

Ethel Wilson's Absent City

A Personal View of Vancouver

one wonder[s] if . . . Moscow . . . London and Washington when . . . reduced to actual people talking to each other change their identities . . . This matter of truth is really difficult and important. TRUTH AND MRS. FORRESTER

In “We have to sit opposite,” a story that combines farce with a terrible sense of foreboding—that masks foreboding with farce—Ethel Wilson describes two highly respectable Canadian women travelling in Germany in the 1930s and, unexpectedly, telling ludicrous lies about the customs of their country. People eat bears, dignified Mrs. Forrester declares, and “Canadian men no longer wear trousers.” Mrs. Forrester is from Vancouver and Mrs. Montrose from Winnipeg, cities that become transmogrified as the women talk about them to German travellers who sit, recalcitrantly, opposite on a Munich-bound train. Talking usually has a disturbingly ambiguous relationship to truth in Wilson’s fiction, falsifying life’s simple or portentous truths and creating truths through falsehoods. In “We have to sit opposite,” truth would seem a straightforward matter of fact—men do wear trousers in Vancouver—but since the blue-toothed German has no immediate way of verifying facts about a foreign country, he believes the lies that inform Wilson’s story.

Lies, stories, and the talk of “actual people” emerge from circumstances and mediations that shape what is being said, sometimes adjusting, distorting, or denying facts that can be readily verified, and sometimes purposefully, perhaps fatally, obscuring those that cannot. In Wilson’s story, coercive circumstances, implied in the story’s title, lead the women to tell tales that represent their comically valiant if vain attempt to win a contest already lost to force. Having been forced into uncomfortable seats and into postures of social helplessness, they use stories—outright lies—to chasten the overbearing

Germans. The comic clash of wills takes on ominous overtones as its political implications emerge. For Mrs. Forrester realizes that she is confronting in the German family the “collective mentality” of a nation threatening to “dominate” the world; indeed, Hitler’s attempt to carry out this threat would soon precipitate a catastrophic war. But like the sleeping women, the world of the early 1930s had closed its eyes to the dangers within sight, trying to block out horrors to which it must awaken in Munich. Thus, the lies that characters tell in the story point to political truisms, if not to truth: that denial cannot defend us against danger, nor fiction against the force of fact.

In the story, “Truth and Mrs. Forrester,” two women wonder whether the friends they talk to determine what they will say about a person or place, and whether places like Moscow, London, Washington—and, one might add, Vancouver—change their identities once they are “reduced to actual people talking to each other” (117). As the characters talk, they imply that talk may be reductive, identity mutable, and truth pragmatic, adjusted to fit the occasion. If the implications are valid, then neither the truths generally accepted about city life, nor a particular city’s identity, would be stable and knowable—or real, if real implies a difference between actualities and the artifactual products of words, a difference hotly argued in postmodern literary theory. Indeed, the more Wilson’s women talk about truth, in effect, theorizing about its apriority or secondariness, the more uncertain and elusive it seems, and the more urgently important. I begin with this urgency because I believe that Wilson’s fiction is energized by a thematic quest for a definition of truth, which is distinct from a quest for truth itself. Religion defined truth as absolute, and art, as universal, Wilson believed, and yet her own art suggested that truth was created by circumstance, contingency, and the confusing effects of language as literary expression and as the ordinary speech of “actual people talking to each other.”

Wilson’s musings on truth and talk place her critic in an ironical position, or so I see myself. For the view of Wilson’s Vancouver that I propose to present is, after all, an artifact of language—the product of a “talk.”¹ Is it, then, necessarily reductive, accommodated to circumstances, only equivocally, if at all, true? And since the talk was about Vancouver as created by Wilson’s language, should one ask whether the writer and her critic, as actual people, changed the identity of the city as they talked about it? As an actual woman, Wilson knew Vancouver through lifelong residency under historical and biographical circumstances that shaped her highly personal

view of the city. My own view of Vancouver is also personal, though I would claim that this transcribed talk is true to Wilson's texts, and not adventurous or merely artifactual. It begins with a recollection.

I first read Ethel Wilson's famous novel *Swamp Angel* on a plane as I was flying into Vancouver. That was twenty years ago. Since then, like Wilson's talismanic migratory birds, I have flown in and out of the city. The first trip, however, remains in my memory because of the overpowering fantasy it evoked—a fantasy of irresponsibility and escape. I had come to the end of the novel and the end of my flight, and I wanted to keep on flying, right out of the city and beyond, into *Swamp Angel's* arcadian landscape. In my fantasy I was already on Capitol Hill, leaving behind my life as well as the city I had finally set foot in only to flee. At Pender Street I would have located the Universal Taxis stand and found the young Chinese cab-driver who now takes me to New Westminster where I board a bus to Chilliwack. From there I travel along the banks of the Fraser River to the village of Hope. I wind up mountain roads, pass streams, waterways, and the Similkameen River, and continue to Kamloops. Twenty-five miles further I arrive, at last, at my destination: Three Loon Lake or Lac La Jeune. This is the itinerary mapped precisely in *Swamp Angel* for the transforming flight that turned, or re-turned, Maggie Vardoe into Maggie Lloyd.

