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Excellent Woman

Shirley Hazzard

As we cryptically say 'Proustian' or 'Jamesian', we may now say 'Barbara Pym' and be understood instantly. Only a writer with a strong original view – an implacable view, one might say – can do that for us. Having read Barbara, one cannot recast one's consciousness in the pre-Pym mould: what did one do, pre-Pym, with those observations and imaginings to which she has given voice and form?

I have the impression that poetry formed her. Poetry flows through her books – not only in outright quotations, but in suggestions, in allusions concealed not merely for the appreciative but for the loving. She is herself the poet of the lonely, the virtuous, the ironic; of the unostentatiously intelligent and witty; of the angelically self-effacing, with their diabolically clear gaze. Nothing escapes such persons; and they escape nothing.

She understood those who measure out life in coffee-spoons; and she knew, too, how they carefully count the spoons when the company has departed. She knew how dread of change can act as a brake on existence, can become an existence in itself: the lament of a transferred bureaucrat about his new office – that 'different pigeons come to the windows' (*Excellent Women*, p. 71) – is perhaps her most enviable line.

'The truth is so rare', said Emily Dickinson, 'it's delightful to tell it.' Barbara Pym's delight in telling it is what gives her work its largeness. Magnanimous, merciful, she yet could not tell a lie. Excellent woman.