

# Difficult Compassion, Compassionate Modernism

Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel*

**E**thel Wilson's *Swamp Angel* (1954) begins with the end of a mistaken "act of compassion" (11): Maggie Lloyd leaves her cruel husband, whom she had married out of compassion, and sneaks away to begin a new, independent life at Three Loon Lake in the interior of British Columbia. Reflecting on her feelings of guilt, Maggie resigns herself not to think of "the dreadful thing she had done to Edward Vardoe" and concludes that "He is he and I am I" (41). While Maggie escapes her relationship with Vardoe and, seemingly, the feelings of guilt that accompany its end, the tension between compassion as a sacrificial union with another and the insistent subjective autonomy captured in the decisive split between "he" and "I" in the above quotation preoccupies Wilson throughout her novel. This tension drives the novel's plot, inspires some of the most philosophical passages in all of Wilson's writing, and illustrates the difficult nature of compassion that Wilson noted in a 1955 radio program about Joyce Cary. As Martha Nussbaum claims, "[c]ompassion is controversial" (354) precisely because philosophers disagree about the definition and value of an emotion that seems to demand the subject's self-loss in feeling for another. Through her investigation of the tension between Maggie's compassionate self-sacrifice and desire for autonomy, and her reimagining of compassion as a modernist emotion in *Swamp Angel*, Wilson participates in the philosophical and aesthetic controversies surrounding compassion.

Wilson's representation of compassion in *Swamp Angel* is indeed controversial. While most of her critics have discussed *Swamp Angel* as a novel that promotes compassion as a means of reconciling the individual and her community

and as evidence of “Maggie’s resolution of the responsibility of the self to others” (Murray 244), Wilson continually complicates the assumption that compassion offers any such resolution, to an individual’s life or to the narrative of a novel. Wilson certainly explores the universal and moral character of compassion, but in her novel, as in Maggie’s marriage to Vardoe, compassion is always in competition with the individual desires of her characters. Attentive to the challenges compassion poses, especially to female autonomy, Wilson’s redefinition of compassion as active, difficult, and unsentimental not only troubles the conventional critical reading of the novel’s interest in the emotion, it also underlines Wilson’s status as a modernist and philosophical novelist.

Critics have struggled to categorize Wilson as a modernist; although she was born only six years after Virginia Woolf, for example, Wilson published her first novel in 1947, six years after Woolf’s death, and two decades after A. J. M. Smith and F. R. Scott inaugurated Canadian modernism in *The McGill Fortnightly Review*. While Wilson’s modernism becomes more legible through her representation of compassion, her focus both on an emotion that is often perceived as passive and feminine and on the ways it affects women’s lives specifically may appear at odds with the gendered modernist critique of sentimentality, a critique that was so vigorous and widespread that Michael Bell has named it “one of the few threads uniting the internal variety of modernisms” (160).<sup>1</sup> In the years surrounding the publication of *Swamp Angel*, however, Wilson sought to distinguish her representations of emotion, especially of compassion, from sentimentality. For example, in a letter to John Gray, her editor at Macmillan, dated July 25, 1953, Wilson discussed *Swamp Angel* and described “the only way [she could] write—of beauty and emotion and then with a horrid fear of sentimentality, tipping it back on to the other side with a flat statement” (186). Like Smith, Scott, Woolf, and other modernists, Wilson “discriminate[d] *within* the realm of feeling” (Bell 2) by countering a “host of improprieties” modernists associated with sentimentality—including “intellectual softening, nostalgic lassitude, effeminacy, [and] romanticism” (Cuddy-Keane 210)—with a more rigorous and objective representation of emotion.<sup>2</sup> Wilson clearly discriminates between compassion and sentimentality in a talk about Joyce Cary that she gave just one year after *Swamp Angel* was published:

Mr. Cary’s God’s-eye view of his created beings is lighted by an understanding that informs us all. He does not judge, he does not explain, he does not use comparison as an argument; and his compassion (which has nothing to do with

sentimentality) is the true compassion which does not imply only 'a bending down towards,' but takes its human (and possibly divine) place as 'a bearing with' or at least 'a feeling with' people. ("Joyce" 78)

Notably, Wilson admires Cary for qualities her critics would later find in her own writing. Desmond Pacey, for instance, commends Wilson's ability "to arouse our interest in and compassion for the most apparently unsympathetic of characters" (99). Here, as in *Swamp Angel*, "true compassion" may be universal and divine, an "understanding that informs us all," visible from God's omniscient perspective and felt when humans "bear with" one another.