I recall this impulse to follow the novel's heroine out of the city because of the irony that faces me now. Now when I want to stay in Wilson's Vancouver, to inhabit it imaginatively and represent it clearly, I find it strangely absent. This is not to say that Wilson's city lacks clearly identified places set within an accurate map of streets and shops that a stranger, flying for the first time into Vancouver, could easily find. Pender, Powell, and Main Streets, and Granville where a golden retriever plays dead—these are real streets that Wilson's readers have located by following her map of the city, and with a little historical sleuthing they might, perhaps, locate other places Wilson's mentions, like The Krispin and Son Bookstore or a "little notions shop on Commercial Drive."² But Wilson's references to actual (or putatively actual) places raise questions they seem meant to fend. Are the streets merely place-names dropped to create a superficial impression of city life, or are they essential to the creation of an urban atmosphere that her characters will breathe in as people breathe in the noise, excitement, and gaseous smells of Paris or New York? Are particular streets necessary for

particular actions, or can they be switched arbitrarily, as they were in Wilson's first published story, "I Just Love Dogs"?³ Another story, "The corner of X and Y streets," suggests how arbitrary Wilson's street-names can be, for the mystical singing and dancing that may or may not have taken place in London's Soho could have taken place with as much reason, or lack of reason, in Vancouver or anywhere. One could argue that as signs in a literary text, X and Y streets are no more arbitrary than Powell, intoned like a mantra in "Tuesday and Wednesday" as the street where Mort meets his old pal Eddie and his death.⁴ The exact locale of Mort's death adds a needed realism to a story that includes angels among its characters, but setting is subordinate to theme in the story, which points to the marvelous ambiguities created by an interweaving of fiction and fact, talk and truth.

Topographical specificity provides a map of Wilson's city, but whether it creates an urgent urban presence seems to me questionable. I say this knowing that I recognized Pender Street when I first saw it from its description in *Swamp Angel*—fiction supporting fact in an inversed process of validation. But I would argue that the streets one can find in Wilson's fiction and the street-car routes one can follow denote a setting that is incidental, rather than essential, to Wilson's vision of life and to the life of her characters. For Wilson's characters are neither formed nor transformed by Vancouver, a setting seemingly devoid of conditions associated specifically with city life. Density of population, anonymity and *anomie*, impersonality, alienation, indifference, materialism and materialistic desire—these signs of urbanism are strangely absent in Wilson's city. Unlike Wilson's fog-veiled mountains, her city loses contour as light, the illumination a critic hopes to bring, searches for its shape. Where should light fall to reveal the outlines of a city that is not simply background or periphery? Where is the centre of the city, the pulsating heart that gives it life? It cannot be found in crowds and scenes of hustle and bustle which Vancouver, in its early days, may have lacked. But a modern city without masses of intense and hurrying people hotly pursuing their desires seems hard to imagine or explain. Also hard to explain is a city in which characters want to look rather than to buy and have. In "A drink with Adolphus," Mrs. Gormley buys "ten cents' worth of view" by having her taxi-driver stop and let her look out at the "glory" of the world seen from the city (73). Just looking satisfies the human spirit in Wilson's city, though "just looking" usually implies shopping. But Wilson's city is curiously devoid of seductive shops and great department stores

(except for Eaton's, mentioned briefly). It seems devoid also of restaurants, grubby or romantic; of theatres, museums, and libraries, a city's cultural centres; of office buildings, factories, and hotels (the Regal Rooms of "Tuesday and Wednesday" hardly counts). How does one explain all these absences in the city of a writer associated irrefragably with Vancouver as the place she lived in, wrote about, and loved?

Also inexplicable, at least to me, is a city that does not evoke desire—the theme of modern city fiction. Always impelling in city life, desire becomes manifest in city novels in scenes of great expectations. Such scenes hold out a promise of happiness by ostentatious displays of material goods that emphasize the difference between dispossession and riches. Things dazzle the eye in the city and produce the glamorous sights—and glamorous sites—that have lured countless characters to Paris, London, St. Peterburg, Chicago, and New York, and countless readers to Balzac, Dickens, Dostoyevsky and Dreiser. In Mordecai Richter and Gabrielle Roy, the city of promise is Montreal, "the very essence of the big city" to the desirous young heroine of Roy's novel *Bonheur d'Occasion*. Poor Florentine Laclasse, a waitress in a five-and-dime, sees the city offering her "one wild chance of happiness." Like Dreiser's Carrie Meeber, another poor working-girl, Florentine equates happiness with material things and pleasures made immediate in the text by an urban iconography common to city fiction as a literary genre:

She visualized St. Catherine Street in Montreal, the windows of the big department stores, the fashionable crowd on Saturday evening, the florists' displays, the revolving doors of the restaurants, their tables almost flush with the street behind glittering plate glass, the brightly lit theater lobbies, with their long passages beyond the cashier's cage leading up between walls of mirrors, past polished rails and potted plants, up, up toward the screen where the most beautiful pictures in the world are shown: all that she most longed for, admired, envied (8).⁵

Streets, crowds of fashionably dressed pleasure-seekers, restaurants, big department stores, theaters, a luxurious display of flowers, and factitious images of beauty—the aspects of city life elided from Wilson's fiction are all here, configured in an iconography of glitter, glamour, and desire. Wilson's iconography fixes instead upon flying birds, framing windows, and flight.

