

# STRUCTURE IN ETHEL WILSON'S "THE INNOCENT TRAVELLER"

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IN THE FOURTEENTH chapter of Ethel Wilson's novel *The Innocent Traveller*, its central character, Topaz Edgeworth, prepares to take a stand on an issue of some importance.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Hamilton Coffin is about to be black-balled from the Minerva Club (a literary society) on the grounds that she has been seen "swimming in the arms of a black man" (Joe Fortes, legendary swimming teacher of Vancouver's English Bay). Topaz, who has witnessed Mrs. Coffin's in fact irreproachable dip in the sea, prepares with some agitation to defend the principles of freedom. She rises to her feet and draws a breath. The reader draws breath in anticipation also; apparently the novel's heroine will at last expose the rigid conventions and commitment to propriety of the society depicted in the novel for what they too often are: a false front for prejudiced and petty minds, and an unwarranted restriction on human independence. But after Topaz has counted to ten, she does not launch into a denunciation of racial prejudice or an exposition of the principles of Christian charity. Instead she responds with a speech which indeed defends Mrs. Coffin's character, but which also mollifies the perpetrator of the objection, "the pudding-faced lady," who joins in the applause that welcomes Mrs. Coffin into the club. The momentary fissure in the fabric of society has been bridged; all are happy and convinced that their world is a good world. Topaz then reads aloud Sir Walter Raleigh's poem, "Even such is time." The poem is quoted in full as an expression of Christian faith which, by analogy, elevates Topaz's speech to one of the small but meaningful acts of charity often celebrated in Wilson's fiction. But the poem also expresses Time's relentless destruction of humanity's passing preoccupations: "Our youth, our joys, our all we have." Thus it directs us to a sense of the trivial nature of the whole event. Racial prejudice here is treated on the circumscribed level of the personal and incidental: Topaz's speech will not ruffle the complacent feathers of Vancouver society even if it does ensure that Mrs. Coffin will not be unfairly ostracized. Raleigh's poem is about the triumphant liberation of the spirit from the contingencies of place and time; its effect here lies in the contrast it provides to the stultifying attitudes and limitations of this society.

This incident in the novel is typical, I believe, because it exemplifies the larger problem faced by its readers: the history of the irrepressible Topaz, unmarried, without profession, sheltered and cared for by her large family for a hundred years, enjoyable as it all is to read about, may leave us with an overwhelming sense of its insignificance.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Wilson deliberately creates and reinforces our sense of triviality of Topaz's life: she is compared to a water-glider, an insect that skims along the surface of the water, "unaware of the dreadful deeps below"; she is "like a warbling unimportant bird" with a "funny little flute voice"; "She inscribes no significant design. Just small bright dots of colour, sparkling dots of life"; when she is dead, "there is no mark of her . . . no more than the dimpling of the water caused by the wind."<sup>13</sup> The significance of Topaz's life is not even that it is typical, for she is a "character," an *enfant terrible* whose outrageous behaviour is described with mingled affection, admiration, and exasperation, and it would be difficult to find a universal pattern in a life so fortunately sheltered as hers. Nevertheless, the novel does achieve a significance that transcends Topaz's life. By various strategies, both structural and thematic, Wilson continually makes us aware of a broader context of meaning for human affairs.

This context consists only in part of the dichotomy between the secure, loving shelter that Topaz finds in her family — the comfortable rituals of the well-to-do Victorian middle class — and the terrible pitfalls that life and time have organized, willy nilly, for the Edgeworths and their descendents. These "nebulous agents of causality"<sup>4</sup> do indeed provide a powerful ironic subtext for the book. In the opening chapter, for example, the Edgeworth family sits respectably around the dinner table listening to the wise words of that archetypal Victorian, Matthew Arnold, all the time unsuspecting of the shocking fates in store for them. We, however, are made aware of them by the startling authorial interjections that dislocate us in time and place from the putative observer, the banished Topaz, "innocent as a poached egg," underneath the table: Joe, "gentle and frail, destined for early death"; "happy, horsey Blakey" bound eventually for Australia to found a patriarchy; Mary, "Out she went to India, poor Mary, to marry a missionary . . . [She] soon bore two little spinsters in the heat and died." These episodes-to-be in the family chronicle are made the more disturbing by the strong sense of order and propriety that pervades the scene. Most shocking of all is the casual disposal of Mother, with all her maternal solidity, for death is seen as the ultimate affront to social order: "Within Mother the last and fatal babe moved and moved." Her anxiety not to cause a disturbance in the orderly household ("I feel it will be tonight, and Joseph will be greatly disturbed," she thinks) becomes an ironic comment on events: he will be more disturbed than she anticipates. Thus here, and throughout the book, the personal world of Topaz is placed in the broad context of treacherous cosmic influences. The effect is to broaden the novel's significance, but not that of Topaz. Rather, the triviality of her con-

