

Wilmet's Wanderings: A Journey from Sterility to Fruitfulness

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Paper presented at the 2022 Virtual North American Conference of the Barbara Pym Society

Wilmet Forsyth has been one of Barbara Pym's least popular protagonists. Her seemingly constant focus on her attire has led some to dismiss her as a negligible character. Others are annoyed by her seeming stupidity. "How could she not notice that Piers is gay?" they sniff. Perhaps for some, her isolation and relentless focus on self – those clothes again! – make her just another post-war wanderer, somewhat less interesting than the angsty existential heroes that populate twentieth century fiction. Yet Wilmet is imaginative, whimsical, inquisitive, a true Pym heroine, and Pym portrays her in finely detailed, nuanced and of course humorous style. I contend that Wilmet is on a search for meaning, one made in a specifically Christian context, that takes her through a dry Lenten period and into a larger life.

In considering Wilmet, we are first struck by how easy her life is. She has a lovely home, beautiful clothes, ample money, plenty of leisure, a friendly mother-in-law who is attentive to her likes and tolerant of her foibles. She is good-looking, elegant, and has an ideal husband. Rodney is kind, generous, tolerant, and financially well-to-do. He even has a dry sense of humor. These attributes alone could make us dislike her. Wouldn't we all like to be free to wander around all day without any responsibilities except to show up on time for an occasional boring tea party with Miss Prideaux? And, when we consider that the novel is set in England ten years after World War II, we can say that Wilmet is doing very well indeed. What doesn't Wilmet have that she could possibly want?

Ah, but let's take the opposite tack. Let's look at Wilmet's life from a post-war perspective of emptiness, loss of purpose, lack. What doesn't Wilmet have?

First of all, we learn that Wilmet has no home of her own. She lives in her mother-in-law's house, and has no household responsibilities. Sybil manages the household, and a maid does most of the actual work. Wilmet makes it clear that although she is comfortable, the house is not one she would have chosen. In approaching it, she observes, "It occurred to me how very bleak and respectable the house looked. This appearance was of course very fitting for Rodney, a civil servant...". The implication is that it is not at all fitting for Wilmet, with her love of beauty and adventure. Furthermore, Wilmet and Rodney have no children to make home life full of activity. She confesses, "I did not really regret not having any children, but I sometimes envied the comfortable busyness of my friends who had."

Wilmet also has not settled into a spiritual home. In the first chapter we find her in a church that she has only recently started attending, and although she has determined that this Anglo-Catholic milieu is the right one for her, she hasn't even spoken to the priest in charge yet, or apparently to anyone. As the novel progresses, she states her determination to be involved in the life of St. Luke's, but she is uncomfortable with the reality of doing so. In the first chapter we learn that Wilmet does have one skill. In a departure from the self-consciousness we already see in her, she states calmly, "I have a talent for arranging flowers." She has a natural feeling for beauty, color, and order. Nevertheless, being new in church and having no one to make introductions, she is not able to use her talent as she would like. She apparently sees the flower guild as a bit of a clique, later referring to it as "the charmed circle of decorators," longing to take part in their work and unable to see how that might happen.

How is Wilmet to take part in the life swirling all around her? Sybil is the one who decides where the family will go on vacation, and that Wilmet will learn Portuguese with her. Wilmet is frank about having no career and no particular training, and she doesn't even do any volunteer work. Without these, she has no connection to a wider community. In an attempt to be helpful, Sybil takes her along to the Settlement House for a committee meeting, but Wilmet sits drowsily on the sidelines, having nothing to contribute to the discussion. It is not that Wilmet wants to have a career, but she wants connection. She fantasizes about working "in a small cosy office where a little group of women might gather in a room, drinking tea and eating biscuits, discussing the iniquities of the Boss."

In fact, Wilmet is socially isolated to a startling degree for a woman who is so interested in the life around her. Though she lives with her mother-in-law and is fond of her, the two women have little in common. She makes clear that despite his sterling qualities, she considers her husband Rodney to be rather boring. He is a man who invites a pompous colleague to dinner on Wilmet's birthday, who thinks a cyclostyled report on the linoleum industry would make good bedtime reading for a guest, and who – horror of horrors! – is “slightly fatter and balder” than when he had been a “dashing major” during the war years. Although he occasionally brings home a surprise present for Wilmet, she is dissatisfied with these gestures of love because “there was always a good reason” for the gift, such as that he happened to see something that she might like, and apparently this doesn't meet her standard for heady romance. As far as her social circle goes, she refers to “a vague collection of friends who always seemed to need praying for”, hardly an inspiring crowd, and in fact none of them appear in the novel.