Swamp Angel begins with "Ten twenty fifty brown birds" flying past Maggie Vardoe's window and drawing her mind after them (7). This opening sentence establishes the theme of escape that twenty years ago had

drawn me into and away from Wilson's Vancouver. Though I did not know it then, *Swamp Angel* had already given me significant clues to the special but strange features of Wilson's Vancouver, and to its special fascination. Maggie Vardoe had felt this fascination. Like other characters to be mentioned later, she had "become attached to, even absorbed into the sight from the front-room window of inlet and forest and mountains" (7). This triad of "inlet and forest and mountains," seen from a window as a distant view, induces in Wilson's characters a sense of esthetic wonder, religious awe, and social indifference. For the luminous triad draws the eye away from the social circumstances of class and gender and directs attention to a providential design in which each of us is caught. Wilson's characters become aware that they are enmeshed within a design woven to include, enthrall, or perhaps entrap them. Like Mrs. Severance they come to see, and lead the reader to see, "the miraculous interweaving of creation . . . the everlasting web," an image to which critics inevitably refer. Perhaps looking outward from a window becomes a habit of Wilson's characters because space seems free of webs and gives closed-in and entangled men and women an illusory promise of freedom. Wilson's readers are induced to look outward by the texts' insistently recurrent prepositions: *out*, *across*, and *beyond*. *Beyond* appears almost inevitably in Wilson's descriptions of places and people. Ordinary people in ordinary rooms, at cocktail parties or alone, lonely or contented, invariably look *beyond* their immediate surroundings to an endlessly changing landscape framed within a window. Thus, the sea and its freight ships, mountains and their vaporous fog and glistening snow, forests with their great trees looming in the light and receding in darkness are always close and always distant, never and always the same, and always the setting of a perpetual flight as migratory birds flew in and out.

Once critical light falls fully on these aspects of Wilson's Vancouver—upon distance and flight—it reveals the city as a point of departure. True, the characters of *The Innocent Traveller* arrive and remain, but Vancouver as a distinctive throbbing city leaves them curiously untouched. For the Edgeworth family of *The Innocent Traveller* has simply transposed to British Columbia a way of life made to order in England. The gentle matriarch Annie remains the same, exercising her sweet but implacable control; the dutiful daughter Rachel continues to carry out her duties; the handsome sons continue their support; and the irrepressible Topaz remains unchanged by a hundred years of living. *The Innocent Traveller* makes one

wonder how a new land and a new and growing city, transformed before the characters' eyes, can leave everyone unchanged. Though Wilson alludes to an historical transformation of a frontier town into a modern city, she describes neither the lawless turbulence of the former nor the vicissitudes of the latter. Like its characters, the novel's city is static, a setting for an established Victorian way of life that defies the forces of history and change. The markers of historical change that Wilson places in the text seem mere acknowledgements of well-known facts recorded in official archives. The characters see and dismiss the auguries of change the historical facts signify because they like the city as it is, or more accurately, as it was. When Topaz reads the slogan of the Hundred Thousands Club (changed in 1911 to the Half Million League), Sister Annie shakes her head at the call for growth: "No, Topaz," she says, "I like it [Vancouver] very well the way it is," and the narrator agrees that "it was a very comfortable little place to live in " (111-2). But cities are not little places, not necessarily very comfortable, and not immune to changes that "no one could stop"—except by arresting the moment in art. Wilson stops time in *The Innocent Traveller*, though she describes decades passing, as they must. During these decades, catastrophic historical events, mentioned only fleetingly, take place somewhere in the background. In the foreground is a beautiful city with "a beautiful name," changed happily from Gastown (a name derived from Gassy Jack Deighton) to Vancouver—a "very pleasant" place where people listened to the "sounds of ocean," ship sirens and sea-gulls' cries, and looked at "the contours of the mountains [that] became part of their lives" (111). Like Three Loon Lake in *Swamp Angel*, the city of Vancouver in *The Innocent Traveller* is a world elsewhere, arrested in time and recoverable only when one travels back to the past through memory and imagination.⁶

Wilson's work traces a pattern of regression, but urban fiction as a literary genre describes progress and equates it with change, the transformation of characters under the influence of the city as a place and way of life. Characters in urban novels may leave the city, but only after the city has left an irradicable mark upon their inmost selves. In Wilson's fiction, the city's influence seems indifferent, inconsequential, or secondary to the captiousness of Time with a capital T. Time is the great arranger of human destiny in Wilson's fiction, acting as a providential agent that moves plot and characters in new directions. Inexorable in effecting its ends, Time decrees an end to the time of each living creature whose stay in any place, in the long per-

spective, is brief and temporary, a tentative stop—like that of sea-birds resting on land before they are impelled to fly away. Wilson's characters also feel impelled to flight, but not because of the pressures of city life. They are trying to escape from an intricate web of circumstances that could have entrapped them anywhere; they are driven also, as we shall see, by reasons Wilson has made vague and esoteric.