As Wilson further defines compassion, however, she moves from the potentially divine perspective of Cary's "God's-eye view" to the decidedly difficult human perspective. "And yet," Wilson claims, "compassion is not only a passive element; it is active, and we find it to be so in our lives. Compassion is sometimes highly complicated by our discovery in human relations that there is a choice to be made, not always between right and wrong, but between what appear to us to be two wrongs, because there is no right. Then, it is difficult" ("Joyce" 78). Here Wilson considers a model of compassion that does not easily correspond to a divine position. This "difficult" compassion necessitates the compassionate individual's action; it requires "a choice to be made" that cannot be guaranteed by an absolute morality, "because there is no right." As she often does in her novels, in her definition of compassion Wilson also oscillates between divine and human perspectives, and this persistent oscillation inserts Wilson in a philosophical debate about the very nature, possibility, and value of compassion.

Wilson's engagement with compassion's philosophical tradition positions her as a philosophical novelist. As David Stouck notes, the tension between the individual and her community makes up "the philosophical vision of [Wilson's] novels" (*Ethel* 87). Furthermore, compassion forms an important part of the "philosophical resonance" (1) that Anjali Bhelände has identified in Wilson's fiction. Noting the similarities of Wilson's ideas to Indian philosophy, Bhelände's reading of Wilson's work focuses on the subject-object dualism that compassion promises to overcome. Bhelände emphasizes "the change in perspective when one reaches a plane of consciousness that is beyond dualistic logic" and argues that Wilson's fiction transcends "[t]he polarity between the 'self' and the 'other'" (3). Bhelände's emphasis on the transcendent moments of Wilson's fiction, however, diminishes the way in which human relations often rise up to challenge compassion in *Swamp*

*Angel*. For example, although Bhelande is right to note that “Nell and Maggie are perceived not only as women but as seekers with a spiritual quest” (81), her conclusion that Wilson’s “focus” is not ultimately gender (81) brackets the very gendered risks involved in compassion that Wilson seems keen to foreground as part of the emotion’s “difficulty” in her novel. Rather, through her focus on the challenges facing female “seekers” in particular, Wilson subtly critiques the philosophical tradition that has defined both women and compassion as passive and sentimental.

Wilson’s theory of difficult compassion, particularly as we see in the persistent tension between compassionate union and individual autonomy in *Swamp Angel*, transforms both Arthur Schopenhauer’s and Friedrich Nietzsche’s definitions of the emotion. Emphasizing compassion as a transcendent union with the Other that dissolves individuality, Schopenhauer defines compassion as a “direct participation . . . in the sufferings of another” and notes: “When once compassion is stirred within me . . . the difference between myself and him is no longer an absolute one” (85). This emphatic identification forms Schopenhauer’s metaphysics: he describes it as “the sense which identifies the *ego* with the *non-ego*, so that the individual directly recognizes in *another* his own self, his true and very being” (139). Understood in this way, compassion fully risks the self for the sake of the other, a risk Maggie faces in her relationships with both Vardoe and Vera. For Schopenhauer, however, although compassion is the basis of all morality, it is not necessarily intellectual or rational, and so women, who are “inferior . . . in virtue of justice” and “understanding and holding to general laws” (90), “surpass men in the virtue of loving-kindness; because usually the stimulus to this is *intuitive*, and consequently appeals directly to the sense of Compassion” (91). Schopenhauer thus positions compassion as a passive and universal emotion, one that dissolves differences between subjects and individuality itself. In contrast, Wilson’s compassion emphasizes choice and criticizes passivity; thus, while Wilson preserves the transcendent potential of Schopenhauer’s model of compassion, she also transforms it into a feeling that occurs in a moment of time and is possible only from the position of the autonomous individual. Moreover, Wilson’s theory of compassion importantly corrects Schopenhauer’s view of the compassionate and intuitive character of women: *Swamp Angel* presents compassion as a *problem* for women, an emotion that they, like Wilson, must actively redefine.

Like Nietzsche, who famously rejected the self-sacrificial nature of compassion that Schopenhauer celebrates, Wilson also calls attention to

the risks compassion poses to individual autonomy. Christopher Janaway explains that Nietzsche objects to Schopenhauer's promotion of compassion in part "because it can divert one from attending to one's own life and rob one of the sense of a right to one's own well-being" (68). Maggie's marriage to Vardoe and Nell's suspicion about Maggie's friendship with Vera, similarly pit compassion against the flourishing of the strong individual. In fact, Maggie and her friend Nell—who notably "despise[s] sentiment" (104)—are both Nietzschean characters who desire to create their own values outside the social conventions that prescribe them self-sacrificial roles as wife (Maggie) and mother (Nell). Moreover, Wilson's specific definition of compassion as a difficult choice between two wrongs rather than a clear vision of a universal right significantly resonates with Nietzsche's revolutionary argument that "there is no absolute morality" (*Human* 88). Importantly, however, Nietzsche's criticism of compassion, like Schopenhauer's promotion of it, is gendered. Criticizing Schopenhauer's characterization of compassion, Nietzsche claims to oppose its "disgraceful modern softness of feeling" ("Preface" 7), a description that aligns compassion with the effeminate excess of feeling modernists criticized as "sentimental." Although Wilson is interested in female compassion, *Swamp Angel* importantly transforms both Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's gendered definitions of it: no longer "soft," passive, or intuitive, Wilson's compassion is a "difficult" modernist emotion that reflects the moral ambiguity of the modern world.