She does have one close friend, Rowena Talbot, but Rowena has a home, children, and a social circle of her own. Think for a moment about Rowena's living room. The piano is crowded with pictures of family and friends, and Rowena herself is busy smocking a dress for her daughter. When Wilmet arrives for a visit, Rowena begs for news, but Wilmet has none. It is Rowena who has the juicy gossip about their old crush Rocky Napier. Rowena even does most of her own cooking. In a poignant scene, Wilmet feels a surge of rueful appreciation for Rowena's work-worn hands.

Yet this friendship is not as fulfilling as it might be. For one thing, Rowena lives far out in the suburbs so Wilmet doesn't see her often. The suburban social crowd is a bit boring too. At Rowena's cocktail party, the color-loving Wilmet notes, “nearly all the women in black,” and, “The conversation was inclined to be heavy going...”. Wilmet loves masculine attention and tries to engage the men present in convivial chat but, “one was often interrupted in such a conversation by the appearance of the wife, usually with some bright domestic remark that made one feel unwanted and shut out of the dreary cosiness of their lives.” Meanwhile, the efforts of Rowena's husband Harry to interest Wilmet in an affair are clumsy and distasteful. No wonder that the drunken Piers's desire for a quiet chat in another room seems so romantic!

The great tie between Rowena and Wilmet is their shared past in the WRNS. This past as recalled by Wilmet is a sunny and exciting time of romance and youthful pranks. The cameo appearance by the glamorous Rocky Napier makes the point better than any long descriptive passage could for those who have read *Excellent Women*. Both women have had a turn at romance with him before meeting “the two rather dashing army majors” who turned into “Harry going up to Mincing Lane every day and Rodney working from nine-thirty to six at the Ministry.” And there were other men as well. “After all, the man one eventually marries is practically never one's first proposal, surely?” says Wilmet to Sybil naively, going on to imply that she had more than one proposal before Rodney came on the scene. Later on she says, “...remembered now after ten years this life had a fantastic dreamlike quality about it.” It is a dream that Wilmet wants to recapture, to relive, but she is all too aware of the passing of time. Reminiscing with Rowena keeps this life alive for her, and she tries to recreate the romance of it with her fantasizing about Piers and her other bids for masculine attention. These efforts are constantly letting her down, and her various observations of younger people throughout the book depress her. The most accessible point of comparison (for North Americans at least) would be the fellow who was captain of his secondary school football team, adored by all the girls, a “big man on campus”, and after graduation became “just another Joe” for the rest of his life, continually recalling past glories that can never come again. Many of us probably know someone like this, and Wilmet is in a similar predicament. Because she wants to recreate the past, she is unable to be fully present in her own life, and her fantasizing causes her to miss the clues that would tell her what is actually happening right under her nose. The reader knows, though Wilmet doesn't, that Sybil and Professor Root are falling in love. The reader knows, though Wilmet doesn't, that Piers is not particularly interested in women. The reader sees, along with the aptly named Sybil, that all is not well in Rodney's marriage, but Wilmet thinks the boredom is all on her side.

The first-person narration in *A Glass of Blessings* serves to emphasize Wilmet's sense of isolation. We get a sense of how limiting she finds her life. We also get a close look at the ways in which she fools herself. Rodney is “going bald in a rather distinguished way.” Really? Or, “No,” I said comfortably. “I'm useless.” Comfortably? For the one thing Wilmet has is time, and she is far from comfortable with it. She describes her “wandering round the shops.” She “sometimes felt guilty

about my long idle days.” Mary Beamish “was the kind of person who always made me feel particularly useless.” In short, as she reflects before going to Miss Prideaux’s for tea, “There was plenty of time, perhaps too much time.”

Here we have a woman who is disconnected from the life around her, who feels irrelevant. She is out of place, as the references to wandering suggest. She has no outlet for her skills. She is largely isolated socially, spending a great deal of time by herself. Finally, she is displaced in time, living on the memory of past good times or in her own fantasies, often unable to see what is happening right in front of her. Her dissatisfaction with her life gives her the impetus to change things, though she is often unable to see what the real problem is. Let’s take a closer look at Wilmet’s wanderings, and trace the incremental steps that lead to the novel’s cheerful resolution.