cerns is emphasized by the ironic viewpoint so characteristic of Ethel Wilson's writing.<sup>5</sup>

Successful as this irony is, there is another less obvious area that Wilson explores in the book, and that is the precarious balance between the benefits offered to Topaz by the highly conventional society in which she lives, on the one hand, and the limitations it places upon her on the other. This society, whose nucleus and emblem is the Victorian family, is at once supportive and restrictive: both aspects are consistently realized in the novel.<sup>6</sup> Topaz, having "attained her undesired majority and independence at the age of fifty," with the death of Father and the Stepmother, "felt her weakness," and this momentary dislocation is not remedied until Annie offers her a home and another stepmother: "Rachel slid by nature and unaware into the Stepmother's place." Topaz's dependence on her family is complete and unregretted. At the same time, the Family, particularly as represented by the Stepmother and, later on, by Rachel and by Topaz's brother John, is the great enforcer of convention, of "proper" behaviour, and this insistence is made to seem stifflingly restrictive, if often amusingly so.<sup>7</sup> Topaz as a child may not mention the new plumbing to Mr. Matthew Arnold; later she may not climb the Eiffel Tower in a high wind that blows up her skirts, or speak to a Frenchman outside her hotel room, or lie on the floor of the Sistine chapel the better to view the ceiling; still later she is scolded for going into the smoking car of a train, planning a letter to *The Times*, kneeling for family prayers on an easy-chair instead of on the floor. Her world is full of petty restrictions; indeed, the proprieties of behaviour are frequently the subject of conversations and arguments, as when Topaz and her brother John with "his passion for correct behaviour" argue on the way to her interview with the Queen at Buckingham Palace: "I do wish, Topaz . . . that you would try to control yourself, and — er, *conform* a little," he says. Here, as elsewhere, Topaz comes out on top, but her spirited forays against Victorian convention are not simply humorous. They are the means by which Ethel Wilson can explore the values and limitations of a society that depends upon well-defined human relationships and a strong sense of propriety for its existence, or in broader terms, the benefits of being an involved, responsible member of human society as opposed to the restrictions such a role places upon the freedom of the individual to act in significant ways.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE NOVEL is episodic and therefore open-ended: the hundred years of Topaz's life could accommodate as many events as the author wished to include. As Desmond Pacey has pointed out, the chapters are frequently self-contained and could stand independently as short stories — two were in fact published as short stories before the novel appeared.<sup>8</sup> Yet the

Wilson papers in the University of British Columbia Library contain several episodes in the life of Topaz that might have been included in the novel but were not. Was Wilson concerned only about lengthiness? Even without them, readers may find the book too long. Particularly in the last half there are chapters that add little new to our understanding of Topaz (e.g., "Christmas Eve," "Rather Close in the Sitting Room," "The Thirties"). These seem to be merely pastiches of minor incidents, while others concentrate confusingly on secondary characters — Rose, for instance, or, earlier, Mrs. Porter. One must ask what, if any, formal principles governed the choice of episode in the book.

