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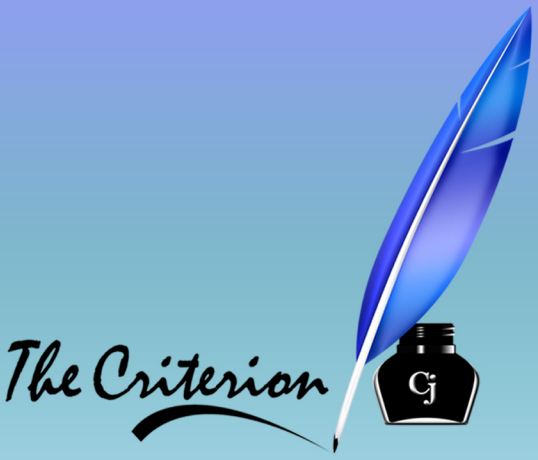

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Editor-in-Chief
Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor
Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Ms. Lonely and Mr. Lonely in *Leaving Home* and *Making Things Better* of Anita Brookner

B.Lakshmikantham
Ph.D Scholar,
Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli District ,Tamil Nadu, South India.

Literary Master Anita Brookner's elegant style is manifest in every page of her brilliant novels. Born in London in 1928, she became the first woman to hold the Slade Professorship at Cambridge University in 1967. Since 1977, she has been associated with the Courtauld Institute of Art. However, since winning the Booker Prize in 1984 for *Hotel du Lac*, she has become better known as a novelist. Her fiction is mostly set in London, and often involves characters of Jewish extraction, like herself. Her works always explore the alienation of a character, usually female, whose quiet, solitary lives are punctuated by destitution and disappointments in love. Her style has often borne her comparisons with Jane Austen and Henry James. This paper analyses the loneliness of a male protagonist in *Making Things Better* and the female protagonist in *Leaving Home*.

Anita Brookner (1928 -) is a contemporary British novelist and French Romantic art historian known to write novels which explore moral, social, and gender issues similarly to her great influences Henry James and Edith Wharton. Her narratology exhaustively and less decisively analyzes humanity's limited comprehension and consciousness. It reflects an uncertain postmodern world about lonely, single women. Born in London on 16 July 1928, she is educated at James Allen's Girls' School. She is born and brought up in a large Victorian villa in Herne Hill in South London. Her maternal grandfather had emigrated from Poland to Britain, and founded a tobacco factory. He supplied Edward VII with cigarettes. Her mother, Maude, is a professional singer of sentimental ballads, who has enjoyed some success in America. She has given up her career when she married Newson Bruckner, who has also migrated from Poland to Britain, when he is 16. He has fought for the British Army in the First World War, and then been conscripted into the family firm. She is an only child, but the house is seldom empty. There are family friends and relatives engaged in what she describes as elevated gossip. She received a BA in History from King's College London in 1949.

Brookner received a Ph.D. in art history at the Courtauld Institute. She has spent some time in Paris doing post-graduate studies. In 1967–1968, she is the first woman to serve as Slade Professor at Cambridge University. From 1977 to 1988 she is a Reader at the Courtauld Institute and in 1990 is elected a Fellow of King's College where she has worked until her retirement in 1988. Brookner is made a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in 1990. She is a Fellow of New Hall, Cambridge. Brookner has published her first novel, *A Start in Life*, in 1981 at the age of 53. Since then she has published approximately a novel every year. Her fourth book, *Hotel du Lac*, published in 1984, won the Booker Prize. Brookner has said she that she does not wish to be ghettoized and deplores any Jewish eagerness to reclaim lost souls. Instead she prefers to be known as an English writer and has indeed achieved fame and

recognition as one of the most accomplished writers of English fiction. She is known for her elegant turn of phrase and elegiac description of mood, often a deep well of inner loneliness. Brookner initially gained eminence in the field of art history, with a passionate espousal of Eighteenth Century French painters such as Watteau, Greuze and David. When, in 1950, she accepted a French government scholarship to study at the Ecole du Louvre in Paris, her parents are furious enough cut her off. Brookner has felt only liberation; Studying, writing, visiting every gallery and museum within striking distance.