A list of characters who leave Vancouver, whether permanently or for a time, would include Maggie Vardoe, Lilly Waller, Ellen Cuppy, Frank Cuppy, the Forresters, and others who take flight through an imaginative identification with departing birds. In "Lilly's Story," usually described as set in the city, Lilly Waller lives in Vancouver only long enough to get into the "Trouble" (with a capital T) that causes her to run away and stay away except for brief visits, in later years, to her daughter.⁷ Ellen Cuppy of *Love and Salt Water* leaves Vancouver regularly, first to take a long sea-voyage, then to join the Wrens in London, work in Saskatoon, vacation on Galiano Island, and finally, we infer, to live with her husband in Montreal. Meanwhile, her handsome enterprising father, who had shuttled from Vancouver to far-flung places throughout the world, has moved to New York; while her brother-in-law, a member of Parliament, travels back and forth between Vancouver and Ottawa. These comings and goings seem realistically motivated by business, politics, or pleasure, but in a long digressive passage, Wilson attributes her characters' restlessness to reasons that her abstract explanations leave unexplained. Through a knowing narrator, she asserts that people of the far west live on a "periphery" that they feel impelled to leave by an incessant human need for "a place that remains (as yet) a centre." Once characters find this centre, they "can refresh themselves there with the things that a periphery cannot provide" (88). *Periphery* and *centre* are interrelated and relative terms, both of which, along with *things*, this strange digression leaves pointedly vague. What it makes clear is that Vancouver lacks a centre, however it might be imagined, and that characters must leave regularly on a quest for centrality elsewhere.

Perhaps the peculiar geography of Vancouver makes it seem all periphery, for it is a city at the edge of a country and continent. As likely, or in addition, Wilson's personal view has led her to define Vancouver by its geography rather than its sociological, economic, and emotional features.⁸ Simply through elision, Wilson has stripped her city of the distinctive signs of urbanism as a way of life—the pullulating life that such city writers as

Balzac, Dostoyevsky, and Dreiser have made central to their novels and that ordinary people recognize instantly. Rather than fix her characters within the matrix of city life, Wilson has them transfixed by the changing but eternal landscape that lies *beyond*. A wonderfully descriptive writer, she is drawn to a distant vista that is all periphery, a surrounding natural environ which moves away from, and in effect denies, a centre. Moreover, she has set sights upon the transcendent rather than the immediate and mundane, and when she looks to the mundane, as in "Tuesday and Wednesday," she sees diminished if amusing human beings who by their unexpected actions evoke questions of philosophical, rather than social, significance. "Tuesday and Wednesday" is about people who work, at least sometimes, but it is not about urban class society or working-people as a class. Nor is it significantly about gender, for Mort and Myrtle, Wilson's vaudeville husband and wife, are equally feckless, both liars practicing an inverted snobbery that feeds their conceit. The story raises Wilson's familiar thematic questions about the relation of truth to stories that create a truth of their own. Wilson's predilection for philosophical musings on truth, time, chance, and providential design, on abstract subjects rather than on socially circumstanced concrete issues, may help explain the vacuum at the centre of her Vancouver, an emptiness produced not by a real city that the fiction putatively describes, but by the writer's thematic interests and extraordinary powers of description. These powers become gloriously manifest in the metaphors through which Wilson precipitates the flight of characters fascinated by birds, compared to birds, and avid for a bird's seemingly unfettered freedom. The metaphoric comparison is explicit in a sentence that ends Wilson's digressive remarks on the constant comings and goings in *Love and Salt Water*: "The fact that these western people live on a periphery tempts them continually to move and return, move and return, very like birds" (89).

Surprisingly, I think, *The Innocent Traveller* devotes a chapter to sea-gulls, omnipresent birds symbolizing imminent flight in Wilson's fiction. As Rose walks along Granville Street, she follows in her imagination "the cry of a gull above the traffic, something that is not a sound but a disturbing, forgotten, unnamed desire, a memory. Java, Dubrovnik, the Hebrides. . . [Rose's] thoughts fly way as the gulls swoop and cry over the city streets. Land's End, the gusty Channel, the sun on the striped awnings at Ostend" (224-5). "Not a sound . . . but a desire," the cry

of the gull expresses a desire for flight and escape that can overcome even securely positioned characters. Social standing, family support, love, and marriage, all that holds the privileged Rose to her home in Vancouver, cannot fulfill the desire for a centre elsewhere that impels unhappy or threatened characters like Maggie Vardoe and Lilly Waller to flight. Momentarily, if only through an imagined identification, Rose has escaped the Family with a capital F, and she is free, flying with the sea-gulls into an endless, uncircumscribed space. These “arrogant, greedy birds” may seem domesticated when they land on Aunt Topaz’s window-ledge to forage for crusts of bread the wily old woman pretends to have eaten. But when the crusts are gone—or when instinct prevails over hunger—the gulls reassert their freedom and fly away, “fly high, and higher, wheel, negotiate, gather and disperse,” communicating their “exaltation” to the inevitable evening watchers of Wilson’s fiction who lift their eyes “to the mysterious sight” (226).

