

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-

dominated, scholarly world of anthropology and literature and the subordinated female world of magazines and home-making. Adroitly she steered them around the circus-ring of her novels, spot-lit by her wit.

There are casual links between all of Pym's novels so that they form a coherent imaginary world, but three of them form a special unity with regard to anthropology. Both a male and a female Africanist are central characters in *Excellent Women* (1952), and are alluded to again in *Less Than Angels* (1955). Two other anthropologists from that novel appear in her last work, *A Few Green Leaves* (1980), where a new female social anthropologist is the protagonist. I intend in this paper to concentrate on what has been regarded as the most "anthropological" of Pym's novels, *Less Than Angels*. (Muriel Schultz misleadingly claims that it, "provides a rather sly anthropology of anthropologists" (113).) *Less Than Angels* contrasts at least half a dozen anthropologists of various kinds and at various stages of their careers, linked by their association with a London research centre. As the emeritus professor of social anthropology, Peter Lloyd, has painstakingly established, the world of the Foresight Centre for Anthropological Research in *Less Than Angels* is closely based on the International African Institute in London, which he himself frequently visited as a postgraduate student in the 1950s, and where Pym worked from 1946 to 1974. Its director, Professor Mainwaring, is unmistakably a caricature of Daryll Forde, the Director of the IAI, whose name appears as the editor of *Africa*, the journal on which Pym worked. Mainwaring's assistant, Esther Clovis, is apparently partly based on the Institute's secretary, the redoubtable Beatrice Wyatt, from whom Pym was to take over as assistant editor of *Africa*. So, even by 1953 when she was writing *Less Than Angels*, Pym already had scholarly and personal knowledge of the world of British anthropology beyond the crash course of lectures which she had attended for a term at University College and the London School of Economics. This is set against the intimate, scholarly knowledge of literature displayed in her novels. The contrast between the figures of the poet (especially the novelist) and the new social anthropologist is the major theme of *Less Than Angels*.

After some apprentice work, this was the fourth of her novels to be published. In it she elaborated a theory of her own craft which self-reflexively illuminates this particular novel as well as providing a commentary on contemporary British anthropology. That was a highly ambitious project since, aware that anthropologists examine a small society in progress, she not only presents us with a depiction of a range of the English middle-classes, locating them in the city, the country and the suburbs and displaying the ways in which women were circumscribed by class- and gender-expectations, but she also shows historical awareness of how the post-war English society of the 1950s was still influenced by Edwardian values yet had been profoundly changed: "Two wars, motor cars, and newer and ever more frightful bombs being invented all the time" (211) as Mark Penfold puts it, though Rhoda Wellcome feels the social revolution more in terms of a lack of servants (82), and Digby Fox remembers that "women consider themselves our equals now... [although] men were once the stronger sex" (77). Anthropology, as a function of that society and as a pursuit by which the English middle-classes maintained their imperial power, was also changing—and not only in the way suggested by Mark, that in West Africa "the roar of the high-powered motor-car of the urbanized anthropologist" was more likely to be heard than the roar of wild beasts (214). Challenges from the empire, and the involvement of women and lower-class men, were threatening the paternalism of interwar anthropology. Peter Lloyd has indicated the accuracy of Pym's representation of the ways in which the older, descriptive ethnology pursued by amateurs, such as missionaries, colonial officers and schoolmasters, was being replaced with the new, theoretically informed analysis by young, university-

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 social science has no way to quantify this aspect of humanity and so cannot hope to interpret it. Literature trains the inner leap of the imagination. Pym herself displays that agility when she constructs the private thoughts of her male characters—a terrain where Jane Austen never ventured.

