

**LIFE AND LITERATURE IN ANITA BROOKNER'S
*HOTEL DU LAC***

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Anita Brookner might stake a claim to the reputation of “novelist of the 80s” since she has steadily brought out a novel a year since 1981¹. Her fictional bent appears to be a tardy talent: she has spent her working life teaching the history of art and her publications up until 1980 were on the French painters Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721), Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805) and Jacques-Louis David (1748-1825). From 1967-68 she was Slade Professor of Art at the University of Cambridge, the first woman ever to occupy the post, and last year she completed ten years as a reader at the Courtauld Institute of Art.

Brookner may be recalling her roots in *Hotel du Lac* when she has her protagonist, Edith Hope, go to Madame Wienawska: “an elderly Polish dressmaker in Ealing” (126)² to have her wedding outfit made. The reader cannot help noticing the detail when (s)he knows that Brookner’s father was Polish, as were her grandparents on both mother (who was English) and father’s sides. Furthermore, she was quoted in the “El Mundo de la Escritura” section of *El País* as claiming to have: “... recibido de sus padres [sic] polacos un legado de amargura y melancolía...”³ However, I am not concerned here with drawing parallels between the author’s life and her writing (as my title might indicate) but with tracing the life/literature dichotomy in her most successful (and rightly, it seems to me) novel to date, that is, the Booker McConnell prizewinner: *Hotel du Lac*.

The background against which the greater part of the novel is set, the Swiss lake-side hotel out of season, has an air of unreality about it. The small town is frequently enveloped by: “dense cloud that [descends] for days at a time” (7) and the hotel itself appears to belong to an age gone by, before “la rebelión de las masas”, as Ortega would have it:

The Hotel du Lac (Famille Huber) was a stolid and dignified building, a house of repute, a traditional establishment, used to

welcoming the prudent, the well-to-do, the retired, the self-effacing, the respected patrons of an earlier era of tourism. [...] Its furnishings were of excellent quality, its service impeccable. [...] it took a perverse pride in its very absence of attractions, so that any visitor mildly looking for a room would be puzzled and deflected by the sparseness of the terrace, the muted hush of the lobby, the absence of piped music, public telephones, advertisements for scenic guided tours, or notice boards directing one to the amenities of the town. There was no sauna, no hairdresser and certainly no glass case displaying items of jewellery; the bar was small and dark, and its austerity did not encourage people to linger. It was implied that prolonged drinking, whether for purposes of business or as a personal indulgence, was not “comme il faut”, and if thought absolutely necessary should be conducted either in the privacy of one’s suite or in the more popular establishments where such leanings were not unknown. Chambermaids were rarely encountered after ten o’clock in the morning, by which time all household noises had to be silenced; no vacuuming was heard, no carts of dirty linen were glimpsed, after that time. A discreet rustle announced the reappearance of the maids to turn down the beds and tidy the rooms once the guests had finished changing to go down to dinner. [...] the Hotel du Lac took a quiet pride.. in its isolation from the herd,... [...] The salon was... furnished with... a small upright piano at which an elderly man with a made-up bow tie was playing mild selections from post-war musicals. (13, 14, 15, 17)

The female guests at the hotel, too, with whom the protagonist comes into contact from the beginning of her stay, are all isolated from the reality of the world beyond the hotel for one reason or another. Thus, the aged Comtesse de Bonneuil. Deaf and abandoned by her son and daughter-in-law, she reads the *Gazette de Lausanne* and belches her life away. Monica is another. Confined to the hotel in the hope that she will gain the strength to produce an heir for her husband’s distinguished lineage, she has a weakness for cakes but can stomach no other food and *will* insist on smoking. And last, but never least, comes Mrs Pusey, who “[does] love nice things” (43), together with, inseparable from, her daughter Jennifer: “fitted out like a queen” (43) by her doting mother; both are dedicated to spending the money left in a Swiss account by Mrs Pusey’s deceased husband. These two women —and especially Mrs Pusey— contribute much vitality to the novel and perfectly illustrate the fairy-tale existence (see the diverse descriptions: “Aladdin’s cave” (44); “this garden of earthly delights” (107); “elaborate games of make-believe” (108); “I have no feeling that Mrs Pusey is ever going to die [...] ... She seemed to be hesitating on the brink of womanhood, amazed at the