At first it appears that Wilson had in mind an adaptation of classical epic. She gives Topaz a gentlewoman's version of a classical education ("... I've read the *Odyssey* and *Iliad* more than once, not in the original, you understand"), and we know that she herself was well-read in the classics.<sup>9</sup> Echoes of the *Odyssey* are found in chapter 5 in connection with Emily Porter, and also perhaps in the opening of chapter 17 ("The Innumerable Laughter") which suggests the Nausicaa episode. The theme of the book itself has epic potential. It describes the origins of one of Vancouver's founding families, the Malkins, and tells how they like other immigrants came from the old world to establish in the new the spiritual, economic, and social values that they lived by. There are conscious epic suggestions in the book: Annie's grandson reflects on the Edgeworth descendents ("There are forty of us — why, there must be over fifty of us now! — Canadians, up and down the country"), and the journey to Canada especially is reminiscent of epic. But in the end these suggestions are never realized. "Down came the forests. Chop. Chop. Chop." describes the building of Vancouver, and the Edgeworth ladies all write to their English relations, "You should see Stanley Park." Nor does the journey result in the start of a new life. Though this chapter (11) seems to be structurally important (at 32 pages it is the longest in the book; the next longest has only 18 pages and the average length is ten), it does not mark any thematic change. The life the Edgeworths establish for themselves in Vancouver is much the same as the one they enjoyed in Ware: it is still dominated by family, propriety, and religion. Topaz continues to go to book-club meetings, to buy inessential items, to make minor forays against convention and to be sheltered by her family. The intimations of a new freedom are never fulfilled. On the journey, Rachel, through whose eyes it is partially seen, says to Topaz, "I'm so glad I came to this country, I can't tell you . . . It's my kind of country and I never want to go back home again. There's something . . .' Rachel wanted the simple word 'free,' although no word could express her all-pervading release of spirit —." Rachel's difficulty in finding the simple word is symbolic, because in fact her life continues to be governed by familial duties and a strict sense of social convention.

Any epic expectations that may be aroused are thus frustrated by the ironic viewpoint, by deliberate trivializations of theme, and by a form which eludes strict

classification. This form does not however function as the artistic correlative of the free-wheeling life of the book's main character. The anecdotal quality of the episodes is deceiving, for theirs is a closed structure that reflects primarily confinement. Each episode is carefully devised to reinforce the idea of a society which is the antithesis of epic: secure, ordered, and above all resistant to change. Typically, a chapter begins by establishing a setting and evoking the form of behaviour that is required or expected in it. Then someone, usually Topaz but occasionally another character, acts in a way that is seen to be inappropriate in terms of the setting. Finally and most importantly, the situation is resolved in such a way as to restore the original *status quo*, for no matter how much it shocks her relations, Topaz's behaviour is never allowed to challenge seriously the essential foundations of her world.

The conventional setting most often established at the outset of a chapter is that of the well-ordered family life. Thus the mealtime setting of the opening chapter is disrupted by Topaz's speaking out of turn; this setting is repeated in chapter 3, "Mr. and Mrs. Porter," where again Father rebukes her for talking too much. In chapter 8, "Recurring Pleasures," Topaz's escapades in Europe which flout the conventions of proper behaviour are set first in the context of daily life at home in Ware; a similar preamble in "Nuts and Figs" sets the scene for Grandfather Edgeworth's startling marriage proposals (this time he, not Topaz, is the one to flout convention). The journey to Canada begins with a brief description of the family life Annie, Rachel, and Topaz each leaves behind and ends by re-establishing it in Canada: as their train draws into the station in Vancouver, "Oh, Rachel, I see the Boys!" cried the Grandmother"; this is followed by extracts from their letters home to family and friends. In Canada, the main setting is still the Family, though this time it is Rachel's family. "Christmas Eve" begins with the rituals of the little household in the "pepperpot house" under Rachel's control where, after her brief secret excursion with Rose, she returns to her role as rebuker of Topaz, comfort of Annie. "Rather Close in the Sitting Room" and "Saturday Morning" both begin with descriptions of the ritual of family life. Later on, Rose's reduced family provides a similar setting as in "Aunty Spends the Day" and "Gusto." The expectations of good manners and consideration for others are all established by placing the central event — sometimes events — in such a context. In fact, often propriety is the explicit theme of the initial setting, as in "Mother, Mother" which opens with a discussion of propriety at the funeral: "Decorum, decorum, sorrow and decorum."

Where the family domain is not the setting, something equally conventional is provided. "I Have a Father in the Promised Land" is set in the rituals of church-going: ordinary restrained demeanour is disrupted by a new preacher and the over-sincerity of the young Rose, who responds emotionally to his evangelical appeal. "Down at English Bay" begins with a peacefully conventional description

of a summer day at the beach, where the swimmers are shrouded neck to ankle in decent serge cloth; "The Thirties" sets the scene in the wonderfully stultified rotunda of Victoria's Empress Hotel, where visitors "follow the movement of the waiters with glazed eyes" until Topaz, "spoiling for commotion," provides a diversion. Each chapter provides us at the outset with a context which establishes the norms and rituals of a strict code of behaviour.