In May 1955, as Pym makes notes for the novel that will become *A Glass of Blessings*, she reflects, “When starting to tell a story you have to choose exactly the point to plunge in.” (AVPE, p.194) She “plunges in” adeptly with the shrilling of a telephone in church. This sets the context: a spiritual journey. We are quickly apprised of the time as well: it is noon, and Wilmet is attending this mid-day service because she is one of “the idle ones” as she describes herself. Moreover, it is her birthday; she is thirty-three, and throughout the book she will recur to the idea of her lost youth. In a clever authorial stroke, Pym has Wilmet reveal that it is St. Luke’s day, the feast day of the church’s patron saint, thus linking Wilmet’s individual life to the life of the church. St. Luke’s feast day is October 18, and we know from Pym’s notebooks that she originally thought of ending the novel with the drama of kindling the “new fire of Easter.” She later changed this, and the novel takes place over roughly a year, giving Pym the time frame she needs for the development of both plot and Wilmet’s character. When the “new fire of Easter” is kindled dramatically and a bit comically by the Master of Ceremony’s cigarette lighter, Wilmet has grown somewhat but is still entangled in a fantasy of being the source of salvation and focus of adoration for Piers, thus celebrating a sort of inverted Easter.

The telephone in the marvelous opening sentence starts Wilmet’s thoughts wandering. Pym plays with this theme of wandering throughout the book, as Wilmet gets progressively more involved with a cast of other wanderers. Piers strays into a wine bar when he should be heading back to work. Mr. Bason’s straying fingers keep picking up other people’s possessions. Harry is a straying husband who invites Wilmet to stray with him. The active and helpful Mary Beamish is out of place in a convent when she belongs in the world. Father Ransome thinks of wandering from the “good Anglican path” as Wilmet calls it, and only Mary’s steadying presence keeps him from going over to Rome. The boring model husband Rodney starts to stray. Even a character so minor that we never even meet him, Ransome’s friend Father Sainsbury, strays from the Anglican church, and after going over to Rome does a kind of penance by wandering over Exmoor, one of the rainiest locations in Great Britain. Much of this is humorous, but Wilmet’s plight is not.

The ringing of the telephone in the middle of a service, borrowed from an incident in Barbara Pym’s life, not only sets up the themes of dislocation and untimeliness, but it drives the plot. Wilmet turns her head when she hears it, and thereby spies the oh-so-handsome and charming Piers Longridge. At the end of the service, Wilmet approaches Father Thames to speak to him for the first time, but still thinking of the untimely phone call, she blurts out the thing that has distracted her, “How strange to hear a telephone ringing in church!” and then is embarrassed by how unsuitable her remark is. We see at once that Wilmet has a high value for appearances and for her position in society. Today we think of phone calls as an annoying constant, keeping us connected when we wish we weren’t, but in 1950’s London, where not every house had a telephone, they often brought news of importance, and indeed, surprising phone calls will punctuate the novel. Father Thames reveals that the mystery caller is the new curate, who will prove to be another charming, world-weary, and devastatingly handsome man. The conversation delays Wilmet long enough that Piers is able to speak with her, and her mind begins to wander in most unsuitable directions. She now begins to formulate two goals, to help Piers in some undefined way that we realize means an affair, and to take more part in the life of St. Luke’s church. In the following chapter she adds a plan of giving blood, thus beginning a reluctant relationship with Mary Beamish. Since all of these goals mean involvement with real people, she is going to find all of them much more challenging than she realizes.

Her efforts at the church start out poorly. Father Thames, who doesn't even recall her name, accosts her in the church courtyard and appeals to her to be an answer to prayer by becoming the cook-housekeeper at the clergy house. The idea of being an answer to prayer is so seductive that Wilmet is almost ready to agree, until, "I remembered that I was married and could hardly leave Rodney, even if I did nothing very much in the way of housekeeping for him." Things look up wonderfully when she is able to recommend Wilfred J. Bason for the job. Now she really has been an answer to prayer, even if Father Thames continues to forget her name!