The flight of birds may seem mysterious and exalting to Wilson’s characters, but their own reasons for taking flight, whether into or out of the city, are usually commonplace. Even so, place may not produce the changes characters hope to see in their lives. In particular, characters who come to Wilson’s Vancouver in order to escape from unhappiness, boredom, or a featureless future elsewhere fail to find the asylum they seek. In the story “Till death do us part,” a young woman hopes that Vancouver will save her from a marriage she cannot avoid in Portage la Prairie, but after seeing the trap that can close around a woman anywhere, here in Vancouver, she turns for “comfort” to the suitor she had fled (195). “Circumstances” resign, rather than reconcile, her to the fate. This undramatically matter-of-fact story subverts the promise of a scintillating new life that city novels hold out to a perennial young provincial. The story ends with its narrator knowingly facing a dead-end, while the end of another newcomer to Vancouver seems imminent as an unseen murderous intruder stands over him with an arm held high, ready to strike. In “The Window,” a story with a title emblematic of Wilson’s fiction, rich old Mr. Willy retires to Vancouver to escape the boredom of marriage. He creates for himself a room with a magnificent changing view that opens to Wilson’s eternal triad of inlet, forest, and mountain: to a “wrinkled” or placid sea, distant “spangled” shores, deceptively innocent mountains, and a sky set aglow by “a great invasion of colour,” green, rose, and yellow—the Northern Lights (197-9). Surrounded by this gloriously illuminated vista, Mr. Willy nevertheless sits in darkness,

for the room that offers characters like Mrs. Severance or Mrs. Emblem freedom to be themselves imprisons him within a self become despairingly arid. Alone and bereft of belief, Mr. Willy sees an ominous reflection in his window: "The window, which was not illusion, only the purveyor of illusion, did not vanish [as the view vanishes], but became a mirror which reflected against the blackness every detail of the shallow living-room" (202-3). Looking out, Mr. Willy sees the darkness within a self separated from human society and from God. The room that gives some characters safety isolates others within a terrible solitary confinement.

Like its rooms, Vancouver's streets can be liberating or deadly. Characters who take to the streets regularly, like Mort in "Tuesday and Wednesday," or impulsively, like Mrs. Severance in *Swamp Angel*, Topaz Edgeworth in *The Innocent Traveller*, and elderly Mrs. Bylow in "Fog," may not survive. Mort meets an untimely and unforeseen death by drowning. Mrs. Bylow dies after being knocked down by juvenile thieves robbing a grocery store. Mrs. Severance has a severe fall that separates her from her beloved swamp angel, the gun she has juggled throughout her life. Topaz, the teflon character, thinks she has become suddenly paralyzed, only to discover that her knickers have fallen about her legs. In the unpublished manuscript, "The Vat and the Brew," Mrs. Grant thinks she has found a new lease on life with the birth of her grandchild, but she dies in the street, killed by the car of hit-and-run juvenile delinquents.

In a letter of 1957, Wilson described "The Vat and the Brew" as a "tract" she felt compelled to write in order to draw attention "vehemently" to "a dreadful problem in our midst": the outbreak of juvenile violence, which she linked to the neglect and sheer "idiocy" of working-class parents (Stouck, 206-7). Originally entitled "Written in Anger," the unpublished work draws a simple cause and effect relationship between parents' lack of values and discipline and their children's delinquent behavior. In "Lilly's Story," Wilson had created a feckless young woman transformed by motherhood into a responsible parent whose sole purpose in life was to give her child respectability. The Family of *The Innocent Traveller* is so inviolably respectable that not a single blacksheep turns up among the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren listed as the Edgeworths' legacy to Canada. That legacy seems part of an obliterated past. Modern times, as Wilson viewed them, brought modern problems to Vancouver susceptible, perhaps, to simple solutions.⁹ For if parents behaved properly, so would

their children, though why parent fail, other than through “idiocy,” Wilson saw no need to wonder. After all, if Lilly Waller could become respectable, then so could anyone, regardless of how disorganized or brutal one’s family and background. Indeed, in the midst of the city, Wilson had located a ideal family that rose above its conditions. Crowded into small, inadequate rooms and ghettoized, parents and children of the Quong family in *Swamp Angel* turn toward each other, rather than against the world. In Chinatown, an unlikely arcadian oasis in the city, the father rules with absolute but benign authority; the children obey and work. Discipline and love prevail, and everyone is happy. So idyllic does this family seem that Maggie Vardoe, bereft of her own family, employs—one might say *appropriates*—one of the good-natured, hard-working sons into the surrogate family she tries to make her own at Three Loon Lake. Families can be idyllic in Vancouver, but only if they belong either to the past, like the Edgeworths, or to another culture, like the Chinese, and if they have authoritative figures who kindly but firmly discipline their children. A disorderly urban family provoked Wilson to an anger that was heartfelt but hardly ameliorative.