Commonly, Wilson's critics understand compassion in her fiction as an attempt to create meaning in precisely that morally ambiguous modern world: "her world is the uncompromising real world . . . but it can be modified by . . . compassion and love" (Comeau 38). Brent Thompson acknowledges Wilson's fictional world as one in which, because God does not proclaim himself clearly, the difficult choices of individuals take on extreme importance: "we must employ other human attributes—the intelligent will and compassion—to complete our participation in the 'everlasting web' of creation. The employment of these is based on faith . . . if not in an incomprehensible God, then faith that the intelligent will and compassion will be enough" (29). Wilson's emphasis on the compassionate individual's active choice further indicates that the individual, in the absence of a transcendent morality that illuminates the difference between right and wrong, must fortify her own ethics.

Like Cary's compassionate narrator, Wilson's narrator also takes a "God's-eye view" of the events in *Swamp Angel*. The narrator's omniscient

and detached position has inspired many of Wilson's critics to admire her narrator's compassion; however, they have also ignored the dynamic relationship between that impersonal narrator, who can be as contemptuous as compassionate, and the image of compassion they celebrate in Wilson's work. W. J. Keith, for example, adeptly notes the philosophical nature of the narrator's omniscience—which gives Wilson “the freedom to expand and generalize that only omniscient narrative can provide” (“Overview” 106)—but he reductively concludes that it correlates to a metaphysical understanding of the world. Indeed, the unlimited omniscient point of view allows Wilson to comment upon a situation from a perspective unavailable to her characters. For example, Wilson gives her most direct description of the nature of compassion in *Swamp Angel* in simple, general terms unattached to any one character's perspective: “There is a beautiful action. It has an operative grace. It is when one, seeing some uneasy sleeper cold and without a blanket, bends down, and covers the sleeper because the sleeper is a living being and is cold” (114). Drawing upon passages like this one, Keith argues that Wilson's “is invariably a providential vision, and her authorial intrusions, so culpable to the advocates of modernism, are justified because they reflect and interpret a worldview that presupposes a larger meaning” (“Overview” 113). In other words, as Keith states in a later essay, “Wilson's authorial stance presupposes and to some extent embodies the sense of an imperfectly recognized but still palpable divine purpose” (*Sense* 46).

Wilson's God's-eye view, however, rarely manifests as directly as it does in this brief passage. The elliptical conclusion of the passage, which relates the description of compassion back to Maggie and the strained relationship she develops with Vera at Three Loon Lake, better characterizes both Wilson's style and her interest in the difficulty of compassion: “Maggie was compassionate and perhaps she would serve Vera Gunnarsen in this way, forgetting that she did so, and expecting neither praise nor thanks . . . or perhaps she would not” (*Swamp* 115). The narrator's comments balance Maggie's confidence and remind the reader of Maggie's fallibility. Thus, the providential or divine character Keith finds in the narrator is not one of powerful foreknowledge. Rather, Wilson's intrusions serve as reminders of human failure, including the narrator's, and deny the reader a sure understanding of what is to come and its significance.

More than signalling a divine coordinate, Wilson's detached narrative voice and modernist use of multiple points of view embody the difficulty of compassion as she describes it. That is, rather than uniting opposing

perspectives through her transcendent position, as Schopenhauer might imagine, Wilson's narrator underlines the distinct individualities that might fail to meet each other compassionately. Stouck, picking up on the narrator's occasionally cold tone, argues that instead of reconciling the multiple perspectives offered in the novel, the narrator further troubles compassionate unity: "what . . . involves and disturbs us as we read Ethel Wilson's fiction is a certain *froideur* in the narrative voice, an implied emotional preference for retreat, evasion, and distance, which is always in tension with the author's vision of unity and her theme of human responsibility" ("Novels" 74). Blanche Gelfant best expresses the narrator's ethical position, her denial of a conclusive moral stance, and her implicit call on the reader's judgment:

'Perhaps' or 'perhaps not,' 'I think,' 'it was impossible to say,' the omniscient narrator says again and again in Wilson's fiction, implying that even the all-knowing story-teller does not know the truth. Sometimes we as readers have a choice, because the narrator, uncertain of the truth, offers two exclusive possibilities, two adjectives or nouns linked together by *and* though they require *or*. (21)

Notably, Gelfant describes the position of the reader in terms remarkably similar to those Wilson uses to describe "difficult" compassion as a choice between "two [apparent] wrongs, because there is no right." Unable to provide the "right" moral interpretation for her characters and her readers, Wilson's narrator emphasizes the difficulty of choice and judgment. The detached omniscient narrator reminds the reader of the difficulty of interpreting and responding to an indifferent world. In this way and despite the criticisms of Wilson's modernism that Keith notes, the narrator demonstrates both modernist self-reflexivity and skepticism about the potentially passive and self-sacrificial character of compassion.

Wilson's description of the sleeper quoted above provides the most detailed image of an ideal compassionate act in *Swamp Angel*. Initially, the narrator describes this act in general terms that set it up as a universal definition of compassion:

There is a beautiful action. It has an operative grace. It is when one, seeing some uneasy sleeper cold and without cover, goes away, finds and fetches a blanket, bends down, and covers the sleeper because the sleeper is a living being and is cold. He then returns to his work, forgetting that he has performed this small act of compassion. He will receive neither praise nor thanks. It does not matter who the sleeper be. That is a beautiful action which is divine and human in posture and intention and self-forgetfulness. Maggie was compassionate and perhaps she would be able to serve Vera Gunnarsen in this way, forgetting that she did so, and expecting neither praise nor thanks. . . or perhaps she would not. (114-15)

In her general description of compassion, Wilson repeats many of the characteristics of the emotion that she outlined in her comments on Joyce Cary: compassion is both human and divine, and suggests a universal feeling that links individuals. Like Schopenhauer, Wilson emphasizes that compassion is spontaneous and performed without the fear of punishment or the promise of reward.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Wilson indicates that the virtue of compassion is found in the compassionate person's "self-forgetfulness," which, as Schopenhauer believed to be necessary for compassion, transcends the individual.

As Wilson presents this general image of compassion, however, her referents become more exact and her skepticism of compassion becomes more overt. As she begins, Wilson uses the un-gendered pronoun "one," which signals the philosophical nature of her meditation and the apparently universal quality of both the emotion and its accompanying action. Yet, after the compassionate act occurs, Wilson shifts to the masculine pronoun: "*He* then returns to *his* work" (emphasis added). Finally, Wilson turns to Maggie, a woman whose compassion is in question as the passage ends. This shift in the compassionate subject and the narrator's growing skepticism about the likelihood of a real act of compassion relates to Wilson's transformation and critique of the philosophical tradition of compassion: here, Wilson's female protagonist seems the least likely person to experience or offer compassion.

There is, however, a further philosophical (and more generous) explanation for the narrator's skepticism about Maggie's compassion. In her general consideration of compassion, Wilson emphasizes the self-forgetfulness and transcendence that Schopenhauer praises in the emotion and so implies that compassion occurs in an undivided present moment. This temporality of compassion is important to Wilson's redefinition of the emotion after Maggie leaves Vardoe. According to it, compassion has no past and no future; it occurs only in a spontaneous present moment. This temporality also means that Maggie cannot plan her compassion. Maggie is described as compassionate, but Wilson's definition of compassion here bars that description from determining how Maggie will act in the future; "perhaps" Maggie will show Vera compassion or "perhaps not."

The narrator similarly warns of Maggie's potential failure of compassion when she describes Maggie swimming ten pages later. Maggie thinks of swimming as a metaphor for her relationship with other people and her ability to "swim past obstacles (Vera is sometimes an obstacle)" (*Swamp* 125). Like Wilson's suggestion that compassion occurs in a moment of total presence, swimming allows Maggie to forget "past and future" (126). But,



as in the passage above, Maggie's confidence in her ability to swim—to lead an independent life untouched by the people she “swim[s] round” (168)—is undercut by the narrator who states, “She could never sink, she thinks (but she could)” (126). Thinking of herself as a swimmer, Maggie imagines that she will lead a solitary life in which she will serve others but will not bear the compassionate burden of their pain: “Swimming is like living, it is done alone” (125). Maggie fails to realize, however, that rather than confirm her total independence, swimming, much like compassion, enhances the present and thus brings her into closer relation with the people around her. Furthermore, Maggie's potential to sink signals a moment in which Maggie herself may need the help of another and foreshadows Vera's attempted suicide by drowning, which pulls Maggie into an active participation in her antagonist's pain. Thus, while Maggie cannot plan her compassion, she also cannot count on her independence: the present arises as a moment in which difficult compassion may thwart or foster autonomy.