What Pym develops in *Less Than Angels* is a depiction of English middle-class culture and of how limited its imagination is. She foregrounds "Englishness" against constant references to primitive tribes and examples of the stereotyped ideas about "darkest Africa" and of the "joyous confusion" about anthropology held by many of her female characters. Meanwhile she normalises her background African characters in London, such as the Ethiopian boyfriend dancing at a party, the smart African businessmen who board a plane alongside the English anthropologist flying back to the field, and the student, Mr Ephraim Olo, who shares a flat with English student anthropologists and likes to drink Ovaltine while he types up his political articles for African newspapers. He eventually returns to become a cabinet minister in his own country. Africans have progressed from the time when they were depicted merely as "turbaned Negro servants" in a portrait of one of Professor Mainwaring's forebears. At the same time, as Janice Rossen points out, Pym defamiliarises English society by subjecting it to the scrutiny of a French anthropologist and the reflections of English anthropologists. Taken-for-granted customs of English culture become rituals, ceremonies and insignia, signifying practices that distinguish people's rank and gender. (Pym's examples of a debutante ball, men's clubs and suburban courtship practices are cases in point, but so are the fur cape and pearls of the upper-middle class lady, the umbrella and briefcase of the businessman, and the squire's shooting-stick, likened to a chief's regalia.) Yet although Charles Burkhart claims that "She has made Africa come home to suburbia and found that they are the same" (52), Pym actually uses African culture to show how repressed English society is. She does this within the explicit context of the decline of empire (163).

Pym's novel attempts to stretch her readers' imagination and ability to identify with others different from themselves. Much of her humour stems from people's lack of self-awareness or awareness of how they appear to others. I should say that what she has in common with anthropologists is this interest in "the other;" where she engages with anthropology is precisely over the issue of imaginative identification and the use of figurative language to develop it. Her use of poetic figures in *Less Than Angels* is more self-conscious than Jane Austen's and leads to a startling analysis of the kind of literary imagination which was possible for women in Pym's period. If her own writing appears on the surface to be as politely feminine

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 *La Bohème* in their squalid student digs.

The double structure enables Pym to cover both of the typical plots of the "Woman's Novel" as outlined by Olga Kenyon. On the one hand, through the first-year undergraduate Deirdre and her suburban upbringing, Pym represents "the restrictive effects of environment on a

young girl's psyche;" on the other hand, through the cultivated sensibility of Catherine, who has been reduced to writing facile articles and trite stories for women's magazines, Pym represents "the social frustrations and intimate thought processes of [a] gifted undervalued wom[a]n" (149). As Eva Figes wrote in *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970), "the male-as-norm has permeated all systems of knowledge," even though, as Olga Kenyon agrees, "man's vision of women is not objective, but an uneasy combination of what he wishes her to be and what he fears her to be" (11). However, the women-centred novel such as written by Pym challenges male autocracy, illuminates women's occluded vision of men and women, and at times reveals the anger women feel at being subordinated (13). In *Less than Angels*, the upper-middle-class Professor Mainwaring and Tom have inherited the imperial sense of their own superiority with regard to race, class and gender, that vitiated earlier anthropology. They patronise and make use of others without regard for their feelings. Catherine's cutting ("catty") rejoinder to Tom reveals just how much his indifference has wounded her:

How soothing it will be to get away from all this complexity of personal relationships to the simplicity of a primitive tribe, whose only complications are in their kinship structure and rules of land tenure, which you can observe with the anthropologist's calm detachment. (186)

From further down the social scale than Tom or Mainwaring, Digby (who shares digs with an African student) can sympathise with Esther Clovis and shows real concern for Catherine and Deirdre, especially when Tom is killed. We can tell that he will achieve the kind of rapport that Edmund Leach argues is necessary for the modern fieldworking anthropologist.

