

Not a Bit of Fish to Be Got Today : Food as a Reflection of Social Context in Jane Austen and Barbara Pym

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This is the third offering in a continuing series of treatments of issues raised by the work of a significant pair of novelists of manners, two of the greatest masters of the form, Jane Austen and Barbara Pym. While not the final projected work in this series, this is the final discussion in these pages and rounds out our treatment of the role of food in the works of each.

The original inspiration for these two treatments of food in Austen and Pym came from the comment in E. M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* that food in fiction plays only a social role. It must be granted that Forster intended for readers to disagree with him. Even with minimal thought on the matter, his comment is a rather 'soft target'. However, this seems particularly true for the novel of manners in which social behavior is the primary frame of the action. In our previous discussion, we dealt with the relationship of food to character (P & C, 2004). In this discussion, we turn our attention to the relationship of food to the social, cultural and economic context surrounding the novels of these two writers.

Before attacking this second topic, we should make explicit reference to the difference in these topics. The former, food and its relationship to character, can be discussed solely in terms of the world created within a particular work of fiction. By contrast, the topic of this discussion must, by definition, look at the 'real' world that surrounded the creation of any particular piece of fiction. Of course, in the case of both topics, the life experiences of the writer are germane, as these experiences define, to some extent, the dimensions of the imaginary world created in a novel. The late Carol Shields, herself a much celebrated novelist, brought a writer's sensibility to her engaging biography

of Austen. In the context of a different issue, Shields raises a key question, which, according to her, “unfolds to reveal that larger problem of the relation of fiction to the period in which it was written—does a novel help explain the times or do the times illuminate the novel?” (S, p.169).

We make no claim to answer that question. Whichever direction one attempts to resolve it, however, we would argue that comedies of manners provide one of the richest sources of material from which to extract interesting details about the life and times in which they are written. In the other direction, studying the period provides fodder for the investigation of the novels. The focus of comedies of manners on social details coupled with the fact that the settings of such stories are almost always ‘contemporary’ with their composition makes them an ideal target for study in both directions.

There is plenty of discussion of the extent to which aspects of experience on the one hand, and people they knew on the other, worked their way into plot and characterization for both these writers. For interesting treatments of this topic, see Spence (2003) in the case of Austen, and Burkhart (1987) in the case of Pym. Spence works back and forth between the events of Austen’s life and the events of her fiction to illuminate the question of how Austen became the writer she was. Burkhart draws uniquely on his own friendships with three people who were among the most significant relationships in Pym’s life, her sister, Hilary, co-worker and literary executor, Hazel Holt, and long time friend and correspondent, Robert Liddell, to comment on Pym’s fictional world.

In addition, it has long been a practice of analysis, criticism and biography to weigh in on the question of whether there are autobiographical elements in any novel or body of work that is the target of analysis. In the case of these two writers, the evidence suggests that Pym was more inclined than Austen to use incidents that can be traced to her own experience. However, it can be argued that neither used such material as a means of self-justification or to work through

layers of personal psychology, but rather to turn a keen eye and ironic cast of mind on the worlds they inhabited and the worlds they created. Shields notes the rather peculiar absence of the spiritual from Austen's work, given that she was the daughter, sister and kinswoman of clergymen and, by all contemporary accounts, devout.

Nor did she use much of the extraordinary dramatic material that was immediately available to her. Tact, and tenderness for her sister, may have kept her from creating a fiancé who dies of yellow fever shortly before his wedding. Nowhere in her novels is there a clergyman (like her father) who also keeps a school, one of whose pupils, Lord Lymington, exhibited dramatically disordered psychological symptoms. Nor is there any sideways reference to the extraordinary adventures of her cousin Eliza and of Eliza's mother, Philadelphia. (S, p.69).

Also missing is any incident at all like the arrest, imprisonment, trial and acquittal of her aunt, Jane Leigh-Perrot, for stealing a piece of lace from a shop in Bath.

With the exception of *Some Tame Gazelle*, the first of her novels to be published, Pym did not consciously create characters taken directly from her life. An interested reader would do well to mine Burkhart for more details of the interface between Pym's life and her literary efforts as well as the world view reflected there. Within a few years of Pym's death in 1980, Hilary Pym and Hazel Holt edited a kind of autobiography, *A Very Private Eye*, comprising material from Pym's diaries, letters, and notebooks connected by commentary from both the editors. They quote from a 1934 diary entry.²

Sometime in July I began to write a story about Hilary and me as spinsters of fiftyish. Henry and Jock and all of us appeared in it. I sent it to them and they liked it very much. So I am going on with it and one day it may become a book.