Two competing ethical maxims further complicate Wilson's theory of compassion. While Maggie's and Nell's credo that “it takes God himself to be fair to two different people at once” (121, 201) signals the individual's desire for autonomy and freedom, Nell's quotation of Donne—“No Man is an Island, I am involved in Mankind” (200)—suggests that the individual inevitably participates in a community. Nell invokes Donne to warn Maggie that her intentions to fortify herself at Three Loon Lake will inevitably draw her out of seclusion and into a community for which she is responsible: “You won't be immune ever at that lake Maggie” (200). While Nell's allusion emphasizes the inevitable communal obligations of the individual, she intends to discourage Maggie from getting too involved in the community at Three Loon Lake, where Vera's self-pity pulls Maggie into an uneven relationship similar to her marriage to Vardoe. Nell thus advises Maggie not to “spend [her] life drying off fools who get wet on purpose” (198) under the false assumption that she can acquire independence at the lake. Nell's invocation of Donne, made after she has given up her Swamp Angel—the revolver that symbolizes her independence—suggests that Nell has suppressed her own individual interests through an act of compassion for her daughter, Hilda, and also serves as a warning to Maggie that she will “always carry [the Gunnarsens'] load” (202). This inevitability, however, helps Maggie commit to staying at the lake. For this seemingly self-sacrificial reason, Maggie has earned an idealized reputation in Wilson criticism as a “secular saint who fulfills herself through giving herself to others” (Smyth 162-63).

Labelling Maggie a “secular saint” or “compassionate victor” (Pacey 138), however, emphasizes the communal sentiment of Donne’s quotation to the point that it eclipses both Maggie’s strong desire for autonomy, which Nell points out, and the potential failures of compassion that Wilson underlines. Notably, *both* Maggie and Nell adopt the view that “it takes God himself to be fair to two different people at once” (121, 201), and, although Wilson’s critics have had less to say about it, this credo better captures the difficulties of compassion upon which the novel meditates. The maxim emphasizes the fact that in human relations compassion requires sacrifice—that the attempt to ease the suffering of one person in the way Schopenhauer imagines, for example, will be at the expense of another. Underscoring the apparent inequity of compassion, then, the maxim also points to Wilson’s concern that the emotion requires a choice between two seeming wrongs: reluctant to further the suffering of anyone, Wilson implies, the compassionate person nonetheless allows one person to suffer in order to help another. More precisely, this choice involves the suffering of the compassionate individual herself, who “bend[s] down” as she “feel[s] with” another (“Joyce” 78). The logic of the maxim, however, might also offer an alibi for the Nietzschean individualist who desires to escape “involvement” with the human community: because I am not God and cannot diminish the suffering of another without sacrificing myself, I will be fair only to myself. While Donne’s quotation promotes an individual’s compassionate “involvement” with the suffering of another, this aphorism risks excusing self-interest as a human inevitability. Importantly, this tension remains unresolved in the novel and in fact characterizes the contradictory nature of Wilson’s difficult compassion.

Furthermore, this maxim illuminates the first example of self-sacrificial and gendered compassion in the novel. *Swamp Angel* begins when Maggie leaves her second husband, Edward Vardoe, whom she had married at the moment of her own ultimate suffering, after the deaths of her father, first husband, and only child: “Maggie Lloyd, with no one to care for, had tried to save herself by an act of compassion and fatal stupidity. She had married Edward Vardoe who had a spaniel’s eyes” (11). Wilson’s description of this compassionate act is notably ambiguous: Maggie’s compassion, an attempt to “save herself,” may be for herself or for Vardoe, but as Maggie’s own maxim suggests and her marriage reveals, her compassion cannot “be fair” to both her and her husband at the same time. In fact, the narrator’s critical assessment of Maggie’s “fatal stupidity” suggests that Maggie’s marriage leads

to her own self-loss. For example, Maggie's marriage demeans her and so interferes with her sense of autonomy: "in the night, as had soon happened after their marriage, she lay humiliated and angry" (11). As the first (and ruinous) act of compassion in Wilson's novel, Maggie's marriage to Vardoe reveals the vulnerable position in which a sacrificial model of compassion places women. In *Swamp Angel*, however, Wilson attempts to work out a theory of compassion that would correct the "fatal stupidity" of Maggie's compassionate misjudgment. A marriage founded on passive, sacrificial compassion transforms the spontaneous and transcendent character of fellow feeling into a duty that continues to erase Maggie's individuality through time. Moreover, this temporal extension of compassion effectively undoes the ambiguity of Maggie's initial compassion: because Maggie's compassion for Vardoe requires her to sacrifice the self she had attempted to save through her marriage, her marriage causes her to "be fair" to her husband instead of her self.