Later critics such as Hilary Radner and Clare Hanson have amplified Kenyon's analysis of the Woman's Novel by discussing the ways in which its authors display facility with intellectual discourses. I argue here that Pym displayed facility not only with the discourses of anthropology (its language and practices)—as has been amply demonstrated by critics such as Peter Lloyd—but also with the discourses of literary theory. What is more, she was able to combine this with an ethical response to both discourses in *Less than Angels*, which is witty, erudite and incisive. The discourses come together right at the beginning of the novel when Catherine is sitting contemplating her writing and its subject matter whilst gazing over a cup of stewed tea at the customers in a Kardomah self-service café. It is here that Pym produces the two related images which form the imaginative keystones of the novel.

Catherine is generally represented by critics as superficial, a hack journalist. Yet her appreciation of poetry is certainly deeper than the phrase-mongering of Mainwaring; she reads serious literature such as tragic novels by Hardy and Dostoyevsky and demonstrates her sensitivity to poetry by Arnold, Shakespeare and Vaughan. Her publication is constrained by the male editors who control women's culture and require her to be "brittle and quite witty," with a detached, unsentimental tone to her writing: "Men do know *something* about women or at least like to form their taste for them," as she says drily (129). Nevertheless, she has a creative imagination which responds to Coleridge's distinction between "fancy" and "imagination." At first apparently "fanciful," that is, passively subject to a vivid and amusing association of incongruous ideas, she is also able to actively recreate her perceptions in new and vital ways by means of what Coleridge calls the "secondary imagination," which poets employ. I believe it is not too much to suggest that Pym herself used her imagination in the way that Wordsworth labelled "Reason in her most exalted mood" and that Coleridge identified as the inward beholding of spiritual realities unavailable to the mechanical, rational Understanding of physical

science. It is not by chance that Pym responds to Coleridge's analysis. They were both Christians countering religious scepticism. It was Coleridge who originated in English the idea of the "I-Thou" relationship between man and man, and man and God: "There can be no I without a Thou." By imaginatively categorising Tom as "detrified" Pym demonstrates that Tom's self-alienation is a function of his alienation from others, especially his family (or "tribe") and by the time he returns to Africa he has also lost faith in anthropology.

The two images which occupy Catherine's mind while she is musing in the cafeteria at the beginning of *Less Than Angels* help to interpret Tom's state and, by implication, provide a critique of the kind of anthropology he is able to pursue, being the kind of person he is. They are very rich images. Their range of significance, first indicated in *Excellent Women*, is gradually elaborated in the course of the novel. Part of their power comes from the humorous twist which Catherine gives them for, as we know from Freud, jokes betray hostility. The masking of "primitive" emotions such as hostility, as was required by English bourgeois culture, is one of the targets of Pym's satire of Englishness in the novel.

One of the images concerns the line of office-workers laden with food trays who ignore the peacock mosaics on the walls of the café as they look for somewhere to sit down. They remind Catherine of English tourists shambling past mosaics in a church in Ravenna. This impression is strengthened by the sunlight streaming through the café's stained glass windows. She wonders, absent-mindedly, why the tray-carriers do not bow their heads or offer their food up, but realises that "the cult of peacock worship, if it had ever existed, had fallen into disuse" (7). This wry reflection is work for Catherine, who draws inspiration for her stories from everyday life. Yet, as she reflects in the second major image, everyday life is sometimes too raw or tough for magazines; her romantic stories make it more palatable, just as she might make meat tender by mincing it. The quasi-anthropological reference to a primitive cult is linked to her idea about the transforming power of literature through the motif of food and meals that is to reappear throughout the novel. For instance, there is a marked contrast between the conventional English meals provided in Deirdre's home, the cheap, bland food of public eating-places—such as mince on toast with carrots (169)—and the creative eclecticism of Catherine's cooking. Her seasoning of a *boeuf la mode* with a bay leaf and a real calf's foot is bound to remind the common woman reader of Mrs Ramsay's *boeuf en daube* for the dinner-party in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. It is women's role to prepare food and serve tea, to organise the social occasions or rituals which bind people into a community. Thus women turn nature into culture, one of the basic processes of anthropological study. Tom's failure to value Catherine's creative imagination is symptomatic of his limited vision as an anthropologist.