This was Some Tame Gazelle, 'my novel of real people'. It was, in fact the only one of her novels whose characters were taken directly from

life: Belinda was Barbara herself, Harriet was Hilary, Henry was Henry Harvey, Agatha was Alison West-Watson, Lady Clara Boulding was Julia Pakenham, John Akenside was John Barnicot, Dr Nicholas Parnell was Robert Liddell, Edith Liversidge was Honour Tracy and Ricardo Bianco was Count Roberto Weiss. (VPE, p. 11).

Just as it is truly remarkable that Jane Austen could create some of her most beloved characters, Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, in her early 20s, it is remarkable that at age 21, Barbara Pym would embark on creating a portrait of herself and other young people she knew when they had reached their 50s. The Bede sisters of *Some Tame Gazelle* became even more autobiographical in retrospect as their domestic arrangements came to resemble the life Barbara and Hilary shared after 1946, when they had homes together, first in London and then in the Oxfordshire village of Finstock.

The remainder of this discussion concerns just such 'domestic arrangements' in the form of reflections on selected references to food in both writers and their connection to the situation in the societies that surrounded both writers.

Food and the Market

Both writers lived and worked at times of social and economic change in England. As Austen lived and wrote, the supply of food in England was just beginning to be subject the influences of a market-based distribution system.

Hers was a period of rapid urbanization. London surpassed a population of 1,000,000 in 1800—no wonder Lydia and Wickham could be so well concealed there. Obviously, such a metropolis could not exist without a system for marketing food on a large scale, and that system was in place for the largest urban centers by the end of the 18th century. According to Oddy,

reliance on the marketplace grew not only as the towns expanded but also to meet the needs of the semi-rural but commercialized communities... and market towns... with an increasing number of areas where local food production could no longer meet demand, it became necessary for the bulk of the population in Britain to obtain their food supplies through a commercial marketing system at a very early date. (O, p.252).

The self-contained, rural-based economic unit was disappearing during the time Austen wrote. Bracketing Austen's lifetime, food prices were also on the rise, beginning in the 1760s and continuing through the end of the Napoleonic wars. We have no less an authority for this than Mrs. Bennet, who may have been a very silly woman, but clearly knew what was and was not available for her table. The following conversation from early in *Pride and Prejudice* illustrates the point as well as having given us a title for this discussion.

'I hope, my dear,' said Mr. Bennet to his wife, as they were at breakfast the next morning, 'that you have ordered a good dinner today, because I have reason to expect an addition to our family party.'

'Who do you mean, my dear? I know of nobody that is coming I am sure, unless Charlotte Lucas should happen to call in, and I hope my dinners are good enough for her. I do not believe she often sees such at home.'

'The person of whom I speak, is a gentleman and a stranger.' Mrs. Bennet's eyes sparkled. -- 'A gentleman and a stranger! It is Mr. Bingley I am sure. Why Jane--you never dropt a word of this; you sly thing! Well, I am sure I shall be extremely glad to see Mr. Bingley. --But--good lord! how unlucky! there is not a bit of fish to be got to-day. Lydia, my love, ring the bell. I must speak to Hill, this moment.' (P&P, I, *xiii*).³

The passage suggests first that a "good dinner," as contrasted with what in Austen is sometimes referred to as a "family dinner," would include fish in addition to the more normal red meat and possibly fowl. Several

factors argue for the availability of fish through some kind of market system. The setting is Hertfordshire, which has only three or four minor streams. The scene takes place in November, when any local streams would be at a rather low rate of flow in any case. Mrs. Bennet uses the verb "get" and her use of "today" suggests that the lack of fish is not seasonal or weather related, but specific to the day, which we know from Mr. Collins's letter is Monday. For all her silliness, we may be sure that Mrs. Bennet knows which days fish may be had in Meryton, the nearby market town. Further, that her first response is to ring for the housekeeper, shows a firm grasp of her own domestic arrangements (regardless of what we may be told about her ideas of economy). Supplies of fish no doubt reached Meryton from London over the 25-30 miles of "good road" mentioned elsewhere by Mr. Darcy. This Austen work contains her only mention of fishing as a genteel pastime. However, it is also in connection with Mr. Darcy and the stream on his mighty estate at Pemberley, access to which he offers to Mr. Gardiner. There is no evidence, as the foregoing discussion suggests, that Mr. Bennet's estate at Longbourn had the ability to provide fish for the table.