The reception in the church hall for the newly arrived Father Ransome goes much less well. Those who are used to attending such events can readily recognize this devastating satire of church fellowship. The shabby hall, the unappetizing refreshments, the awkward timing of the event, and the ill-assorted group of church-goers are all sent up in gleeful style. Wilmet, so eager to attend and meet Father Ransome and Mr. Bason, is appalled at the company with whom she is expected to mingle: sinister nuns, boring elderly ladies, chinless aristocrats, working-class helpers, random teenagers, and worst of all, a group of men who aren't thrilled when she tries to chat with them. On the plus side, Mr. Bason is a fount of gossip, but Wilmet soon feels that he is getting above himself and needs a put-down. On the plus side, Father Ransome is tall, dark, and handsome. On the other hand, his eye-rolling reaction to the event is disconcerting. To top it all off, Mary Beamish seems to think that Wilmet has been standing around lonely and neglected. How awful to have plain, do-gooding Mary Beamish feel sorry for one! The walk home in the rain seems to be the final straw. Mr. Coleman doesn't even look at her as he gets into his motor car, let alone offer her a ride home!

The plan to "help" Piers gets off to a fine start with a confidential chat at Rowena's cocktail party and then a luncheon date and a romantic walk by the river, but goes along in fits and starts, with one untimely phone call leading nowhere, and Wilmet seldom seeing Piers except at her weekly Portuguese class where he is the instructor.

The plan to give blood proves to be much more successful. Wilmet lies on a cot in a converted church crypt and contentedly contemplates the value of her life-saving donation. In a comical reflection of her inner thoughts, Wilmet notices an eccentric lady ranting about the importance of her blood and demanding to be first in line to donate. Like several other characters in the novel, this woman mirrors Wilmet's inner preoccupations. In this case, as in others, Wilmet is diverted by the woman, but she does not gain any insight.

The ever-helpful Mary Beamish has accompanied Wilmet and invites her to help pick out a new dress. Because this is a task Wilmet enjoys, she cautiously agrees, but later finds herself *tete-a-tete* with Mary in a tearoom, with Mary in the mood to exchange confidences. Wilmet is already feeling a bit jealous because Handsome Ransome is staying with the Beamishes, but when Mary starts quoting poetry, Wilmet is horrified. She says, "I looked at her dispassionately and saw almost with dislike her shining, eager face, her friendship offered to me. What was I doing sitting here with somebody who was so very much not my kind of person? It was my own fault for getting involved with St. Luke's, I told myself unreasonably." Now what is the real problem here? It is that Mary is, in fact, very much Wilmet's kind of person. Wilmet is in her element helping to dress up plain, undistinguished Mary, but when she realizes that they have something in common, she can only think of getting away from her. Wilmet reads poetry too, though she doesn't want to admit it to Mary, but that is not the crux of the problem, it is only a symptom. Looking at Mary, Wilmet sees a woman who is lonely like herself. To be friends with her, to share her thoughts and feelings with her, would be an admission of failure for Wilmet. She needs to get away so that she can go back to thinking of herself in more heroic terms.

As the novel progresses through the church year, we come to Christmas, a time of new birth and the turning of darkness to light. In a seemingly minor incident, almost lost between the excitement of the Christmas Eve mystery gift and Mr. Bason's Boxing Day gossip tour of the clergy house, Wilmet receives a small gift from Mary Beamish, two handkerchiefs. This small gesture of friendship marks a turning point in Wilmet's relationship with Mary, though Wilmet's first response is just to feel vaguely guilty at not having reciprocated. Wilmet quickly goes back to thinking of Piers, to whom she has assigned responsibility for her mystery gift. These two relationships will be catalysts in Wilmet's quest for meaning in her life, though she doesn't know it yet. In a deft authorial stroke, Pym juxtaposes the two gifts at the end of Chapter

Eight so that we notice the handkerchiefs as well as the little Regency box. One gift invites Wilmet to go further astray, and one will start her on the path to more connection with others and herself.

After the comedy of the tea party-with-tour and its surprise denouement with the death of Mary's mother, Wilmet settles down at the end of Chapter Nine to write a letter of condolence to Mary. Wilmet resolves, "to be as helpful as I could to her in the future..." This is the first time that we see Wilmet thinking of reaching out to someone without her own appearance or benefit in mind. Again, it is placed at the end of the chapter so that we don't miss it.

