Novelist as scholarly editor, late 20th-century

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Barbara Pym (1913-80), who wrote eleven novels of gentle social satire, and has her place in the *Oxford Companion to English Literature,* had a day job. 'For over twenty-five years [from 1946 – she] was in charge of the publications of the International African Institute (IAI). In any one year she would edit and see through the press four full-length monographs, two volumes of seminar papers, two or three volumes of the Ethnographic Survey of Africa and one volume of the Linguistic Survey, not to mention four issues of the journal *Africa*'. [1] Her assistant, Hazel Holt, pays tribute: 'She was a capable and conscientious editor'.[2]

One of Pym's novels opens with 'a learned conference' at which an editor is to give a lecture titled, 'Some problems of an editor'.[3] In *A Very Private Eye*, the published volume of extracts from her diaries and letters, Pym refers to many of these problems in her won working life. They include 'trying to avoid having *two* rather dull articles together, and nothing to put in "News and Notes" but endless Conferences and new African Studies Centres springing up in the most unlikely places'; offending somebody by leaving out an account of their Conference; 'everything late, proofs not coming, dreadful volumes of seminar papers to get ready for press'; 'An excessive number of books on Africa coming out and the April number of the journal about to go to press'; people who don't send in their reviews ('I almost hate [them] ... and I have my own private black list in which it is very terrible to be'); the selection of book reviewers and judging whether they are 'quick and reliable'; and bibliographies about Africa 'getting so enormous that the quarterly one we publish in *Africa* is crowding out original work, such as articles and even book reviews'.[4]

All these problems are depicted in her novels, where we meet several editors and the contributors to their journals – predominantly in *An Academic Question*, a novel that turns on –issues of 'academic rivalry in learned journals', including proper acknowledgement, citation, plagiarism, and priority in publication.[5] These are matters taken most seriously by the academics: Alan Grimstone, an author who has abstracted and drawn on a manuscript he should not have seen, uncertain how to replace it and conceal his having had it, reacts to his wife, Caro's suggestion that they 'just burn it' with real shock: 'It is vital material and must be available for other scholars now'. Caro comments, 'I was interested to observe that his scruples were academic rather than moral.'[6] A letter from Pym to Robert Smith discloses that the idea for this novel was inspired by a genuine academic wrangle in *Africa*. [7]

Editors

The editor in *An Academic Question* is Rollo Gaunt, 'a professor at one of our greater universities'.[8] In a letter accepting Alan's article, he refers to 'a few "minor verbal changes" he had felt obliged to make .. he took it that Alan would have no objection to these revisions ...'.[9] Caro reacts -- `Surely he ought not to want to make "verbal changes" -- you write much better than he does, if this letter's anything to go by'. When a contributor demands that publication be held up while he writes a rebuttal to Alan's article, Rollo disagrees, declaring, `After all, I *am* the editor'.[10] Near the end of the novel Caro asks Alan about Rollo's relationship with that contributor.[11] Alan replies, `An editor must be all things to all men'. She protests, `That seems to give him and his world an exaggerated importance', but then considers `that for some people, and that included us, it *was* of great importance. In the academic world what you published and where was about the most important thing there was.'

Writing a letter to Rollo intended for publication, Alan is `absorbed by the niceties of the problem' of how to address him.[12] `"Dear Sir" was out of the question, for Rollo Gaunt was no stranger to him ... did he know him well enought to call him by the diminutive "Rollo"? Apparently nobody ever used his full name -- Roland -- and the old-fashioned "My dear Gaunt" was possible, but that might give the impression that Alan was thinking too little of himself, was being unnecessarily humble. It seemed to be a matter of some delicacy.'

Pym's own position regarding the IAI journal was that of assistant editor. With what glee she must have given Miss Foy, at the conference to discuss scholarly niceties of proof-reading, bibliography and indexing, the comment on Aylwin Forbes, `Of course, the journal he edits is fortunate in having an exceptionally able assistant editor'.[13] This assistant editor is mentioned again as sending Aylwin material for the January issue of his journal -- at which he `brings his fist down on the table, and hears himself saying aloud words that normally one only sees written. "The Editor's decision is final", he declared. "No review shall exceed a thousand words"'.[14]

A less impressive assistant editor is Cressida in *An Academic Question*, described by Alan as `rather a stupid' one who has messed up one of his diagrams[15] -- before he tells his wife that he has in fact had an affair with her. Caro visits the editorial office to confront Cressida, finding it in a small house in a mews off Gray's Inn Road.[16] Inside, `A scene of chaos met my eyes. A large table was covered with piles of books, typescripts and galley proofs, some of which had slipped to the floor. Trails of printed labels were festooned over chairs and hanging from bookcases and bulldog clips on the back of the door. In the middle of it all, acting out the cliché of "wringing her hands", stood a tall blonde girl with a rather horsey, well-bred face and untidy hair like a lion's mane'. Caro's response to this scene is to offer, `Perhaps I could help you tidy things up a bit'.