The dinner in question is to welcome Mr. Collins, cousin, clergyman, next in the entail of the Longbourn estate, and as Elizabeth later comments, "one of the stupidest men in England." The dinner and the concern over its planning find a parallel in a dinner given by Emma Howick in Pym's last completed novel, *A Few Green Leaves* (1980). The meal was mentioned in our previous piece on food and character. Because the main guest is her neighbor, Adam Prince, a former Anglican priest, now a convert to Roman Catholicism, Emma wonders if fish is required for the Friday dinner party. No one in her circle is exactly sure if that is still required of Catholics, but her mother's friend suggests it might be a nice gesture. After brief consideration, Emma settles for something simple rather than the more elaborate kind of seafood that Adam Prince, now a food critic for posh magazines might be used to. "After all, it was only supper, and lobsters-

which Adam might have expected at some of the places he visited—were not easily obtainable in a West Oxfordshire village.” (FGL, p.91). The market forces which are reflected in Austen’s Hertfordshire still obtain 150 years later in Pym’s nearby Oxfordshire.

Where the Elite Meet to Eat (Meat)

This section is titled with apologies to the American radio comedy of the 1940s, *Duffy’s Tavern*, whose motto was “Where the Elite Meet to Eat.” However, in Britain, “elite” and “m-e-a-t” had been highly correlated for a millennium at the time of Jane Austen. Since the invasions and settlement by the Saxons and other Germanic peoples of the 8th century, the people who were becoming “the British” were overwhelmingly meat eaters. This was particularly true among the nobility, landed gentry and warrior classes who often ate very little other than red meat. This obsession with red meat continued until past the middle of the 20th century, at which point, it is represented in the novels of Barbara Pym, as we shall see, by the absence of meat.

Turning to Austen, we can find evidence of the centrality of meat in the aftermath of a large dinner party given by the Bennets at Longbourn, at which both Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy are guests. Just after the guests have departed, Mrs. Bennet gives vent to her enthusiasm for the success of the occasion.

‘Well, girls,’ said she as soon as they were left to themselves, ‘What say you to the day? I think everything has passed off uncommonly well. I assure you. The dinner was as well dressed as any I ever saw. The venison was roasted to a turn—and everybody said, they never saw so fat a haunch. The soup was fifty times better than what we had at the Lucas’s last week; and even Mr. Darcy acknowledged, that the partridges were remarkably well done; and I suppose he has two or three French cooks at least. (P&P, III, xii).

The scene prompts three observations. (1) You'll note that fish is not mentioned. As the text comments, this dinner party was held on a Tuesday. If we can deduce from the earlier example that no fish is available in the neighborhood on Monday, perhaps Tuesday is also such a day. Since no marketing would have been allowed on Sunday, where fish is concerned, a Tuesday dinner party would have fallen victim to the old English dictum (borrowed earlier in the 18th century by Benjamin Franklin as Poor Richard) about the length of time that both company and fish can be appreciated. Meat would seem to be the preferred centerpiece of such a dinner party. In any case, that, along with the soup, are the elements which Mrs. Bennet singles out as objects of pride in the meal. (2) Venison and partridge, the meats that are specifically mentioned, suggest that the Longbourn estate is rich in game. We know that Mr. Bennet shoots (as he does later with Mr. Bingley). In addition, neither of these meats comes from a domesticated animal, nor would they likely be obtained commercially. Deer, in fact, had been for more than 800 years, the exclusive domain of the landowners. Landowners of the gentry class occupied by the Bennets continued to depend on estate-produced food, while also depending on the growing market system for some foodstuffs. (3) The comment about Mr. Darcy's two or three French cooks hints at a fact known about food at the time. Dating from prior to the wars with Revolutionary France, French influence on the eating habits of the upper gentry (represented by Mr. Darcy) was already in evidence. As we will see later, the French clearly won the culinary wars in the post-Napoleonic era, which Jane Austen did not really live to see.