Anger comes to the surface in “Beware the Jabberwock my son . . . beware the Jubjub Bird,” a short story with a long title that tells of a brief encounter between two runaway husbands. The protagonist has run away from his obsessively babbling wife, one of Wilson’s terrible, if well-intentioned, talking women. Ironically enough, the husband who seeks silence soon finds himself listening to the talk of a blind man who has also run away and now, like the Ancient Mariner, holds him in thrall with a long story. Interpolated between the two tales of escape from Vancouver is an idyllic account of a family that lives alone high in the mountains, far away from the city below. The idyll begins glowingly and ends in the angry repetition of the word *masses*, a term of opprobrium that Wilson uses to distinguish present from past, city from country, and flight from quest—and a term that indicates Wilson was well aware of population density, of crowds and crowding, as a distinctive urban characteristic. In the mountains that are to city-dwellers a mesmerizing distant view, parents and children live in uninterrupted happiness. No one cries; everyone is free. Children trill like birds, their young lives ideally linked with birds for whom “[n]othing was planned or arranged.” “Was it like this in Arcady?” a suddenly intrusive narrator asks.¹⁰ The question is followed by a list of indictments against the city which includes its lack of laughing loons and soughing pine trees, its dangers, and

not least, its “boredom.” Through a series of negations, the indictments rise to a crashing crescendo and then end in an ellipsis that allows them to continue: in the mountain away from the city there are no dangers “except bears and occasional cougars which cannot compare with the dangers of cities. There are no traffic jams, no tall or squat buildings staring with nothing but right angles not even an inferred curve, no mass meetings, no mass appeals, no mass advertisements, no mass uglification, perhaps no mass destruction, no mass anything, no . . . ” (159, original ellipsis).

Arcady is the antithesis—more emphatically, the negation—of the city. But Arcady, or Arcadia, offers an illusion of innocence and tranquillity that Wilson herself exposes. In the story “On Nimpish Lake,” Wilson recreates Lac le Jeune (Three Loon Lake) as an arcadian landscape providing sanctuary to two brothers, an isolated fisherman temporarily escaping the city, and birds—sandhill cranes, gray whiskey-jacks, magpies, kingfishers, ospreys, eagles, loon, geese. Flying, diving, hitting the water, the birds create a vortex of motion. Crying, laughing, trumpeting, they become a vortex of sound. In his rowboat, the lame brother gazes up at a clamorous shaft of wild geese and feels exaltation at the sight of birds “flying and crying together on their known way” (40). The birds are free, and yet they share with each other and with us below, however blessed we may seem, “a secret pain.” The last piercing phrase undercuts the scene’s idyllic perfection by pointing to a secret sharing of sorrow that Wilson brings into the open in a short monologue entitled, emblematically, “The Birds.” The speaker describes herself seeing on a windowpane visible signs of her recent encounter with an invisible but devastating reality. These are the marks left by the broken bodies of birds attracted to an image of the natural world mirrored in the window; the birds had flown into an illusion and been bashed to death. Thus, the window serves as an interface for two different views of the world: arcadian natural beauty on one side, and on the other, vulnerability, illusion, and death. Looking from this other side, the woman narrator (perhaps an early version of Ellen Cupppy) says: “I looked out of the window at the living birds . . . flying from tree to tree . . . and in the clear window was reflected to them the familiar sky and the flowers and the trees, and so each day some little bird flew into this familiar reflection and dashed itself against the real glass and fell, with its mouth split and its bones broken . . . and yesterday I had

bashed my head against the reality that was waiting for me, invisible, and had nearly broken my neck “ (70). “A bird is so free,” the unhappy woman thinks, but freedom does not assure safe flight. Wilson’s world is a dangerous place, and we “always live on a brink,” as Nora Peake (Ellen’s sister) realizes after her little boy almost dies in *Love and Salt Water*.

Thus, Wilson’s personal view of Vancouver contains a place evocative of pastoral longings which neither the city nor the far country can provide, except in fleeting visionary moments or in fantasies of escape. Wilson was too wordly-wise, as pastoral writers have always been, to suggest that an arcadian escape from human Troubles, with a capital T, is possible. At Three Loon Lake, Maggie finds the pettiness, meanness, and nagging she meant to leave behind in Vancouver—though she finds also the beatitude of work and the beauty of natural creation. The lake waters allow her to refresh her spirit through the timeless rituals of baptism and fishing. Fishing is not a trivial pursuit; rather it is, like shepherding, part of the traditional life of Arcadia.¹¹ Wilson’s fishermen and fisherwomen engage in a serious and soul-cleansing ritual which, however, cannot protect them against the vagaries of chance and death’s sudden intrusions. In *Swamp Angel*, Mr. Cunningham almost drowns while fishing, his plight explicating the ominous meaning of the phrase, *Et in Arcadia ego* (Panofsky, 295-320). Through a sophisticated muddling of topoi, Wilson creates an imperfect Arcadia that reproduces the conflicts characters had faced in the city, and a beautiful city of peripheries that mesmerizes characters and readers with its surround of arcadian landscapes. Characters who dream of losing, or rather finding, themselves within these landscapes run away from Vancouver because of personal circumstances that might have enmeshed them anywhere.