Her literary canon is filled with many works of art as novels; *Providence* (1982), *Look at me* (1983), *Family and Friends* (1985), *A Misalliance* (1986), *A Friend from England* (1987), *Latecomers* (1988), *Lewis Percy* (1989), *Brief Lives* (1990), *A Closed Eye* (1991), *Fraud* (1992), *A Family Romance* (1993, US title *Dolly*), *A Private View* (1994), *Incidents in the Rue Laugier* (1995), *Altered States* (1996), *Visitors* (1997), *Falling Slowly* (1998), *Undue Influence* (1999), *The Bay of Angels* (2001), *The Next Big Thing* (2002, US title *Making Things Better*), *The Rules of Engagement* (2003), *Leaving Home* (2005), *Strangers* (2009).

Several volumes on art history, including works on Greuze, Watteau and Jacques-Louis David are also written by her. Brookner lives in a mansion block in Kensington. This is a milieu that is familiar from many of her novels. But in recent years her productivity has slowed unfortunately. Her new novel, *Strangers*, is the first in four years. Friends, lunch companions, see less of her. There is the unspoken sense that she is withdrawing. Brookner, who once described her ambition as to be unnoticed, rarely gives interviews. She has not given one, as far as for some 12 years. Brookner lives alone. She has never married, and the preponderance of disappointed spinsters in her books has inevitably tended to give rise to the assumption that she is that person. When Brookner arrived in the early 1980's, she seemed like the kid sister of Penelope Fitzgerald or Barbara Pym, those fine, late-blooming British authors known for quaintly charming novels of manners. But now a musty smell wafts from each new Brookner book, a stale whiff that arises partly because she has tweaked the same novel 23 times in 24 years, and largely because her shrinking-violet heroines live in a hermetic, increasingly unconvincing world. It's a place detached from time, where even bright young women act like little old ladies. With Emma Roberts, the heroine of *Leaving Home*, Brookner may finally have gone too far. In many ways, Emma is a typical Brookner character: bookish, meek, all but devoid of sexual passion. But she also displays a wide streak of self-pity that makes it difficult for a reader to like her nearly as much as Brookner does. Apparently longing for the orderly rules of a Jane Austen world, Brookner allows her characters to behave as if one still existed. Too clever not to see the absurdity of this, she often tries to get around it by situating her heroines at a transitory moment in recent feminism, when clinging to old social rules was just barely possible. Here that ploy seems desperate as Emma, the self-deluded narrator, looks back at the late 1970's from the myopic distance of the early-to-mid-1980.

The term 'Ms. Lonely' is borrowed from James Caryn. Anita Brookner unravels *Leaving Home* using a volcanic imagery. As lava erupts from a volcano, a name erupts from the past in a peaceful night from the third person narrator, Ms. Lonely, Emma Roberts who assures her position to be the protagonist of this work of art. Hence the eruption of her psyche could be expected in the novel. The self with regard to travel in her is unlocked in these lines

> The trajectory has been designed by the unconscious, a long time ago. But the unconscious does not rule the world, does not even illuminate it, apart from these brief fragments of understanding. It is after all, only part of the self. The other part, the most important, is subject to the Will. But it is also subject to the Will of others. (5)

Emma so loves order that she is writing a dissertation on classical garden design, a project that keeps her shuttling between London and Paris. In London, her sickly mother is one of Brookner's nunlike widows, a woman so self-effacing that she drops dead one day in Selfridges, considerately sparing her daughter the years of nursing they could both see ahead. Emma fears turning into her sad, solitary mother, but we know from the start that she already has. In Paris, she is befriended by Francoise, a sexy librarian who has her own problems with Maman. Francoise is destined to enter an arranged marriage so her impoverished family can keep their country house. Meanwhile, she is, Emma says, one of those women who had been liberated into behaving like men, a peculiar judgment from a woman in her 20's. In those pre-Chunnel days, Emma flits between the two cities easily, complaining all the while that she is inept at making her way in the world. The heroine of *Leaving Home* is always leaving; she can neither settle in one place nor relish the joys of her rootless life, which seems improper to her.