The place of meat in other of the Austen novels is also illustrative, but for our purposes here, let's turn specifically to *Mansfield Park*. In more recent times, we encounter the use of the expression "break bread together" as a somewhat formal reference to a shared meal. Originating in the "Lord's Prayer" of the church liturgy, its use did not spread into the upper classes until the more evangelical influence of the Victorian era. Having a meal is never referred to as "breaking

bread" in Austen.

The section in the middle of the novel in which Fanny Price is invited, along with Edmund, to dine with the Grants at the parsonage illustrates two points of note. First, as Mrs. Grant, Mary, Fanny and Edmund stroll in the Grants' shrubbery, Mrs. Grant comments that her cook has informed her that a turkey which she hoped to save for Sunday,

'... will not keep beyond tomorrow. These are something like grievances, and make me think the weather most unseasonably close.'

'The sweets of housekeeping in a country village!' said Miss Crawford archly. 'Commend me to the nurseryman and the poulterer.'

'My dear child, commend Dr. Grant to the deanery of Westminster or St. Paul's, and I should be as glad of your nurseryman and poulterer as you could be. But we have no such people in Mansfield.' (MP, II, iv).

Clearly, Mansfield in Northamptonshire is at a greater remove from the encroaching market system than is Meryton the market town near Longbourn of *Pride and Prejudice* in Hertfordshire to the south. As the encounter draws to a close,

Dr Grant was in the vestibule, and as they stopt to speak to him, she found from Edmund's manner that he did mean to go with her. -He too was taking leave. -She could not but be thankful. -In the moment of parting *Edmund was invited by Dr. Grant to eat his mutton with him the next day* [emphasis ours]; and Fanny had barely time for an unpleasant feeling on the occasion, when Mrs. Grant with sudden recollection turned to her and asked for the pleasure of her company too.

.....

'And you know what your dinner will be,' said Mrs. Grant, smiling- 'the turkey-and I assure you a very fine one; for my dear' -turning to her husband- 'cook insists upon the turkey's being dressed tomorrow..'

'Very well, very well,' cried Dr. Grant, 'all the better. I am glad to hear you have any thing so good in the house. But

Miss Price and Mr. Edmund Bertram, I dare say, would take their chance. We none of us want to hear the bill of fare. A friendly meeting, and not a fine dinner, is all we have in view. A turkey or a goose, or a leg of mutton, or whatever you and your cook chuse to give us.' (MP, II, iv).

The important observation here is that prior to knowing the centerpiece of the meal, Dr. Grant issued the invitation to "eat his mutton with him." You'll also notice that when he waves off talk of the menu, he still mentions three meats, meats of rather high quality. Even though goose and turkey are fowl, they seem to qualify as 'mutton'. The fact that, like a leg of mutton, these are large and would be carved at the table by the host gives them similar prestige. This mode of reference to the main meal of the day obviously extends down into the much less genteel classes. Mr. Crawford calls on Fanny in Portsmouth during the time she is in residence there with her father and mother. Fanny's pain and confusion over the visit is alloyed with the pleasure of learning of matters at her beloved Mansfield. As Crawford takes leave of Fanny and the Prices on the first of what is to be a two day visit, the narrator tells us this.

Before they parted, she had to thank him for another pleasure, and one of no trivial kind. Her father asked him to do them the honour of *taking his mutton with them*, [emphasis ours] and Fanny had time for only one thrill of horror, before he declared himself prevented by a prior engagement. He was engaged to dinner already both for that day and the next, . . . and so they parted—Fanny in a state of actual felicity from escaping so horrible an evil! (MP, III, x)

When Crawford departs Portsmouth the following day, again without dining with them, Fanny thinks of the specific horrors of such meals prepared by the Prices' one kitchen servant, Rebecca, that Crawford, no less than she would also be, "so little equal to Rebecca's puddings, and Rebecca's hashes, brought to table as they all were, with such

accompaniments of half-cleaned plates, and not half-cleaned knives and forks, . . ." (MP, III, xi) Even though the Prices live in Portsmouth, a city surrounded on three sides by the sea, which was the center of English naval activity, and Mr. Price is a former Lieutenant of Marines, who works in the dockyards, he refers to their dinner as his "mutton," and Fanny muses on the horrors of the "hashes" to be brought to the table.