Problems of an editor that appear in the novels include dealing with contributors who are motivated by malice and envy, such as Alaric Lydgate, writing savage reviews: `The fact that he had not been able to produce an original work himself was perhaps responsible for his harsh treatment of those who had.' [17] `In unfavourable reviews it is sometimes customary for the reviewer to relent towards the end, to throw some crumb of consolation to the author ...' Pym comments, noting Alaric's lack of such mitigation. One can feel her sympathy for the editor of the journal for which Alaric writes -- `a gentle patient man [who] would set to work to improve the English and tone it down a little ... As editor, he would feel none of the exhilaration which Alaric felt on finishing his review'.[18] He realizes too that Alaric had once been refused a grant from the institution that published the book in question.

Alaric himself takes a jaundiced view of editors, telling a fellow anthropologist, who has `a few articles nearly finished', `The editors will rewrite them -- you must be prepared for that, they are quite unscrupulous you know. Even *I* have trouble with them sometimes.' [19]

Proofreading

Piers Longridge in *A Glass of Blessings* works as a proof-reader to a firm of printers specializing in the production of learned books in French and Portuguese,[20] which he himself calls, `menial work, really,[21] and tells a story of `raising a number of irritating Portuguese orthographical queries which are practically insoluble ... I expect several people will be cursing the printers' readers and their queries before the week is out'.[22] His sister comments, `It seems such a nasty job; it seems to bring out the worst in you'. Pym offers another most unflattering picture of a proof-reader in Piers' colleague Miss Limpsett. `Her grey hair was awry as if she had been running her fingers through it, and there was ink on her fingers. Her face was haggard ... she gathered up a long slippery bundle of galley proofs, seeming to clasp them to her bosom.'[23] Piers explains that after suffering years of tyranny looking after her scholar-father Miss Limpsett had found `this had given her the means of earning a better living than she could have as a servant or companion. Now she gets her own back by raising obscure queries which drive the authors into a frenzy. But the printers' readers must get their own back somehow'.[24]

We see Alan Grimstone correcting proofs of his own article, when Caro has to `share his anxiety over diagrams and groans over printer's errors'.[25] Crispin Maynard complains, `It bores me so much now, reading things in manuscript or galley proofs, awkward slippery things. I'm getting to the age when I prefer to read things decently in print'.

Prudence Bates works in the office of a `vague cultural organization' where `it would really be difficult to say what any of them actually did'; but she does take `a bundle of proofs

and a typescript from a wire tray, and [begin] to apply herself to them'.[26] After borrowing a tin of Nescafé to make coffee for the only man in the office, she `returned to her proofs with the feeling of having done something more worthwhile than emending footnotes and putting in French accents'.[27] Prudence's next romance seems to start over a bundle of galley proofs, after Mr Manifold complains that she has written up his notes incorrectly. He `sat down by Prudence and together they discussed the corrections that would have to be made ... Prudence assumed an interested tone and looked up into his clear hazel eyes as if she understood every word he was saying'.[28]

Indexing

Proof-reading is sometimes bracketed with indexing in Pym's novels. Mildred Lathbury asks of the wife of the President of a Learned Society, `Didn't she even do the index or proofreading for one of his books? You know what it often says in a preface or dedication -- "To my wife, who undertook the arduous duty of proof-reading" or making the index'.[29] Everard Bone `fetched a bundle of proof sheets and typescript from the desk', telling Mildred `It's quite simple, really. All you have to do is see that the proof agrees with the typescript ... And perhaps you could help me with the index too? Reading proofs for a long stretch gets a little boring. The index would make a nice change for you.' [30] These two combined tasks may even entail a third: Dulcie Mainwaring `had built up a useful reputation as a competent indexer and proof-corrector, the sort of person who could even do a little mild "research" in the British Museum or the libraries of learned societies'.[31]