Although her name evokes Austen's matchmaking Emma Woodhouse and Flaubert's adulterous Emma Bovary, any echoes are ironic. This Emma resembles those Henry James characters that are destined to observe life from a distance. Brookner bluntly announces the connection when a potential love interest -- an older man named Philip, with whom Emma is merely comfortable -- quotes to her from *The Ambassadors*, that classic of the unlived life. "Live all you can, as Henry James said," Philip tells her. Like James's middle-aged men, Emma is constitutionally unable to do this, and goes on living as little as possible. She has a sort-of boyfriend in Paris, with whom she takes fraternal walks on Sunday afternoons. After an initial exchange our relationship was platonic, even celibate, is how Emma informs us that they had sex just once. No wonder if it went badly. Brookner can still do what she has always done best: write beautiful, piercingly elegant observations. *Leaving Home* starts with Emma dreaming colourfully of her mother's old friends, remembered from a child's perspective. Emma's dreams are far more vivid than her life, and that can be excruciatingly sad. One has to grant Emma her nature, but it's impossible to make the case that her contradictions are all intentional, because the distance between her and Brookner often wavers and eventually disappears. Near the end, Emma does something purely selfish, an assertive act with the potential to jolt her into life. Emma is not a Jamesian figure of tragedy. Emma feels that there might be a few changes in future towards the end of the novel. She has finished her own book. It has to go for typing. As she has completed the book, there is nothing to do now, hence Philip Hudson advises her to go for another degree in Garden Design and then she can set up as an individual consultant in landscape Gardening. Her mind is at peace now without any ambiguity about her future:

> I am more or less comfortable, more or less contented. Not everyone is born to fulfil an heroic role. The only realistic ambition is to live in the present. And sometimes … this is more than enough to keep one busy. Time, which was squandered, must now be given over to the actual, the possible, and perhaps to

> that evanescent hope of a good outcome which never deserts one,and which should never be abandoned. (168)

Thus she proves to be Ms. Lonely. Mr. Lonely is in *Making Things Better*, Brookner's 21st novel. It is also true that all of Brookner's novels betray a certain similarity in mood and content. The same can be--and has been--said about the works of Henry James, the writer whose fiction Brookner's most closely resembles. Her protagonists, female or male, invariably suffer from a pained awareness that they have missed out on the fullest possibilities of life. Invariably, too, some unforeseen change in their circumstances forces them with new urgency to discover why. Finding the answer may help them escape the prison of unsatisfied desires and unfulfilled expectations. Or, as frequently turns out in Brookner's novels, it may lead merely to a keener, more nuanced apprehension of failure.

Making Things Better follows this narrative are, but with particular dexterity and suspense. The novel transpires entirely within the troubled mind of Julius Herz, 73, who dreams one night of an imagined meeting with his cousin, Fanny Bauer, the love of his life, when both were young. Herz does not welcome his return to consciousness and to the dawn of the here and now: "Only the relentless ticking of his clock informed him that he had woken up, that this would soon be a new day, all too closely resembling the others, the normal days of his present existence, in which nothing happened nor could be expected to happen" (Gray 44-45). Herz inhabits the present but dwells in and on his past. As his memories accumulate, it becomes clear that he is, in most measurable ways, a fortunate survivor of his family's history. He, his parents and his older brother Freddy, a prodigy on the violin, got out of Berlin in the 1930s when the Nazis' intentions toward Jews became disquieting. They subsequently settled in London, where a family friend gave Herz' father a job managing a record store. Exile saved their lives but did not make them happy. The parents were miserable with each other and with their straitened lives, compared to those they led in Berlin; Freddy, the family's bright hope, suffered a collapse of some sort and had to live away from home. The devastated parents could not even bring themselves to visit him: The burden was shifted to their younger son, who became guardian to all three of them, unaware of his own entitlements. The younger son accepted this burden without complaint because of his own need to make things better.

That, at any rate, is how Herz views matters nearly 50 years later. His parents and Freddy are long-since dead, but he cannot stop thinking about them with a mixture of baffled love and resentment. Their emotional neediness and selfishness stifled him; his sense of family responsibilities crippled his marriage to Josie, which ended in an amicable divorce after a little more than two years. Herz may be comfortably well-off now; his family's old benefactor left him financially independent. But his freedom from the task of supporting himself has left him bereft, roaming London streets with no purpose, reminded by every apparently happy person he sees that he has wasted his life. The elderly man's present existence is rattled by two events. First, an attractive young woman named Sophie Clay moves into the flat a floor below his. Herz meets and observes Sophie for a while, then discovers that after years of inanition he was able again to feel desire. The renewal brings him some happiness and a cluster of uncertainties and reservations about the propriety of such happiness: "He told himself that his interest in her was paternal, although he was alive to her beauty, as any man would be. He had no children, no grandchildren, and this girl, in her late 20s or early 30s, might have been a grandchild. This

reflection aroused others: regret for his past blamelessness, together with a fierce desire for some sort of reward before it was too late" (Gray 44-45).