In the next chapter we find Catherine literally using a mincer to prepare the ingredients for a risotto. Here Pym elaborates the metaphor. Catherine has personified her mincer by calling it "Beatrice." Although the name might have been a private joke for those who knew the IAI and Beatrice Wyatt, for the common reader it recalls the chaste lady whose purity inspired Dante's *Commedia*. Catherine's muse is less ladylike. "Beatrice" is a graceful name belying the fact that Catherine sees the mincer as fierce and ruthless, with strong teeth for cutting and grinding. In fact it reminds her of the bold carvings of African gods that Tom had brought back, which have "evil expressions" and "aggressively pointed breasts," and that she shuts away in a cupboard (29). Pym had already drawn attention to such "nasty malevolent-looking things, some with dusty unhygienic raffia manes" in *Excellent Women*, where Mildred, who regards them as junk, has to take one such "evil-looking image" belonging to Helen Napier on the bus. She feels awkward when people stare and giggle as she sits it in her lap "trying vainly to cover it with my

gloves and handbag” (166). It does not take Freud to gloss this episode of a spinster genteelly attempting to disguise sexuality with her ladylike accoutrements while actually drawing attention to it.

It is striking that Catherine’s disturbing fetish has a female name and the female characteristic of breasts, despite being fierce, aggressive and ruthless. It suggests that the real work of women’s writing has a pitiless ferocity and assertive physicality not usually associated with feminine culture. That was not normally admitted at all in polite society. For instance, Deirdre’s maiden-aunt Rhoda thinks euphemistically in terms of “‘the experience of marriage,’ a vague phrase which seemed to cover all those aspects which one didn’t talk about” (36). Similarly, when Tom’s sister, Josephine, supposes in the final chapter that Tom’s African carvings would be “very crude stuff... not the kind of thing one would want to have in one’s house,” Catherine agrees: “Some of them are positively *rude!*” (253). This links to Minnie Foresight’s taking exception to an academic article as *obscene* (95). The article concerned tribal initiation ceremonies with an account of behaviour and a rough translation of songs which she found “most shocking;” she was “deeply disturbed” by the “unpleasant details” (93).

Thus in *Less than Angels* Pym uses anthropology to indicate the “primitive” or obscene, which in the 1950s was usually censored in polite English society. Remember that D. H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was still banned under the Obscene Publications Act. Alison Light, discussing the Woman’s Novel but specifically Daphne Du Maurier’s late novels published contemporaneously between 1946 and 1957, argues that at that time “the idea of sexual freedom was too fraught with anxiety about social place... to be imaginable.” The word “mince” figuratively indicates the ways in which language was used decorously in the 1950s to disguise what might be found offensive, to mask it. “Mincing” covers a range of behaviours from conventional restraint to the affected delicacy and daintiness of Deirdre’s family home, with its lace table-mats (83) and dressing-table duchesse-set embroidered with crinoline ladies (248). Catherine may be less conventional than other women and find such frippery restrictive, but she still tends to glamorise reality and not only in her romantic fiction.

For the metaphor also extends to the way in which Catherine’s romantic fancy minces the tough reality of Tom’s death in Africa as “a noble way to die... fighting for an oppressed people’s freedom against the tyranny of British rule” (234). In this way she comforts herself not only for his death but also for the despair he had expressed over his life. Mark disillusiones her rather brutally: “He got involved with the crowd purely by accident... he just happened to be there” (234). Mark will not mince matters; he refuses to let her believe Tom was “a kind of Lawrence of Arabia figure—so very far from the truth” (235). Pym has pulled away the curtain of glamour that lies over “darkest Africa” in Middle England and that comforts Middle Englanders for their lack of interest in other people’s lives. She describes suburbia as a cosy, decorative place that stifles imagination, but she also indicates “the dreadful things in the world” that lie behind it (40-1). As Alaric Lydgate reflects, “life was very terrible whatever sort of front we might put on it, and only the eyes of the very young or the very old and wise could look on it with a clear untroubled gaze” (57). Television and radio are used to drug the mind rather than to gain understanding of people *not* like oneself (42). Nevertheless, newspapers are read.