cornucopia of riches the world had to offer her". (110, 111) which is contrasted to the protagonist's harsher experience of life. The Hotel du Lac comes to represent a hiatus, an "interlude" (162) in Edith Hope's life whereas it is an integral part of Mrs Pusey and Jennifer's easeful years. Readers of the novel will remember that mother and daughter always stay at the hotel on their annual spending spree and we are told that Mrs Pusey is: "clearly at home in the ambience of the hotel" (18). Her ostentatious behaviour and appearance conjure up a "spectacle" (18). Smug and a snob, she spends her days smiling, shopping, sipping tea or champagne, chauffeured in "an old-fashioned limousine" (46), quite detached from any life beyond, except the past, remembered as good old days. Edith observes of the two: "... they were both out of date. They referred almost constantly to times gone by, times illuminated by glamour, happiness, success, confidence and security,..." (54). Consistently, then, Mrs Pusey strategically avoids the seedier side of life, substituting newspapers by the literature of romance, unable and/or unwilling to swallow even diluted colour supplement material:

... Mr Neville had procured English Sunday newspapers... But Mrs Pusey, after flicking distractedly through the pages of the colour supplements, gave a sigh and said, "Such an ugly world. Greed and sensationalism. Cheap sex. And no taste. [...] I'm afraid I'm a romantic. [...] You see, I was brought up to believe in the right values. [...] Love means marriage to me,... Romance and courtship go together. [...] This is the sort of story I enjoy,..." "*The Sun at Midnight*", pronounced Mr Neville gravely. "By Vanessa Wilde". (73, 74)

The Sun at Midnight is one of the five novels published by Edith Hope under her "more thrusting" (8) pseudonym of Vanessa Wilde. Another of her published works is entitled *The Stone and the Star*, and these two, together with the manuscript she is working on at the Hotel du Lac, *Beneath the Visiting Moon*, appear to reveal her affinity for the romantic, thus substantiating the conviction of Mr Neville (anxious to play Prince Charming) that, indeed, she is a romantic. At this juncture, it is enlightening to take into consideration the three novels written by Anita Brookner and published before *Hotel du Lac*. In all three, a pattern repeats itself: the female protagonist is an only child who is lonely and throws herself into her work which comes to provide more or less compensation for the melancholy life. Reality offers little joy whereas satisfaction, fulfilment, may be found in the literary pursuit, be it research—as it is in the case of Kitty Maule in *Providence* (the Romantic Tradition) or Ruth Weiss in *A Start in Life* (Women in Balzac's novels), or fiction—as in the case of Frances Hinton in *Look at Me*, as well as that

of Edith Hope in *Hotel du Lac*. But the latter has more to offer than her predecessors, as I shall point out presently.

“... she wrote for tortoises like herself” (30).

In a conversation with her agent, Edith Hope refers to the preference of most women for “the old myths” (27) and insists that “the tortoise and the hare” (27) is the most potent myth of all. In Edith’s usage, the tortoise and hare come to be fable-like renderings of “the mouse-like unassuming girl” (27) as opposed to the “scornful temptress” (27), respectively. Whereas: “‘In real life... the hare... wins. Every time’.” (27), Edith Hope, novelist, vindicates the lot of the tortoise and so has the weaker party come into her own: “... the hare wins,... in life, I mean. Never in fiction. At least not in mine. The facts of life are too terrible to go into my kind of fiction. And my readers certainly do not want them there” (28). The act of writing itself, viewed as Edith’s “daily task of fantasy and obfuscation” (50) becomes a therapeutic exercise, a means of cancelling out the pain of memory or soothing one’s temper. Thus, Edith recalls writing *The Sun at Midnight* when: “David [her married lover] was on his summer holiday..., lying fretfully on a Greek beach with his wife. I imagined him to be having a marvellous time and I wrote for ten hours a day to stop myself thinking of him” (74). And when Mr Neville reduces her to a state of fury:

... she [tries] various distancing procedures, familiar to her from long use. The most productive was to convert the incident into a scene in one of her novels. “The evening came on stealthily”, she muttered to herself, “The sun, a glowing ball...” (102)

Moreover, such fantasies provided vicarious satisfaction for Edith’s own mother, Viennese Rosa: “...that harsh disappointed woman. [...] She comforted herself... by reading love stories, simple romances with happy endings” (104). Edith’s mother is constantly remembered by her daughter as lamenting her “fate” (48), plagued by “vengeful regret for her own wasted years,... monopolized by an increasingly mute husband and a silent child” (84).