Keeping Maggie's motives for marrying Vardoe in mind, we must ask why Maggie's compassion for Vardoe is problematic, while her eventual compassion for Vera, who resembles Vardoe in both her self-pity and her "dog's adoration" for her husband (65), is often celebrated as proof that Maggie's "one completely unambiguous and unfailing quality . . . is her compassion" (Pacey 139). In fact, Wilson unites Maggie with the Gunnarsens through a telling simile: "By the time that two months had gone past, Maggie's union with Three Loon Lake was like a happy marriage (were we married last week, or have we always lived together as one?)" (106). Despite the initial happiness of the union, however, Vera's self-pity pushes Maggie into another relationship that threatens to compromise her independence, and Vera soon causes Maggie "to experience some of the self-consciousness she had formerly felt with Edward Vardoe" (133). In order to understand the theory of compassion the novel develops, then, we must look more carefully at the "marriage" between Maggie and Vera.

Vera's and Maggie's opposing characterizations respectively correspond to the embodied and excessive feeling associated with sentimentality and the more intellectual and restrained modernist response to it. In particular, Wilson sets Vera's penchant for resentful self-pity against Maggie's stone-like (59) and reserved demeanour. While Wilson characterizes Maggie, like Nell, as "one of these man's women" (147), Vera seethes with jealousy and the *ressentiment* that Nietzsche criticizes as an effeminate expression of weak sentiment (Bell 168). Vera's jealousy of Maggie is a sensual indulgence: "She

indulged in the pleasure of the pain of her small growing jealousy. Since jealousy is a luxury which soon becomes a necessity to those who have felt its sharp enthralling pain" (*Swamp* 110). Indulgent, luxurious, and without "the support of simple philosophy" (109-10), Vera's jealousy bears the marks of the "excessive indulgence in emotion" that modernists criticized as "sentimental" (Cuddy-Keane 210) and that Wilson also criticized in her discussion of her own writing. Maggie, in contrast, impresses a new friend when she tells her tragic story in the style that modernists celebrated, that is, "plainly and without too much emotion" (*Swamp* 149). Thus, while Vera's self-pity corresponds to the gendered and modernist criticism of sentimentality, Wilson positions Maggie as a modernist subject through her renewed emotional independence. In turn, Maggie's emotion and Wilson's meditation on the nature of compassion take on characteristics that distinguished modernist considerations of emotion from the sentimentality modernists distrusted: Maggie's compassion is difficult, a way of feeling in a morally ambiguous world, and associated with Maggie's more masculine position as a "man's wom[an]"; it has an epiphanic temporality and is expressed plainly by both Maggie's action and Wilson's prose. Maggie's tense relationship with Vera, then, also embodies the tension between sentimentality and modernism in Wilson's writing.

As Wilson transforms compassion into a modernist emotion, then, she repositions it as a feeling between women. Maggie's and Nell's belief that "it takes God himself to be fair to two different people at once" indicates the essential change in Maggie between her relationship with Vardoe and her compassion for Vera. Maggie's relationship with Vardoe requires that she 'be fair' to *either* herself *or* her husband, and when she chooses Vardoe, she loses her autonomy in a humiliating marriage to a man who is uninterested in his wife as an individual. Maggie's departure from Vardoe, as Wilson suggests in the images of birds "returning in migration" (7), returns her to herself as Maggie Lloyd. Maggie's independence at Three Loon Lake helps her to feel for Vera in a way that does not risk her entire self. In Vera's most desperate moment, Maggie spontaneously chooses Vera over herself, but, because her compassion exists only in and through the present, she does not compromise her future autonomy as she had through her marriage vows to Vardoe. Thus, Wilson makes autonomy a requirement for compassion, a seeming contradiction that contributes to the emotion's difficulty.

Despite the earlier suggestion that Maggie will "perhaps . . . not" offer Vera compassion, Maggie does offer her antagonist the "operative grace" of the

compassionate in the description of the cold sleeper. Maggie's compassion occurs after Vera, in an extreme act of hopelessness and regret, attempts to drown herself: "Maggie, hearing the drip and drip of water dropping on the wooden floor of the veranda and looking on Vera's ghostly face, knew with horror that Vera had tried to drown herself and had not been able" (190). Although she is incapable of curing Vera of the jealous "Evil One" that causes her self-pity, Maggie offers Vera "helpless compassion" (192) in her moment of real suffering. However helpless, compassion inspires Maggie to the action Wilson describes in the sleeper passage:

[Maggie's] spirit was very sore and sad within her, and still angry, and it seemed to her the least important thing that she should speak and make words, and the most important thing that a fire should burn and warm the cabin and then there would be, somehow, a humanity in the room when the fire was burning." (191)

As Wilson had suggested earlier, spontaneous action, inspired by the humanity that the sufferer and the compassionate share, defines compassion. Furthermore, Wilson's description of Maggie's compassion for Vera is free of sentimentality; the narrator focuses on Maggie's actions and communicates the fellow feeling between the two women "plainly and without too much emotion" (149) through the objective image of the fire that warms the room they share.