The central action or actions of each episode involve the flouting or rejection of these expected norms. Because the person responsible for it is not always Topaz, the theme of unconventionality as much as the character of Topaz provides the novel's unity. Topaz's older sister Mary is the subject of the third chapter; she reverses all the family's expectations of her "predestined uneventful course as her stepmother's helper" and goes to India to marry a missionary who has proposed to her during one of the ritualized processions home from chapel. In the fifth chapter, which seems to be an unconnected digression into the early history of Topaz's boarding-school teacher, the central action is the abandonment of Mrs. Porter by her husband, an action so shocking in terms of the social conventions that Father and the Stepmother refuse to explain it to Topaz at all. Subsequently Father himself, as Grandfather Edgeworth, defies the conventions of society which rule against remarriage for nonagenarians and proposes in turn to the formidable Mrs. Grimwade and to her sister. Mrs. Grimwade immediately considers the proposal in terms of propriety: "you don't realize that you're over ninety and I'm eighty-seven and we'd be the laughing-stock of our families or at least upset them very much." In "Family Prayer" it is Yow, the disreputable Chinese cook, who provides the central incident: he flouts morality and shocks the family by going off to China "for the purpose of having a baby." Rose, it is suggested, will also be something of a disturbance to convention.<sup>19</sup> In "Rather Close in the Sitting Room" she provides the central perspective as she reads a torrid novel in secret and observes the unbearably proper (to her) behaviour of her aunt and grandmother, and in "Saturday Morning" she evades Rachel's control by adopting a fashionable hairstyle and striking out with friends of her own choosing, of whom the Family does not wholly approve. Thus chapters in the book which appear to be extraneous departures from the affairs of Topaz in fact follow a consistent structural pattern.

The great disrupter of propriety is of course Topaz. Her commotions however are more notable for their multiplicity than for their significance. She speaks out of turn (often); she goes to Europe and has an audience with the Pope, to the horror of her Methodist family; she invades the gentlemen's smoking compartment on a train; she buys a bicycle that she cannot ride but wheels around Vancouver on "outings" for twenty years; she invites strangers to the sacred family At Home; upsets Rachel's company dinner for Dr. Carboys; calls to naked men swimming in the sea; proposes to advertise a family reunion in *The Times*; and

finally, in old age, loses her knickers on a public street. These or incidents like them form the central episode (or one of several such episodes) of the chapters in which she is the chief character, and her lesser infringements (particularly verbal) are included in chapters where she is not featured, such as her letters home, with its memorable account of the slap delivered to Eliza Pinder, which is included in the chapter on Mrs. Porter.

But the minor nature of her actions suggests that for all her apparent unconventionality, Topaz is allowed only to flirt with the borders of convention, never really to contravene them. To be fair, there are moments in her life when she presses hardest against those barriers, and when she reminds the reader of Wilson's other, independent heroines. In "The Voice" the surprising action at the centre of the episode is Topaz's lie to Rachel in reporting Annie's last words. She does not tell Rachel that Annie asked for reassurance of her — Rachel's — happiness, because "Rachel would feel her life (which was all that she had) invaded and deprived by Auntie." Significantly, the greatest gift that Topaz can give to Rachel is seen here to be one of privacy; it is the acknowledgement that the inner life is the only refuge from the demands of society. Nevertheless, though the lie runs counter to propriety, it actually preserves family ties, just as the many lies told by Lilly in *The Equations of Love* preserve the security of her daughter Eleanor. The moment when a younger Topaz, disappointed in love, stands in her bedroom and curses Mr. Sandbach, is another case in point; it suggests an independence of mind worthy of Maggie Vardoe.