Barbara Pym is much more concerned with the details of food in her novels than is Austen. A reader can pick up any of the Pym novels and find plentiful references to meals of all kinds, quick meals prepared when something must be eaten, simple lunches carried to the work place, quick lunches in buffet style restaurants eaten at shared tables, and more elaborate meals either eaten in more up-scale restaurants or prepared at home to entertain guests. Food consumption in the England of both Austen and Pym was constrained by wartime conditions, or in the case of Pym, the shortages of food which began prior to the outbreak of WWII and lasted well after its end.

These constraints are much less obvious to the characters at the center of Austen's novels. Apparently the gentry classes (even those lower level ones to which Austen herself belonged) kept up their style of eating even if other pleasures and luxuries were sacrificed. However, such constraints should not be overlooked. Richardson's research into working class expenditures in southeastern England from 1790 to 1840 is revealing. He investigated the distribution of expenditure on various forms of food among working class families. The results for three categories for two years, 1793 and 1812, are dramatic. Interestingly, these years are quite close to the time frame for all of Austen's novels. Over this period, food and drink accounted for 67.7% of the

Distribution of Household Expenditure on Food Categories

	1793	1812	
Bread/Flour	48.0	74.2	
Meat	26.2	6.0	
Sugar	5.3	2.0	(R, p.105).

expenditure of laborer households.

The dramatic drop in meat consumption provides an interesting contrast with the apparent continuation of meat consumption by the families in Austen's fiction. This does not mean that Austen in no way reflects constraints on food acquisition due to restricted income or availability. The best example of this is found in *Emma*. Mrs. and Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax are the recipients of generous gifts of food from their neighbors in Highbury and at Donwell. At least two specific gifts are mentioned. The Woodhouses present them with a whole hind-quarter of pork. At another time, Mr. Knightley makes them a gift of the last of his apples of a variety that is particularly good for baking, as it is something Jane, whose appetite is not good, will eat. According to Oddy, the increasing necessity to acquire food in the market place made gifts of food between country dwellers, and particularly to friends and relatives in towns, an important aspect of social interaction. "Surviving correspondence of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries mentions gifts of hams, chickens, pigeons and various game birds though fruit, notably apples, was common in the autumn." (O, p. 254).

Pym's situation was rather different. By her lifetime, England was almost completely dependent on a market system for the production and distribution of food. According to Cantor, the misguided agricultural policies of the British government beginning in mid-19th century and pursued with mounting effect right up to 1940, led to the gradual abandonment of the intensive cultivation of cereal grains in the rich central champaign which covers about 40% of the area of England and also the diminution of the herds of livestock, which were in part dependent on the grain production. The economic downturn of the Great Depression and other political disturbances of the 1930s slowed the importation of grain, particularly from North America, and of red meat from there and the European continent. These were then virtually halted by the German submarine blockade of the British Isles after the outbreak of war. The privations of the nearly two decades stretching

from the mid-1930s to the mid-1950s altered the eating habits and attitudes toward food of almost all Britons, like Barbara Pym, who came of age during this period. The food rationing that was imposed on the British was not finally abandoned until 1954 (O, p.263). Intake of nutrients produced by the raising and slaughter of livestock plummeted. What nutrients from animal sources remained available were those that had a greater return ratio of feed to product and did not require the slaughter of animals. These included primarily eggs and dairy products. During the war itself, these often took the form of rather undesirable dehydrated versions.

Pym comments in diaries and letters that at the outbreak of the war and the beginning of rationing when she was back in her native Shropshire, food was at first plentiful. However, she soon became subject to the same privations as all her fellow compatriots. Here are a few relevant comments. This first, from a period in 1940 and 1941, when she worked in a YMCA canteen, shows the effects of privation but also reveals a sharp sense of humor, a keen eye for observation and a pixie-like desire for the normal.

Busy poaching eggs in little machines.

A ravishingly handsome Second Lieutenant poured into an exquisitely tailored overcoat came in, but he studied his book of Gas Drill rather than me.

Like all women in civilian life she was busy with housework, making over her old clothes now that there was clothes rationing, and constantly preoccupied with food:

Links managed to get a 7 lb jar of marmalade--such are the joys of going without. Not even love is so passionately longed for. (VPE, p.96).