Caught in a web of marriage, romance, or sexual exchange, Wilson’s women leave Vancouver because they want to get away from men. Maggie wants to free herself from her husband, Lilly from the Chinaman Yow, and Ellen Cuppy from her disaffecting fiancé Huw. But bad men can turn up anywhere, Vardoe in Three Loon Lake, and inexplicably, Yow in the Fraser Valley, the second of Lilly’s havens. Moreover, Maggie had found and married mean little jaunty Vardoe in Three Loon Lake; Vancouver was merely a fortuitous setting in which she saw how much she hated him and how desperately she wanted to free herself from his hold. Actually, the impersonality and anonymity of city life helped her effect her escape. She could go to a sportsmen’s shop where she was unknown, as she would not be in a small-

town, and sell her fishing-flies. She could go to another neighborhood and find the Chinese taxi-driver who would help her escape. In Vancouver, her life was private; in Arcadia, privacy was invaded by gossip, and to gain acceptance she had to tell her story, revealing and concealing the truth about her life as she accommodated her talk to her audience. If Maggie had been as wise as Wilson, she might have understood that she was seeking to recover a past that was unrecoverable, except through pristine memories of childhood, family, and love, or through stories of these memories. Though Maggie finds a family in Three Loon Lake, it is not her own; and perhaps Vera Gunnarsen is not entirely at fault in resenting this city woman as an interloper whose ability to rescue others also serves to rescue herself from bitterness and inanition.

Wilson's men run away from women because they talk incessantly and their talk is boring. Babbling wives who bore their husbands may be stock literary figures, but Wilson's boring women carry a heavy if comic symbolic burden as their talk becomes synonymous with urban blight. In a unique and unflattering way, Wilson conflates women and the city by indicting urban life not for being violent, unruly, and the site of inexplicable accident and unearned pain—all of which it is—but for being insidiously boring. Women make it boring by their constant and inanely depleting talk, notably in "The Window," "Jabberwock," "Truth and Mrs. Forrester," "Tuesday and Wednesday," and *Love and Salt Water*. That talking women can be boring is a commonplace of satire and comedy, but that their talk can contaminate a beautiful city with boredom is an extraordinary indictment. Cities are famously interesting places, and places where people can find, express, and share interests beyond measure and imagination. Aside from Topaz Edgeworth, whose interests are as superficial as they are numerous, few Wilson characters find anything interesting to do in the city that they could not do anywhere—that is, other than looking out their windows at the luminous mountains and sea beyond.

Somewhere, in the landscape that lies beyond the city, there may be a dimension beyond time that will allow characters to escape into a pastoral past, or so they hope. And somewhere beyond the city, some characters do find what their hearts desire. Maggie Vardoe finds a family; Lilly Waller, safety and respectability; Ellen Cuppy, love and marriage; Frank Cuppy and Morgan Peake, power; and the Jubjub bird's husband, the promise of quiet. A solitary woman looking out from her hotel window at a transfixing

Vancouver view of inlet, forest, and mountain forgets about the excitement of cities, its hurrying crowds, glamorous theaters, restaurants, expensive boutiques and surreal department stores, its wealth and lavish waste and well-dressed people stepping into taxicabs; forgets the glitter of the city and the rush of desire in the city, the lift of the heart at the promise of happiness. The solitary woman looks out at English Bay and sees the geese form their great wheeling V of freedom over English Bay. She hears the sea-gulls' wild peremptory call. No wonder she wants to fly out of the city to an arca-dian landscape beyond.

My personal view of Vancouver has been framed by an inextricable inter-meshing of a visitor's fleeting experiences with indelible images impressed upon my mind by Wilson's fiction. Befitting to this fiction, my talk ends not with truth or pronouncements about truth, but with the fantasy of escape that was its beginning—a fantasy that Wilson has described and that reading Wilson's stories makes possible. For the real world recedes when one enters Ethel Wilson's vividly presented and yet strangely absent city. Once within it, one might be anywhere—in Stanley Park, on Lion's Gate Bridge, on Powell Street, at the far point of Sea Island, or on Capitol Hill. So I might step into a Universal Taxi that, like fiction, can realize a universal desire for escape. Guided by Maggie Vardoe, I might meld into the distance beyond. "Drive," she said. That's all I would have to say.

NOTES

- 1 This essay is based upon a talk given at a conference called "Montréal & Vancouver: Images et écritures de nos villes (Imagining and Writing our Cities)" that was held at Simon Fraser University in March 1993. I wish to thank Professor Carole Gerson for her kind invitation to speak about Ethel Wilson's Vancouver. Since the effects of "actual people talking" is an issue raised in Wilson's story, I have kept traces of the actuality of my talk in this essay.
- 2 In her essay "Companion in a Difficult Country," based upon a movingly personal talk, Helen Sonthoff has described herself coming to know Vancouver through Wilson's fiction as well as through her own explorations of the city. Wilson made Vancouver a "real" place for Sonthoff, though it seemed "nowhere much" to other newcomers. When Sonthoff drove to Hope, Kamloops and beyond, and when she settled on Galiano Island, she felt herself "accompanied" by Wilson's books which create "a space" in which readers can "wander about" (97-104). Alice Munro has also described herself discovering Vancouver through her own experience and Wilson's fiction. Writing about *The Equations of Love*, Munro says: "When I read these stories for the first time, I was a new-comer to Vancouver, and one of the pleasures I had in them was the discovery of that place through Ethel Wilson's eyes, just as I was discovering it through my own eyes"

(260-61). Munro adds that the Vancouver she had come to know “is now mostly gone.” Wilson tries to recapture the city that is gone in her fiction, notably in *The Innocent Traveller*, and to do so she elides the modern city from her texts through various literary means.