In the end, though, these larger incidents, like the smaller ones, are absorbed within the bounds of conventional behaviour, and the same is true of all the infringements described in the book. The third movement of each episode, after the establishment of a conventional framework and the ensuing disturbance to propriety by Topaz or one of the minor characters, is the re-establishment of the original *status quo*, that is, the confirmation of a harmonious, loving set of human relationships dependent on decent, conventional behaviour for its survival. This is true even of the most significant actions in Topaz's life. Her lie to Rachel preserves the mother-daughter relationship in which she stands with regard to Rachel, even though she is her elder and her aunt. Had she told Rachel the truth, it would have ruptured the conventions of their relationship by making Topaz an intimate to Rachel's private, non-motherly life. The truth might also have made Topaz Rachel's equal, rather than leaving her as the child who is scolded for letting the fire go out as soon as Rachel enters the room, and in this lies our sense that very often the resolution of Topaz's unconventional action is ambiguous. As in the Minerva Club episode, her action here preserves a well-defined relationship that has been threatened, but at the cost of advancing that relationship to a new and perhaps ultimately more rewarding plane. Even in the case of Mr. Sandbach, Topaz's magnificent cursing is not allowed to stand; she retracts it later when she

recalls having met him years afterwards: "And as we talked I thought, 'How could I curse him? How could I be so wicked, and how could he make me suffer so?' It was all washed away. . . ." In her mind and in the reader's the original significance of the affair is rendered trivial.

The other great event of Topaz's life, her private audience with the Queen, confirms the pattern. In the first place, recognition by the monarchy is a supremely conventional form of achievement. Topaz's audience is set within the context of her brother John's stuffy complaints about her unconventional appearance and behaviour, but his is shown to be merely a narrow view of propriety. The Queen herself demonstrates truly good manners by putting Topaz at ease, but there is no lack of ceremony in the interview. Topaz is escorted down a long hall to the room where the Queen stands in jewelled regalia; she is politely reminded when her half-hour is over, and is given the standard signed photograph. The nature of the audience and Topaz's real concern to behave properly confirm that her usual behaviour is only nominally disruptive since it can so easily conform to convention. Wilson asserts through Topaz only that a narrow sense of propriety is wrong; a humanitarian form of it, despite its restrictiveness, is essential to society's survival. At the end of the chapter the quarrel between John and Topaz is likewise resolved. "John was really very good," Topaz concludes.

According to this conservative view, infractions against convention, though they may seem to be nominal, are potentially dangerous to the close-knit fabric of society, and Wilson makes use of a variety of characters and devices to restore harmony when it is on the brink of failure. This is the special function of Topaz's sister Annie, who is frequently seen keeping chaos at bay. When the child Topaz is carried away by excitement at wearing black for Mother's funeral and forgets the sad reason for it, Annie is the one who comforts her in the face of Aunt Chalk's outrage; she re-establishes family bonds by giving Topaz a home when she is orphaned at age fifty; she is invariably the peacemaker in Topaz's conflicts with Rachel, the imposer of propriety. "Well, shall we have a little game of dominoes?" she suggests in the bristly atmosphere at the end of "Rather Close in the Sitting Room," and the tensions of family life are resolved when they all consent. Even the delinquent Yow conforms to proper behaviour under the influence of Annie, and attends the ritual family prayers.

Other characters also function conventionally to mend the tears in the social fabric. Mrs. Porter establishes a thoroughly proper school for young ladies as a way of reintegrating herself and her daughter in society after her abandonment by Mr. Porter; Father condones the audience of John and Topaz with the Pope in the face of the Stepmother's outrage; nephews and grand-nephews arrive to re-establish family security at the end of "A Buried Life," when Topaz has been regretting her curse of Mr. Sandbach. Topaz herself is frequently the instrument of restoring harmony in the latter part of the novel. She smooths over Rose's



emotional outburst in "I Have a Father" with a kindly joke; in "Saturday Morning" she sides with convention "just for the fun of it" by mildly criticizing Rose, but also shows she can keep up with the times by laughing at two small boys singing "twenty-three skidoo"; and she smooths the injured feelings of Miss Umplethwaite after the untimely descent of her knickers: "Miss Umplethwaite begins to smile again and to regard the whole thing as simply a bit of a Do."

THE IMPORTANCE TO THE novel of a dominant tone of social harmony, which is disrupted by various characters but never seriously broken, is illustrated by examining the material that at one time Wilson may have considered including in the book but that she eventually rejected.<sup>11</sup> All four of these stories have to do with Topaz, but certain traits make them distinct from the stories in *The Innocent Traveller*. Two of them do not conform to the established structural pattern. "Lay Your Commands Upon Her, Joseph" (WP 6/21) is a rambling tale in which Topaz, aged ninety-four, recalls the early death of her sister Hannah from consumption, the standard illness of the age. Hannah leaves a quite proper, sentimental bequest to a young man, which Topaz delivers, and Topaz refuses to be dosed with stout by the Stepmother. There is no central contravention of propriety; the incident is anecdotal in the most general sense. A second story, "The Very Ferocious Man" (WP 6/37), tells of a farm labourer who shoots a serving girl for refusing his advances. In this case the infraction is the problem: it is extreme and melodramatic, and in its horrific violence it exceeds the type of infringement against convention that forms the basis of the other chapters in the book.