Edith is so readily bewitched by Mrs Pusey and Jennifer since she sees them to possess a strength she is lacking. She feels: “curiosity, envy, delight, attraction, and fear, the fear she always felt in the presence of strong personalities” (33), and admits in one of her unposted letters to David: “I adore Mrs Pusey. She is a totally serene, supremely confident woman...” (46). Yet, finally, she will come to see Mrs Pusey’s self-assurance as grotesque, judging “her present monstrous cosiness” (144) as a consequence of “sheer ignorance of the world” (144). Edith is

provided with the opportunity of acquiring Mrs Pusey's privileged material existence through the offer of marriage from the enigmatic Mr. Neville: "a connoisseur of the fantastic, an intellectual voluptuary of the highest order" (112). Mr Neville also possesses: "a considerable force of will" (160) and promises the chance to live happily ever after in "a very fine... Regency Gothic" (164) house, furnished with a "rather well-known collection of "famille rose" dishes" (164). What more could a girl ask for? But could something "real" come out of the fairy-tale world of the Hotel du Lac? Already at Mrs Pusey's birthday celebration, Edith is coming to see through the "show" (112), the "pretence" (112), the "masks" (112) and juxtaposing all this sham to David, who is identified with "the truth" (112). David is her "life" (12); Mr Neville, who never becomes Philip to her, could only supply a parody and, indeed, only wants to. He rejects the "burden" (169) of Edith's feelings.

Uncharacteristically, then, if one compares *Hotel du Lac* to Brookner's earlier writing, the work ends on a note of defiance, of rebellion. The female protagonists of the three previous novels are condemned to rather hopeless lives and we contemplate them, finally, comparatively resigned to their fates. But Edith makes a choice against what may be socially convenient for her, as Mr Neville points out; as she did, in fact, when she refused to go through with the marriage to Geoffrey Long. Mr Neville reminds her that she is courting exile and, as we know, she was exiled to the Hotel du Lac by her frowning London friends following her first misdemeanour. But she will come to react against the dictates of her peers:

The careful pretence of her days [at the Hotel du Lac], the almost successful tenor of this artificial and meaningless life which had been decreed for her own good by other who had no real understanding of what her own good was, suddenly appeared to her in all their futility. (116)

All this seems to me to be refreshingly assertive, even feminist, it might be claimed, although if we are to associate Brookner's voice with Edith's, her consciousness has no deliberately feminist commitment: "I can understand [the feminist] position, although I'm not all that sympathetic to it" (146).

It is no doubt a fluke that *Hotel du Lac* should be published in 1984, that is, in the year that Orwell foresaw the surrender of Winston Smith. It was no doubt fitting that there should be an act of defiance, and on the part of a woman, to counter the forfeiting of integrity by Winston Smith. Edith Hope carries her name with dignity. The hope of happiness can only be a slender one since we are given to understand that it is unlikely

that David Simmonds will abandon his wife and family but, importantly, Edith is being true to herself and not ignoring the harsh truth, as her telegram makes clear. She is not “ [going] home” but “returning” (184). A triumph for tortoises everywhere, then... Cold comfort? Why no —we should remember the ditty: “The tortoise took his time but (s)he got there”. And Bloomsbury-looking Edith Hope might become a Virginia Woolf yet!

In the light of what went before, *Hotel du Lac* might be interpreted as watershed in Anita Brookner's writing, a turning point, but I regret to say that this is not the case. In *Family and Friends*, *A Misalliance*, *A Friend from England* and *Latecomers*, the tortoise torment emerges once more: Mimi, Blanche, Rachel and Christine, respectively, are all martyr maids and there is much plaintiveness about, so that Edith remains quite unique. We can only hope that the end of the decade will jerk Anita Brookner out of her “misere mei” syndrome.

Notes

1. *Look at Me* (1981); *Providence* (1982); *A Start in Life* (1983); *Hotel du Lac* (1984); *Family and Friends* (1985); *A Misalliance* (1986); *A Friend from England* (1987); *Latecomers* (1988).
2. Page numbers follow quotes in brackets throughout the text and are taken from the following edition of *Hotel du Lac* — London: Triad Grafton Books, 1985.
3. *El País*, 17-IV-1988, LIBROS VIII.