In the next chapter, we find Wilmet being genuinely useful, assisting Mary with the funeral collation and staying to chat afterwards at Mary's invitation. Though Wilmet is horrified at the revelation that Mary is to test a vocation as a nun, at the end of the chapter she takes Mary's part against her overbearing brother in a surprising act of solidarity. The conversation with Mary also introduces the concept of "practical sympathy", a quality Mary attributes to Father Bode and which intrigues Wilmet. What more the women say about it is not revealed, but the context shows that it is a union of feeling and practical help in service to another, a path that Wilmet has just started down with her service to Mary.

We might say that Wilmet's incremental inner changes, her inching forward and back, make up the skeleton of the story over which Pym layers a rich assortment of incidents both comic and poignant, and that this comes into focus at the turning of the year.

On Shrove Tuesday, the day before the start of Lent, Wilmet gets a shock when she discovers that Rowena's husband Harry sent the mystery Christmas gift. At the same dinner party, she finds that Piers is carrying around what he claims is a love letter, while Rodney is predictably carrying around a cyclostyled report from the Ministry. These two revelations don't seem to connect in her mind to show her that Piers has a life that doesn't include her except as a casual pal. Rather, she continues to fool herself that Piers is a figure of romance and that she can have an important role in his life. This habit of fooling herself in the face of evidence is something with which Barbara Pym was familiar in her own life, and in assigning it to Wilmet, avowedly one of her favorite characters (AVPE, p. 223), she suggests an uncomfortable truth: that we all do this on occasion.

Winter brings Wilmet the surprise knowledge that Rodney enjoys the manly tasks of dealing with frozen plumbing and recalcitrant heating apparatus. She wonders, "if I really knew the man I had married." Of course she doesn't, but she doesn't make an effort to get to know him better either. Instead, her vaguely formulated Lenten aim is to be more like the unknown woman with the cultured voice who called the clergy house to ask for the times of the Ash Wednesday services. Making a good impression is still a primary, though unacknowledged, goal.

"The New Fire of Easter...revealed a bough of golden forsythia decorating the font, and life seemed to stretch out before me new and exciting," says Wilmet. Ah, Easter and springtime! A time of rebirth, but poets seldom highlight the messy struggle of the birth process. Barbara Pym does. Here she portrays three bumpy social events in quick succession: Wilmet's lunch with Rowena, her lunch with Piers, and her visit to Mary at the convent. Rowena's chat focusses on the confinement of her life. "Neither of us has had a lover, or is ever likely to," she declares. "The idea has got translated into something remote, even comfortable, now. Like morning coffee with a woman friend in a country town – none of the uncertain rapture and agony of those Rocky Napier days!" Wilmet feels rebellious at this, and then later embarrassed when Rowena reverts to Harry's interest in Wilmet and implies that Rodney is not as dashing. The episode ends with Wilmet making a telephone call – an untimely one as it turns out – to see whether Piers is all right. The common voice on the phone which introduces Piers's lover Keith to the reader perplexes Wilmet, but doesn't warn her off. The luncheon with Piers is awkward and doesn't lead to a romantic interlude, ending abruptly when he goes back to work and Wilmet heads for the convent to see Mary. Mary, realizing that the convent is the wrong place for her, plans to be back in London before Corpus Christi. She has no place to stay, and Wilmet impulsively invites her to stay with her, an invitation that instantly gives her misgivings. Now Mary and Wilmet will be in the same place at the same time on a daily basis, and they will be attending church together, thus furthering their friendship and drawing Wilmet further into the life of St. Luke's.

Rodney's first venture into 'working late at the office' coincides with Sybil's annual night out with a friend, and Wilmet gets a "brilliant idea." She will go on an adventurous expedition, wandering out beyond Shepherd's Bush to find out where Piers lives. She is interrupted while planning this foolhardy undertaking by Mr. Coleman, and the adventure of the purloined Faberge egg, "a kind of colored Easter egg," as Mr. Coleman calls it launches her on a new quest. Now she has something in common with Mr. Coleman, even though he is not of her class. Just as importantly, her foray into the clergy house to give Mr. Bason cover while he replaces the egg brings her up against Father Bode. His plan to get Mary a job at a retreat house leads him to air his idea of a parish retreat. "We might hire a coach," he suggests. Wilmet recoils in alarm. We know her well enough to realize that being trapped in a coach, let alone at a retreat center, expected to share her inner feelings with a group that she still thinks of as oddballs, is not something she can contemplate...yet. This tiny scene, just a few lines long, foreshadows the progress Wilmet is going to make in connecting to other people rather than judging them. Although neither Wilmet nor the reader know it yet, both the retreat and the coach are going to become reality soon enough.