The impressions from this period when she was between her mid-20s and mid-30s, writing and revising what became her first three published novels, *Some Tame Gazelle* (1950), *Excellent Women* (1952),

and *Jane and Prudence* (1953), were lasting. Discussions of and attitudes about food never left her work right through to the composition of her last completed novel, *A Few Green Leaves*, written 1977-79 and published posthumously in 1980.

Rather than cite a great many further examples from Pym, we simply turn to several mentioned in our previous treatment (P&C, 2004). The delightful incident of the caterpillar in the cauliflower-cheese in *Some Tame Gazelle* provides evidence of the meatless meals to which the British became accustomed. Belinda's offer to have an egg poached for the seamstress, Miss Prior, adds to the picture. Miss Prior's response about the niggardly fare at the Rectory and almost total lack of meat leaves Belinda both gratified and determined to roast a chicken for Miss Prior's next day with them.

The British love affair with the egg had not diminished by the writing of Pym's final novel thirty years later. The opening pages of *A Few Green Leaves*, in which the character of Emma Howick has been initially sketched, have her laconically scrambling an egg, drinking overly warm red wine, and enjoying them in spite of her awareness that her food-critic neighbor, Adam Prince, would not approve. The dinner party including Adam Prince has already been discussed above as an example of fish/seafood and the market. One further reference to a non-meat item is found in the early pages, when the local rector talks of his interest in finding the site of a D. M. V. (deserted medieval village).

Emma reflected on the cosiness of the term D. M. V., which reminded Her of a meat substitute she had once bought at the supermarket when she had been trying to economise, T. V. P. was it? She smiled but did not reveal her frivolous thought. (FGL, p.5).

The T. V. P. in question is an American product called Textured Vegetable Protein, which was shipped to Britain in huge quantities in the post-war Marshall plan. Pym must have been familiar with it from the lean years immediately post-war and it still crept into her

work three decades later.

Hark, the Lowly Potato

Potatoes seem a ubiquitous element of contemporary diets, particularly in that deep fried form that has added so dramatically to the waist lines of the entire world. That they have not always been present is therefore surprising. They were well established by the time of Pym's novels. Just to give one example of the stereotypical British consumption of fried fish and chips, we turn to *An Unsuitable Attachment*. Among Pym's endearing and slightly inept characters in this novel are the vicar Mark Ainger and his wife Sophia. One of the unsuitable attachments of the title is that of Sophia for her cat Faustina. Mark has agreed to get them something for their evening meal.

'FRYING TONIGHT. ROCK SALMON-SKATE-PLAICE.' Mark Ainger read from the roughly chalked-up notice in the steamy window. Which would Sophia prefer? he asked himself. And which would tempt Faustina's delicate appetite? Rock salmon—that had a noble sound about it, though he believed it was actually inferior to real salmon. Skate—he imagined that was one of those flat bony fish, with the teeth showing in a sardonic grin. Only plaice was familiar to him, so he supposed it had better be that. Plaice, then, and two helpings—better make it three if Faustina was to be included—perhaps 'portions' was the word—and some chips. (UA, p. 15).

The contrast here is with Austen. In the whole of Austen's corpus, the potato is mentioned only once, in *Mansfield Park*. The scene is dinner at Mansfield Park and the discussion is mostly about improvements which Mr. Rushworth proposes for his estate at Sotherton. Dr. and Mrs. Grant from the parsonage and Mrs. Norris, the previous occupant of the parsonage, are also guests. Upon Dr. Grant's criticism of the flavorless apricots on their tree, Mrs. Norris protests that it is a moor park, and Dr. Grant counters,

'You were imposed on, Ma'am,' replied Dr. Grant, 'these potatoes have as much the flavour of a moor park apricot, as the fruit from that tree. It is an insipid fruit at the best; but a good apricot is eatable, which none from my garden are.' (MP, I, vi)