Hazel Holt tells us of the indexing at the IAI, `Authors of monographs usually made their own indexes (or their wives or girl-friends and once, gloriously, the author's mother)'[1] -- which would account for the dedication quoted above, and the references to the `thankless task' of indexing (above, and Dulcie to Viola: `You'll get some kind of acknowledgement in the foreword ... Something about your having undertaken the arduous or thankless -- thought I hope it won't be that -- task of compiling the index'.[32] The indexes for the Ethnographic Survey of the IAI, the Seminar volumes and the cumulative, annual indexes for *Africa* were done by Pym. Her years as an indexer show when John Challow, on first meeting Ianthe Broome in the library, makes the joke that indexers get so tired of hearing -- `"These card indexes -- or should one say indices? I never know." He laughed ...'[33]

Other issues dealt with as `some problems of an editor' include acknowledgements, citation and footnotes. There are particular problems concerned with anthropological journals, such as their article titles. `One did not joke about the titles of articles in learned journals, as I knew to my cost', observes Caro.[34] Ianthe is wiser: when she asks Rupert Stonebird for the title of his article, and he tells her `The implication of jural processes among the Ngumu: a structural dichotomy' she just `turned her head away as if she were in pain or distress'.[35] The sponsor of one Learned Society takes exception to an article in its journal on tribal initiation ceremonies `with rough translation of the songs they sing', as being obscene. `We must remember that our patroness is not an anthropologist', observes Professor Mainwaring.[36]

Offprints

Pym writes of offprints, `These single articles, detached from the learned journals in which they have appeared, have a peculiar significance in the academic world. Indeed, the giving and receiving of an offprint can often bring about a special relationship between the parties concerned in the transaction. The young author, bewildered and delighted at being presented with perhaps twenty-five copies of his article, may at first waste them on his aunts and girl friends, but when he is older and wiser he realizes that a more carefully planned distribution may bring him definite advantages.' Many offprints are presented to Esther Clovis, `a kind of caretaker in the new research centre' of a Learned Society,[37] `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'.[38] Rupert Stonebird considers distributing his like Christmas cards, then hesitates, feeling `like the poet with his nosegay of

visionary flowers: "That I might there present it -- O! to whom?"'.[39] Alan Grimstone describes Crispin Maynard as `distributing largesse' in handing out offprints of his last article.[40] After Viola Dace's romance with Aylwin Forbes has ended and she is leaving to marry another, Dulcie finds in Viola's wastepaper basket, `not even decently torn up, was a signed off-print of one of Aylwin Forbes's articles, just cast out with the other rubbish' -- a sure indication of the end of the affair.[41]

Learned Societies

Pym's real-life journal, *Africa,* and *Man* of her *Excellent Women*,[42] were both published by Learned Societies. Pym delightfully mocks such societies:

`It is often supposed that those who live and work in academic or intellectual circles are above the petty disputes that vex the rest of us, but it does sometimes seem as if the exalted nature of their work makes it necessary for them to descend occasionally and to refresh themselves, as it were, by squabbling about trivialities.' Esther Clovis `had formerly been secretary of a Learned Society, which post she had recently left because of some disagreement with the President', believed to be `something to do with the making of tea ... Voices had been raised and in the end Miss Clovis had felt bound to hand in her resignation.'[43] Escorting Mildred to a Learned Society meeting, Rockingham Napier warns her, `The papers will be long and the chairs hard'.[44] At a conference, recognizing the name on a badge as `that of the librarian of quite a well-known learned institution', Dulcie `instinctively drew back a little, unable to reconcile such eminence with this jolly woman serving out the soup'.[45]

Festschrifts

In a letter to Philip Larkin, Pym records the presentation of a Festschrift to Daryll Forde, the Director of the IAI, on his Professorial retirement from University College London.[46] Her fictional Everard Bone proposes a Festschrift for the 70th birthday of Professor Felix Mainwaring, and Miss Clovis and Miss Lydgate anticipate the work of producing this: `turning over the names of those who should be asked to contribute and, almost as important, those who should not. Everard Bone would perhaps edit it himself; Miss Clovis would "do the work", as she put it, rounding up and bullying the contributors and harrying the printers ... perhaps they could even think out an arresting title, the sort of thing that might make people buy it, in the hope that it was something new instead of a ragout of scraps which the contributors had had lying around for years and never done anything about'.[47] Here is true editorial insight!

As well as these fictional portrayals of chaotic editorial offices, vainglorious editors, helpless assistant editors, deliberately exasperating proof-readers, indexers as drudges, causing much amusement to the cognoscenti, surely there is also editorial nostagia generated here, with the `long slippery bundles of galley proofs' and `trails of printed labels were festooned over chairs', wives participating in professional tasks, piles of printed offprints -- no computers, no email, no internet, no ejournals ... a splendid portrayal overall of a bygone scholarly editorial era.

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– *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* Vol. 37.2 pp 119-130, 2006