In another marvelous juxtaposition of events, Mary arrives from the convent, Wilmet discovers that Piers is romantically involved and living with a beautiful young man, and Rodney makes another venture into 'working late'. We are now in the month of May, six months on from the beginning of the novel, and beginning with the date with Piers that ends so badly, many events will mirror those in the first part of the novel, showing us the contrast in Wilmet's behavior as she begins to come to grips with her life.

The shock to Wilmet of finding that Piers views her as hopelessly self-involved is as severe a blow to her self-esteem as the discovery that she has been hoping for an affair with a gay man, perhaps greater. Faced with this judgement, her instinct is to draw back into herself in self-protection, but Mary's presence prevents that. Nevertheless, when Rodney arrives home after Wilmet has already gone to bed, she not only pretends to be asleep to avoid speaking with him, she tells us that she has taken a sleeping pill. At the end of her life, Barbara Pym, having finished the rough draft of another novel, expresses the wish to live long enough to revise it, "loading every rift with ore." Here we have a wonderful illustration of how she does this. Sleeping pills don't grow on bedside tables. Wilmet is unhappy, more unhappy than she is willing to admit; at some point she has been to the doctor and complained of insomnia. Sleeping pills used to be prescribed like candy, especially to women, and Wilmet sometimes takes them, either to get to sleep or to avoid intimacy with Rodney. All this is conveyed in a short phrase, as Wilmet avoids the husband who has been avoiding her.

Once again Wilmet finds herself helping Mary to select clothes. Now there is a difference, however. On Corpus Christi day, Wilmet remarks to Mary, "Perhaps it's one's demeanor rather than one's dress that matters. I'm sure you would know how to greet the retreatants, *whatever you wore...*" (italics mine). Friendly, other-oriented Mary grasps that Wilmet is unhappy and asks her about it. While Wilmet is not about to confess to the whole fiasco of her crush on Piers, she opens up to another person about her feelings for the first time in the course of the novel. This partial openness and Mary's warm reassurance is another step in cementing their friendship. Mary also makes the point that facing one's faults can make one "even nicer." Up until now Wilmet has been avoiding this, but Mary expresses one of the paradoxes of spiritual growth. Confronting one's own inadequacies and failures opens new possibilities.

Wilmet's growing friendship with Mary is already opening new doors. No longer on the sidelines, Wilmet is now one of the church decorators. At the inevitable fellowship hour after the service, prompted by Mary, Wilmet helps to fetch tea for Miss Prideaux and Sir Denbigh Grote. The affair of the egg enables her to chat with Mr. Coleman. Though she feels "rather foolish" as she inquires after the Husky, she is meeting him on his terms, rather than looking for attention from him. We may wonder why Pym has skipped over Whitsunday, one of the three main holy days in the Christian calendar, to set these events on Corpus Christi day. Corpus Christi celebrates the body of Christ, as the name suggests, and the mystical communion of his real presence. On Corpus Christi, reality and presence form the message, and here Wilmet admits to some of her reality and is present in the body of Christ in a church hall, mingling as best she can.

Another shock is in store for Wilmet when Sybil announces her plan to marry Professor Root and make Rodney and Wilmet find a place of their own. Wilmet has not yet regained her equilibrium when she arrives at the retreat center for a visit with Mary that turns into a mini-retreat of her own.

The two scenes in the garden of the retreat center are, in my opinion, two of the most remarkable scenes in Barbara Pym's work. Feeling useless when she wants to be useful, Wilmet begins by perching anxiously on an upright chair or hard bench, ready to spring into action. Then, emptying some pea pods onto the compost pile, Wilmet is captured by the beauty and peace of the scene. The green shade seems to take her into another and older world, one where pagan and Christian symbols mingle. The apple trees suggest the Garden of Eden, with its guilty associations and enticing prospect of knowledge of good and evil, but here they also represent fruitfulness, with lively birds swooping around them. The compost pile is a heap of rotting vegetables, and also a spot where refuse transforms into richness so that new life can spring forth from it. Keith, memorable for his pensively romantic face as he posed next to a tree in a knitting catalogue, here transforms in imagination into Pan peering through the foliage, at once an alien and friendly presence. Wilmet is fully present in the moment, in touch with something fundamental. The spot is so peaceful and yet so vital that even the light seems green. In a final touch, the trees shelter bee hives. Bees function only in community and function so well together that scientists tell us they are like a single organism. According to folklore, they also have a need to be connected to the human environment where they live. Any news affecting members of the human family in the vicinity has to be told to the bees or they will abandon their hive. Wilmet imagines these hives as, "a kind of primitive confessional" and further imagines naughty school-boys and unwed mothers there in a reflection of her own need for forgiveness and a fresh start. She says, "I went slowly back to the lawn, but to a deck chair now..." For the first time in the novel, we see Wilmet quiet and at peace.