Given our contemporary view of the role of potatoes, it seems surprising that this is the only use of the word in all of Austen, when "asparagus," for example, appears at least three times. The explanation lies in the fact that potatoes were not generally consumed in the south of England until after the Napoleonic wars. They were eaten in the north and west of Britain. Until the end of the 18th century, their general use extended south only into the Midlands and into Wales and the West Country. (O, p.256). This does not mean that potatoes were not known, but probably explains their only appearance in an Austen novel in the more northerly county of Northamptonshire, in *Mansfield Park*. Of course, one Austen setting, Pemberley, is in Derbyshire, farther to the north. However, the only scene of eating is on a day visit by Elizabeth and the Gardiners when seasonal fruit is spoken of, but potatoes would not likely be served. Perhaps potatoes would have been considered a bit low brow for Pemberley in any case. Jane Austen would have known this. We know that her mother liked potatoes and always included them in the garden at Steventon and later at Chawton. Perhaps Mrs Austen learned to eat them during her own childhood, which occurred in Gloucestershire in the west of England.

French Victory (and Ultimately Russian)

One final mention of how the habits of the age are reflected in the novels is the manner of serving a meal. While Austen may avoid many contemporary references as one of her great strengths, she cannot know the future direction of meal service. Until after the Napoleonic wars, hence until after the death of Austen in 1817, meals were served in what is usually called the English manner. This is retained

today in what is called "family style" in the United States, a form still to be found in some country restaurants and at church picnics and suppers, particularly in areas with a high concentration of German ethnic settlement. In this style, all the dishes of the meal, except desserts, were placed on the table at one time. Diners helped themselves, or servants assisted them in whatever order they wished. A "family" dinner might consist of only one "course." A second course, meant that the entire table was cleared and a complete set of new dishes was placed on the table for the eating to begin all over again. Occasionally, rather than remove the entire cover, so-called "replacement dishes" were placed on the table when the originals were used up. This is what Mrs. Bennet means when she insists that having Mr. Bingley to dinner means at least two full courses. Such a change of cover is significant in Emma, for example at the dinner at the Coles'. It gives Emma the opportunity to work on the idea with Frank Churchill that the piano delivered to the Bates's residence for Jane Fairfax had been the gift of Mr. Dixon, the husband of her friend, the former Miss Campbell.

The conversation was here interrupted. They were called on to share in the awkwardness of a rather long interval between the courses, and obliged to be as formal and as orderly as the others; but when the table was again safely covered, when every corner dish was placed exactly right, and occupation and ease were generally restored, Emma said:

'The arrival of this pianoforte is decisive with me.' (E, II, *viii*)

The language, with the table 'safely covered,' makes it clear that this is not course service as we now think of it. In fact while Britain defeated the French in the Napoleonic wars, France fairly quickly won the cultural wars on several fronts. This included table service, which fairly soon after the end of Austen's life became what is called French service. In this style of dining, the meal is divided into sections devoted to soup, fish course, meat or fowl course, sweet dessert and savory. In the French style, several dishes might be offered in the

specific course, but there was course separation by category. According to Oddy, this was replaced by the last quarter of the 19th century by *service a la Russe*. This Russian style had first replaced the French style in France itself and thence moved to England. With variations in complexity of dishes and types and the order of courses, this style consisted of presenting a single dish at each course, which is then removed and the single dish of the next course presented. This, as we know, is the style that once in place in England by 1880 has persisted into the 21st century as a style for middle and upper class entertainment dining at home and for dining in restaurants, even simpler, so called “family” restaurants in the United States. Of course in Britain and the United States, the English style of 200 years ago persists for some family meals. Obviously, a great many meals in Pym reflect this *service a la Russe* that continues to be so common in our own lives.

Final Thought

Looking at food in Austen and Pym not only suggests further similarities between these two masters of the novel of manners. It also suggests something of the eras spanned by the two writers, which in some ways seem to reflect the opening and closing of a single age of British and world history. That span is the subject of the fourth and final article projected in our Austen/Pym series. Unfortunately, readers of this journal will have to look elsewhere to find us. Sayonara.

NOTES

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- 2 Citations from *A Very Private Eye*, preserve the type conventions in that work. Direct quotations from Pym are in regular print while all editorial commentary is given in Italic print. Note that in sections of this kind of text, book titles are given in regular print to contrast with the Italic.

- 3 To avoid confusion with different editions of Austen's novels, page numbers are not given. Citations state only Volume (upper case Roman numerals) and Chapter (lower case Roman numerals), here Volume I, Chapter viii.

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