There were two sensational news-items in the mid-1950s: the Mau Mau terror campaign in Kenya for political independence from Britain, and the trial of the serial killer, John Christie, who hid the bodies of his female victims around his house. (His conviction influenced the change in legislation regarding the death penalty in Britain, for he was found guilty of a murder for which Timothy Evans had earlier been hanged after Christie gave evidence against him.) Full

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 (194-5).

Certainly the trivial kind of romantic fiction Catherine produces will provide no guide, since she is spiritually bewildered herself. Nor will any help come from an anthropologist such as Tom, nor from the vicars we encounter in the novel. But, inspired by Catherine’s savage muse, the primitive urges released by her relinquishing Tom, accepting his death and taking up a new relation with Alaric, seem to guide her into a more authentic life. By experimentally wearing his African masks, Alaric explores the self behind the social front. The new passion between Alaric and Catherine is associated with the primitive rituals of bonfire night that commemorate the burning of Guy Fawkes at the stake—first a destruction of the past and then a wild, celebratory dance. Catherine is finally seen through the uncomprehending eyes of Rhoda as a parodic fertility goddess, her arms full of rhubarb. It is only on the surface that Pym may seem to be producing traditional romantic fiction or social comedy for female readers. Part of her insight in *Less Than Angels* is that an empathetic anthropology might reveal what is repressed in so-called civilised society: the primitive self that blows both hot *and* cold, passionately committed.

Such an empathetic, imaginative anthropology might also have enabled male anthropologists to study women and women’s culture, which were also repressed in the 1950s. Tom, being dismissive of Catherine’s responses, just as he devalues his mother and childhood sweetheart, has shut himself out from a fundamental part of his own culture. The “functional interdependence of all aspects of culture” was axiomatic to the founding father of British social anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski. This obviously entails that men and women are interdependent, men’s culture is indissoluble from women’s—and cannot be fully understood independently (a point commented on sardonically by Malinowski’s *protégée*, Audrey Richards when she was sent to the field to study women’s culture). The correlative of this interdependence is that male and female anthropologists will need to work in partnership, an idea promoted by Esther Clovis in Pym’s novels. It also underscores Clovis’s scepticism with regard to celibacy for anthropologists.

The importance of women’s culture is stressed in *Less Than Angels* after Tom dies. Catherine might have become “detrribalized” and alienated like Tom, since she had lost all her family and her first love (presumably in the war). However, she has easy access to the community of women that constitutes her “tribe.” When Catherine first met Deirdre’s mother and aunt they were daunted by her status in the masculine world of publishing; she put them at their ease by discussing recipes and home-made cakes. Small-minded they may be, but after Tom’s death they take her in and give her the consolation, stability and comfort that she had sought in vain from the male-dominated Church. Digby is shown to have access to this “feminine” world through his closeness to his mother: he is not embarrassed to discuss chip-making, attend church, pour tea, read light fiction, or to offer emotional sympathy and support—all activities associated with women. Significantly, in later novels it is Professor Digby Fox who,

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

If Darryll Forde was the original for Profesor 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 anthropology together with the popular female culture of dress-making and table-setting. I should like to give the last word to Edwin Ardener who, although not a literary critic, said most perceptively of Pym's work that it was "far beyond our time" in its portrayal of the "strange unreliability that respected figures show in her novels," and in its "perception of disturbing chasms beneath the social surface." He was hinting that, although Pym's work of the 1950s seemed decorous, it was obliquely a forerunner of the rebellious feminist writings of the 1960s' Women's Liberation Movement pioneered by radicals such as Eva Figes, Germaine Greer and Margaret Atwood.