While Maggie does not totally forget herself in feeling for Vera, her impulse to help another trumps her concern for herself and thus suggests some level of self-forgetfulness. Vera's suffering deflates Maggie's past problems with her; they are "little things . . . nothings, really" (191). In this moment of difficult compassion, then, Maggie balances her self-interest (her own anger and sadness) with her feeling for Vera. Maggie's compassion thus takes on elements of Schopenhauer's—it joins Maggie and Vera in a moment of shared suffering—but it does not result in the self-sacrificial union of her relationship with Vardoe. Wilson thus suggests that the compassionate individual maintains her autonomy so long as her compassion is only momentary. Here is an alternative vision of the necessity of the present moment for compassion: the compassionate present may not overcome the future, as it does in Maggie's marriage, for to do so would compromise the compassionate individual's autonomy. The spontaneous moment of Maggie's renewed compassion thus also restores the epiphanic quality of the emotion that is lost when compassion becomes a duty.

Maggie's redefined compassion does not, however, cure Vera of the destructive self-pity that causes her suffering. Outside the compassionate

moment Maggie and Vera are still independent subjects within the novel: Vera is Vera and Maggie is Maggie. The novel thus concludes not with the resolution of the opposition with which it began, but with a reminder of the tension between Maggie's and Nell's maxims and their bearing on the uncertain compassion Wilson contemplates in *Swamp Angel*. Nell's repetition of Maggie's belief that "it takes God himself to be fair to two different people at once" (201) also connects the maxim to the Swamp Angel, a symbol of "selfhood and power" (Stouck, *Ethel* 199). Nell relates her own difficult choice between juggling her revolver in travelling shows with her husband, Philip, and providing her daughter, Hilda, with a traditional home: "with me it was Philip or Hilda, Philip or Hilda" (201). Although Nell's story suggests that her choice was between her husband and her daughter, her love for her revolver and the independence it grants her suggest that her real choice was between a life defined by the social expectations of motherhood and one she defined for herself. For Thompson, as for most of Wilson's critics, when Maggie throws the gun in the lake at the end of the novel, she fulfills Donne's image of commitment to community and fully curbs the individualism symbolized in the Angel: "the relinquishment of the Angel is an admission of the necessity to limit the individual's wielding of power in the human community" (31).

Yet *Swamp Angel* concludes with the questions and uncertainty that mark Wilson's prose and undermine Maggie's confidence throughout the novel: "whether or not Maggie will succeed, we cannot know. The ending of the novel brings no formal closure" (Stouck, *Ethel* 200). The last pages of the novel, which describe Maggie going out onto the lake and dramatically throwing the Swamp Angel into it as Nell requested, feature numerous questions, as Maggie and the narrator are unsure of the significance of Nell's request and what the future will bring: "There were certain things that Maggie could not settle. Would a recovered but enfeebled Vera return to the lake and to the poignant sight of that memorable and melancholy shore? And if she did not return, could Haldar so far bend his own strong will to stay with her in town?" (*Swamp* 208-09). Maggie's questions return to the uncertainty of compassion: will Haldar compassionately sacrifice his own desires for his wife? Moreover, Maggie's question about Vera's return underscores the momentary nature of the union between the two women: outside of the compassionate moment, Maggie cannot be sure of how Vera feels. Furthermore, as Maggie contemplates the gun and whether or not she will throw it in the lake, Wilson's prose briefly and significantly

switches to the simple present—“Maggie handles the Swamp Angel and looks at it curiously and thoughtfully” (208)—and thereby emphasizes the importance of her spontaneous and uncertain present for ethical action, in this case Maggie’s fulfillment of her promise to Nell. Again, Wilson stresses the unpredictability of Maggie’s actions. The ending of the novel describes Maggie, having kept her promise to Nell, seeing the lodge from the lake: “Now she stopped . . . to get her direction” (209). Although she resigns to “appl[y] herself to the matters at hand” (209), Maggie knows neither what will come to her next nor how she will respond to it. The last sentence of the novel, which was not included in its first Canadian edition, reinforces Maggie’s commitment to work and to the lodge, the locus of both her autonomy and community: “Maggie turned again, took the oars, and rowed hard, straight in the direction of the lodge” (209).<sup>4</sup> Rather than indicate that Maggie possesses an assurance that the narration of the novel has in fact persistently signaled as fallible and indeterminate, the last sentences of the novel describe Maggie committing to an ethical present in the face of the unknowable future, which Wilson’s emphatic “Now” underscores.