- 3 In his perceptive essay on Wilson as elegist, Hinchcliffe called Wilson a “determinedly regional writer, ever since her first story ‘I Just Love Dogs,’ was published in the *New Statesman* of 1937” (62). A footnote points out, however, a certain arbitrariness in Wilson’s designation of streets in the story: “Alas, her [Wilson’s] regionalism there was not quite as determined as one might wish,” since the streets were changed from Oxford Avenue and Centre Street in the original 1937 version to Dunsmuir and Granville Streets in the 1961 collected stories (66). I am arguing that while Wilson names actual streets, she is not interested in recreating an urban way of life associated with city streets in city fiction as a literary genre—an association supported by sociological studies of city life.
- 4 By my count, Powell Street appears sixteen times in the episode that brings Mort and Eddie together and to their death (87-112 *passim*). On one page, Powell Street appears four times (105), and reappears on the next page (106).
- 5 The English translation of Roy’s *Bonheur d’Occasion* (published originally in 1947, the same year, coincidentally, that Wilson published her first novel, *Hetty Dorval*) loses a sense of visionary suddenness rendered by the French: “Et soudain, elle évoqua la rue Sainte-Catherine.” Sudden evocations of all that a city street holds and promises to a young suppliant are common in big city fiction; through such evocations of a street or urban scene, a character sees both actually and in imagination the possibility of fulfilling all desires, including those that the city itself generates in a hungry, wondering young woman or man. The desire for simplicity, peace of spirit, or natural beauty—for escape—that Wilson’s characters feel is different from the driving desire for material things that city characters typically equate with happiness. As a geographic and historical place, Vancouver is undoubtedly different from Montreal or any other city. But cities created in and by fictions—by city novels as an established literary genre—share common characteristics and a common iconography that Roy’s Montreal reproduces and Wilson’s Vancouver elides. The absence of generic markers of urban fiction becomes notable and arguable in *Love and Salt Water* (1956), a late novel that deals with modern times.
- 6 Wilson gives her memories of Vancouver as it had existed in the past in the brief autobiographical essay entitled “Young Vancouver Seen Through the Eyes of Youth.” This memoir imbues the young city with “a simplicity in life” which, Wilson concludes, “it would be folly to regret now” (139). That life had been simple represents a personal view which may not have been shared by others who differed from her and her family in social class, ethnic background, and race. In “A Monologue to a Stranger,” Wilson evokes historical, rather than personal, memories in a short tribute to Captain George Vancouver and the landscape and ambient waterways he explored. In this piece, Wilson “talks” directly to her readers, recommending to them a scenic route through and around Vancouver which will reveal its beauties.
- 7 See, for example, the newspaper blurbs on the back cover of the Laurentian Library paperback edition of *The Equations of Love* (Macmillan of Canada, 1974), which say that Wilson’s stories are “set in Vancouver” (although, as I have indicated, most of “Lilly’s Story” takes place elsewhere) and present a “picture of love . . . à la Vancouver.”

- 8 In an essay that focuses mainly on *Love and Salt Water*, I argue that the text inscribes and then ingeniously obfuscates capitalistic values and interests—that Wilson’s elisions are purposeful and important. I have avoided duplicating here the extensive documentation in the Endnotes to “The Capitalistic Will” which might be pertinent to the elisions in Wilson’s Vancouver. In my essay, “The Hidden Mines in Ethel Wilson’s Landscape,” I pointed to the presence of a violence and dislocating disorder that seemed, on the surface, absent from Wilson’s fiction. Here I am arguing, in contrast, that what seems eminently present in Wilson’s fiction—the city of Vancouver as a physical and sociological entity—is strangely absent.
- 9 In Empson’s well-known formula, “putting the complex into the simple” characterizes “the pastoral process” and, thus, suggests why Arcadia has an enduring imaginative appeal (22). Studies of pastoral and arcadian literature reveal, however, that “the simple” turns out to be more complex than first thought. As one critic put it, “A recourse to Arcadia . . . does not free the inhabitants of the city from their usual perplexities” and, moreover, the escapist desire to free one’s self from the adult responsibilities associated with city life is not entirely commendable. Thus, “a note of criticism [of Arcadia] is inherent in all pastoral from the beginning of its existence” (Marinelli, 9-14). S. K. Heninger, Jr. sees the slippage of pastoral into satire or sentimentality as a perversion of a “pure form” for which the spatial “milieu is Arcadia” The original “purpose of the pastoral,” Heninger states, was “to create an ideal existence in contradistinction to the real world” (255), which is the effect created by the sudden intrusion of a mountainous Arcady into Wilson’s story “Beware the Jabberwock . . .,” referred to below.
- 10 For a succinct and informative account of the Arcadia as a literary topos, see “Arcadia and its Transformations” in Marinelli, 37-56. See also Frank Kermode’s explicit statements on the noetic link between “Pastoral” as a literary genre and the city: “The first condition of Pastoral is that it is an urban product” (14).
- 11 In his important study of pastoral motifs, Renato Poggioli notes that “a small place” in pastoral life has been reserved for the fisherman as “twin brother to the shepherd” (7, 234).

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