The remaining two incidents would be out of place in *The Innocent Traveller* for a different reason. Both "Fountains in Italy, 1872" (WP 6/15, 6/16, 1/10) and "A Ripple on the Ocean of Time" (WP 6/30) contain extremely unflattering portraits of the conventional John, and end on unresolved notes of discord between him and Topaz. In the book as it stands his conventionality is amusing rather than intensely dislikeable, but this is not true of these two incidents. In the first, he and Topaz are travelling by train through Italy. The train stops and the Italians get out and urinate in public, to Topaz's great interest. John is outraged by her behaviour, and Topaz thinks, "John looks quite ghastly! Like a fine-looking corpse. How easily he gets upset! And how he does spit. He is really very silly." Nowhere in the book does the feeling between brother and sister descend to such cold dislike. In two of the versions of this incident (WP 6/15 and 6/16) there is no harmonious resolution at the end. John furiously announces that he will never travel with Topaz again, protesting that she is "either naive, insensible, or depraved." In the book the conclusion of the European trip is quite

different: Topaz and John are united in both having dared to attend a papal audience, and both are gently forgiven by father. Similarly, in "A Ripple in the Ocean of Time" John is disagreeably characterized by his snobbish English accent (he calls his wife Annie "Annay"). He makes a long speech on the disgusting colonial manners of Topaz, Rachel, and "Ethill" (i.e., Rose), of which the complaint to Topaz in "Apotheosis" is a much shorter and milder version, devoid of the affected accent. Later in the unincorporated incident he loses Topaz in the crowd at Gladstone's funeral and goes home without her; she avers that she *never* really forgave him.

The omission of these incidents argues both the importance of the structural pattern I have described and the careful balance Wilson creates in the novel between the demands of propriety and the need for individual freedom. Certainly the reader has a positive sense of the actions which maintain harmony in the small world of the Hastings family, of the love and charity that motivates them, and of the mutual security they provide. On the other hand one cannot ignore signs of ambiguity about such a rigid code of behaviour, particularly as it is dictated by the Stepmother, Rachel, and John. The very repetitiveness of the structural pattern (twenty-eight chapters in all, many of them embodying more than one contravention and resolution) reinforces the sense of inflexibility: all behaviour has the same result (harmonization within the rules); there is never any great change, either for better or for worse. Actions too extreme to be incorporated in the system are simply ruled out.

This is particularly evident on the few occasions in the book when behaviour does go irretrievably beyond the pale. The results are ominous. When Mary astounds convention by going off to India to marry a missionary, she promptly dies in childbirth and is buried "with violent and shocking haste." Even here a reconciliation is attempted: the daughters, Tilly and Sassy, are incorporated into Topaz's larger family of mail correspondents. Admittedly, death also occurs in the natural course of events, but the fact that on at least one other occasion it is made to seem the result of going beyond conventional limits (when Grandfather Edgeworth in his nineties proposes to the amazed little Miss Sarah Raphael and she promptly goes home and dies), makes it appear that Wilson surreptitiously links uncalled-for behaviour with old age, illness, war, and accidents as causes of death. All are disastrous because they sever family and social relationships. The same inference is made when Annie dies. "The house with the pepper-pot tower was 'broken up'," and Yow, whose ties to conventional society have always been tenuous, now engages in a life of petty crime (crime being another cause of social disintegration) and becomes an outcast. He steals a bride's trousseau to give to a white lady-friend, is discovered and goes to prison. "He would never have done anything like this if he had still been with Grandmother." His white lady-friend must now form "other connections" — that is, build for herself a new social

context, and we see her doing just this as the heroine of *Lilly's Story*. War, as a potential cause of death, reinforces the need for strong family ties while at the same time making Rose feel their confining quality: "... here was war, violent and not to be denied, taking away her husband and jouncing her out of her delightful new existence, back into the *too cosy* seclusion of the house with the pepper-pot." Interestingly, she has nightmares not about her husband's safety, but to do with the curtailment of her life: "'Something . . . is unreal about this . . . I have had nightmares'." Sometimes death is too terrible for the novelist even to write about. The untimely death of Rachel, upon whom the family depends, is "too tragical to contemplate" and is brushed aside with what may seem to the reader to be indecent haste. Thus death as the great divider is linked to family and social disintegration, and more subtly, to other behaviour that threatens social ties. Social propriety is necessary to keep the threat of chaos at bay; thus death can be too terrible even to talk about.