The problem is that Herz can only sustain his passion by keeping it secret from Sophie, its inspiration and object, and he stumbles badly, if innocently, at this task. Appalled and ashamed, Herz bids farewell once again to sexual ambition. As his new desolation is settling in, the second event occurs. Herz receives an unexpected letter from Fanny, the cousin he was dreaming of at the novel's opening. After his divorce, he travelled heartsick and headlong to the Beau Rivage, a Swiss lakeside resort hotel in Nyon where the widowed Fanny and her mother, Herz' maternal aunt, splendidly resided. He proposed marriage to Fanny; she turned him down and sent him obediently back to England. Ever since, for some 30 years, Herz has dawdled emotionally over this adventure: "It fulfilled the function of the youthful indiscretion of which one is somehow proud, although he was a middle-aged man when it had come about" (Gray 44-45).

Fanny's letter tells a sad story. Her mother, her lifelong protector, has died. Fanny is now living in Bonn, widowed a second time, and her late husband's relatives are taking legal steps to keep her from any of the inheritance. "I wonder if you could suggest how I should proceed," she writes. "I have no head for business but I can certainly fight for my rights and my conscience is clear. My one fear is that this letter may not reach you, but I know that if you are still as I remember you, you will do your utmost to help me" (Gray 44-45). Herz is realist enough to know that Fanny's letter was motivated by her survival instincts rather than by any fondness for him. Clearly, he muses, supreme selfishness was the recipe for a successful life. He tries to dismiss Fanny's request from his thoughts and pays her a sarcastic tribute: "He felt for her the same gratitude that he had briefly felt for Sophie Clay: She had put an end to his fantasies of love, something that she had not quite managed to do in Nyon" (Gray 44-45).

He writes Fanny a harsh reply, brimming with bitterness: "I cannot, I think, come to Bonn. What would I do there? My German is now rusty, and somehow I do not see myself making representations to a German lawyer. And I do not know that I want to see you as you must be now." Then he tears up that letter and writes and mails Fanny something markedly different: "Unfortunately I cannot come to Bonn, but we can choose some halfway house where we can be at our ease. What about the Beau Rivage? I remember that you found this comfortable, and I was favorably impressed during the brief time I spent there." Herz extends this invitation on an impulse that quickly blossoms into a vision of his future, a glorious release from the tedium and pointlessness of his London existence. "Once there," he imagines, "and becalmed, as he somehow knew he should be, he would allow himself to be absorbed into the surroundings, would recover his dignity, would realize his destiny as an exile, and perhaps acknowledge the rightness of the solution. He would wean Fanny from her preoccupations, fashion her into the companion of his dreams" (Gray 44-45).

Since all of *Making Things Better* is conveyed through Herz' point of view, it is difficult to get at the truth of his character. Is his self-diagnosis--i.e. that his unhappiness stems from his virtuous obedience to and awareness of the needs of other people--meant to be the correct one? Or does his eagerness to fashion Fanny into the companion of his dreams reveal him as formidably selfish in his own right, interested in others only insofar as they conform to

his expectations and satisfy his hopes? A nonfiction writer would have to take a position on the issue, but a novelist is free to portray unmediated complexity. Indeed, Herz is memorable because he is so hard to categorize, such a bundle of contradictions, some invisible to him but made clear to the reader. Early in the novel Brookner writes of her 73-year-old hero: "At heart he was still a young man, a boy even, to whom adulthood had come as a surprise and had never ceased to be a burden" (Gray 44-45). Gentle comedy is at play here, as is an understated outrage at the afflictions of time, the necessity of growing old. Herz' determination to make things better may be deluded, yet it also, given the odds against it, carries a hint of heroism. Merle Rubin feels that:

> her somewhat darker portraits of middle-aged Alan Sherwood in *Altered States* and George Bland in *A Private View*; and the engaging seventy-three-year-old Julius Herz confronting mortality in *Making Things Better*, Brookner has also ventured beyond her original dichotomy between the innocent, gentle, altruistic soul doomed to romantic failure and the coarse, shallow, self-indulgent sybarite who enjoys undeserved success. (5)

To Michele Hewitson, Brookner' universe is closed and complete, not susceptible, it seems, to the ravages of outside incident or the menaces of modernity. Here melancholic men and women step carefully through sad lives filled with small and inevitable disappointments. In this subdued world of circumscribed Englishness, the values and vocabulary of another era pepper the long pages of introspection, honoring concepts like obligation, penance and propriety. Readers seeking spontaneity, magic, vigor, may wish to run rapidly, screaming, in the opposite direction. Yet all this elegant restraint weaves its own insistent spell. Therefore Ms. Lonely and Mr. Lonely are foils of the novelist.

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