Maggie’s undetermined future makes her further compassion possible but uncertain. But, as Wilson redefines compassion in her novel, she reveals that its unpredictable nature is its very condition of possibility. The virtue of compassion develops from the individual’s choice—between two wrongs “because there is no right”—and so, like Schopenhauer, Wilson emphasizes that the compassionate individual does not perform a duty, which would not allow for her free choice and potential failure. Like Nietzsche, however, Wilson also endorses an individualist ethics that denies an absolute morality. Wilson thus transforms the philosophies of her predecessors: while she presents the individual as transcending her ego in the spontaneous moment of compassionate action, she also suggests that compassion can only be temporary, for a state in which one perpetually sacrifices oneself results in the disparaging suppression of the individual, represented by the image of an apparently dutiful but dependent housewife that Maggie refuses at the beginning of the novel. Most importantly, however, as Wilson transforms previous philosophies of compassion, she also reimagines the gendered assumptions that had defined them. Wilson’s focus on Maggie and her compassion for Vardoe and Vera reveals the risks a sacrificial model of compassion poses for women and redefines the emotion (and the woman who embraces it) as difficult, active, and unsentimental. Thus, while fellow feeling does not decisively indicate the victory of social obligation over the



drive to individual independence, Wilson demonstrates the way in which autonomy shapes the possibility of compassion, especially for women. Maggie's compassion is momentarily met but never held; this difficulty—which underscores choice, autonomy, and continual process—serves as a reminder that compassion, resistant to closure itself, does not bring Wilson's novel to a definitive end.

Difficult, unsentimental, and narrated in plain language, Wilson's theory of compassion also transforms a traditionally passive and gendered emotion into one that embodies the hallmarks of modernist representations of emotion. As she develops her complex philosophy of "difficult compassion," Wilson also develops what might usefully be called a compassionate modernism. Critics continue to struggle to categorize Wilson's writing: as Coral Ann Howells notes, Wilson's distinctive style combines "conventional realism" and modernism so that "her novels shift almost imperceptibly into modernist territory of epiphany, symbolism, and mythic patterning" (298). Often related to her characters' epiphanies, Wilson's representation of compassion also shapes the "modernist territory" of *Swamp Angel*. Attention to the intricacies of Wilson's theory of compassion reveals the contribution her thought makes to the philosophical history of the emotion. Moreover, it opens up a new path on which critics may reevaluate Wilson's modernism at a moment when critics of modernism are also reevaluating the "still-pervasive notions of modernism's hostility to notions of feelings for others" (Martin 10). Wilson's original and complex theory of compassion, then, illuminates not only her own modernism, but also the ways in which modernist modes of representation and philosophical interests combine to examine rigorously the status of emotion in the indifferent but still meaningful modern world. If, as *Swamp Angel* reveals, compassion may be redefined in modernist terms, then, perhaps controversially, Wilson may also help us rediscover modernism's compassion.

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#### NOTES

- 1 Despite modernism's apparently universal disdain for sentimentality, however, feminist critics have attempted to recover sentimentality as part of modernism. For example, in *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word*, Suzanne Clark



- investigates the gendered nature of modernism's criticism of sentimentality, which she argues "located women's writing with the obscenity of the sentimental" (2) and ignored "the sentimental *within* modernism" (4).
- 2 For example, in "A Rejected Preface" to *New Provinces*, Smith complains about the emotional excess of "romantic" and "conventional" Canadian poetry, which he claims represents nature as "humanized, endowed with feeling, and made sentimental," and love as "idealized, sanctified, and inflated" (6). Furthermore, according to Smith's acid assessment, the poet who writes such verse "has a soft heart and a soft soul; and a soft head" (7).
  - 3 Schopenhauer disapproves of Kant's idea that an external voice commands an individual into moral action. Schopenhauer claims that such an impetus to morality actually negates virtue: "A commanding voice, whether it comes from within, or from without, cannot possibly be imagined except as threatening or promising. Consequently, obedience to it . . . is yet always actuated by selfishness, and therefore morally worthless" (16).
  - 4 In "The Rival Editions of Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel*," Li-Ping Geng describes the changes Wilson made to her novel for her American publishers. Although McClelland and Stewart has now adopted the American edition, as Geng argues, this edition "fail[s] to reflect the author's final intentions" (82).

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