embodies the heritages of both the muted and the dominant: women are inside two traditions simultaneously, both the male and the female (264-50). Showalter quotes another anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, who called for "thick description" (266) to understand the meaning of cultural phenomena. For Showalter such a description would insist on gender and tradition as being among the strata that make up a text's forcefield of meaning.

In line with this theoretical proposal, I have tried to demonstrate some of the multiple strands that give force to Pym's writing. In particular, I have traced how she draws on both a male Christian poetic tradition from Dante through to Eliot, as well as on a female tradition of the genre of the Woman's Novel that enables her to yoke male-dominated academic anthropolog