When the bees swarm just as the retreatants arrive, it seems to be an emergency until an elderly priest says calmly that he can take the swarm. This shabby and saintly man might be the image of an older Father Bode, that humble exemplar of "practical sympathy". In this scene, the authority of the Christian priest gathers the straying bees back into the safe harbor of a hive. Wilmet notices another priest jotting an idea for a sermon, but the scene works on Wilmet on a more subtle level. She has no need of a sermon to feel the effect of it.

Back at home, Rodney and Wilmet cope with looking for a new place to live and experience the novelty and sadness of finding themselves surrounded by the beat generation in the greenery of a coffee bar with the real Keith in attendance. The vacation to Cornwall that follows is evidently a bit of a mixed blessing also. Wilmet notes, however, that the search for a new home, "seemed to have brought us closer together than we had been for years..." For *years!* Here near the end of the novel, Wilmet tosses off a phrase that expresses much about all her previous restlessness and dissatisfaction. When Rodney suggests that their next trip should be to sunny Italy, Wilmet counters with, "It would be better to go to the parts we don't already know. After ten years they might be too sad." Finally she is ready to let go of the supposedly glorious past and explore the real possibilities of the present.

All is not smooth sailing yet, however. Rodney confesses that he has been taking Prudence Bates out to dinner and going to her flat afterwards. Surprisingly, Wilmet also confesses to having gone to lunch with Harry and with Piers without telling Rodney. Although Rodney protests that her indiscretions are less than his, presumably because they haven't ended in the bedroom or even on a Regency sofa, Wilmet's confession shows that she knows she has been unfaithful in spirit at least. With the air cleared, Wilmet and Rodney can start a new chapter in their marriage though not without some further reflection on Wilmet's part.

The final scene of the book finds us once again in a church hall at a social event complete with the elderly Miss Prideaux and Sir Denbigh Grote, Mary Beamish, Bill Coleman, working class helpers, and the handsome Father Ransome, now married to Mary. Once again Wilmet can't resist telling us what she is wearing ("an emerald green feather cap with my black suit.") Once again the gossip is flowing. Yet from Wilmet's point of view, the two church fellowship events that bookend this narrative of struggle and spiritual growth could not be more different. Not only does she not try to avoid Miss Prideaux and Sir Denbigh, she puts herself out to speak with Mr. Coleman when she finds herself next to him (and is

rewarded with juicy gossip). She still jokes with Marius Ransome, but now she feels no resentment because he is attracted to Mary. Most significantly, when Mary's overbearing brother says he wants to leave, she contentedly tells him that she can't leave yet, "because we all came from St. Luke's *in a coach*." (italics mine)

In a year's time, Wilmet has gone from isolation to connection, from self-consciousness to other-consciousness, and from judgement to acceptance of those around her. Her surface view of what is happening around her is beginning to blossom into insight, though Pym is too skillful a novelist to make Wilmet into a plaster saint. She still loves clothes and she still loves gossip, and why not? Pym has a gift for celebrating the contradictions that make us human.

In a final revelation, Wilmet is struck by Mary's quote from "The Pulley" by one of "our greater English poets", the Anglican priest George Herbert. Like so many of his poems, "The Pulley" expresses the push-me-pull-you struggle to be holy. Mary sees her life as, "a glass of blessings," and Wilmet realizes that hers is as well and that she has been blind to it. Heading for home and Rodney, Wilmet is firmly engaged with her life as it is in the present. No longer burdened with ennui, hankering after past glories, and unduly concerned with impressing others, she describes the evening ahead as, "a happy and suitable ending to a good day." As Father Bode would say, "All very satisfactory, I think."

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