Topaz's forays against convention are only flirtations with the rules because the social fabric is too fragile and too necessary to sustain direct attack.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, all the characters prefer to withdraw rather than to cause, or witness, a "scene" which might mean changing an established relationship or revising conventional ideas. The Stepmother withdraws to bed and weeps rather than confront a new, violent image of Topaz, one that can call down a curse on Mr. Sandbach; Topaz flees back into the cottage on Benbow Island after her abortive attempt to sleep out on the verandah rather than confront her own fears and begin to understand herself; Rose withdraws from the sitting-room company of her aunts and grandmother, thinking rebellious thoughts but unwilling to state them directly; Rachel threatens to leave home if Topaz's behaviour passes the limits of control. The repeated use of withdrawal and harmonizing strategies conveys the image of a society too fragile to sustain radical actions.

THE NOVEL ABOUNDS in images of containment which reinforce this theme by signifying the need for control. Rachel's milk jelly is a prime example: Wilson tells us "it typified this innocent household. It was fresh, clean, sweet, tart, economical . . . Also it had been poured into a mould and had set. Also it was controlled by Aunt Rachel." Topaz's life is compared to travelling on a canal, another image which suggests control: "This canal had been soundly constructed by her progenitors, and was administered by those now in charge." Topaz wheels her bicycle "whose organs were laced into a kind of flat corset" because if she rides it, she will go out of control. Much of the action takes place in circumscribed settings: in the dining-room, or an enclosed garden, or by the fire at Elder House; in the tiny self-contained railway carriage of the train across

Canada; inside the "pepper pot" house (itself an image of containment); and finally in the bedroom of Topaz's apartment where she dies. The outside is used to suggest a different vision of life, one of broad horizons and daring actions. Mrs. Porter contemplates the waves crashing on the beach when she makes her brave decision to be self-supporting; the vast, challenging northern landscape of Canada is contrasted with the limited landscape seen by Topaz, Rachel, and Annie as they sit in their train carriage; elemental nature (significantly described by Topaz as "hellish") defeats her when she tries to sleep outside at Benbow Island. These settings serve to remind us of the narrower horizons in which the action normally takes place; they liberate us momentarily from the world of rigid convention.

Wilson's ambiguous response to the society she depicts is precisely and movingly captured in the chapter third from the end of the book, "Sea-Gulls in the City." Here the continuity provided by repetition of the basic structural pattern is fractured by a chapter which simply describes the habits of sea-gulls in and around Vancouver. During the day they fly inland and settle in the small park opposite Rose's house. Wilson makes their symbolism clear. They are independent of human cause and effect ("there is some secret reason why they come"), divorced from the implacable causation which at the beginning of the chapter, we are told, will result in the second world war, that ultimate severing of human relationships. They are indifferent to human feeling ("sea-gulls . . . have no regard for anybody else"). They are indifferent even to food, and also to the harassment of Rose's dogs, who chase them ("the big white birds do not seem to notice the frenzied dogs"). They are, in fact, entirely free of all the responsibilities, needs, and desires of human beings who are inevitably committed to family life and its equivalent, life in the larger family of mankind.

The author's ambiguous feelings about freedom and dependency are presented through Rose, her fictional persona, as she looks out of the window at the sea-gulls:

"If I were not a person," she thinks, looking through the streaming window-pane at the devilishly indifferent gulls walking in the rain, "I should like to be a dog in a nice family, or else I should like to be a sea-gull." A dog looks at his own people and his heart is full of love for them . . . The big white sea-gull has no heart of love. He is beautiful, strong, calculating, and rapacious. He does not love his own kind or humankind. He barely tolerates them. This carnal and lawless bird is slave to nothing but his own insatiable appetite. But just the same, there is something about a sea-gull.

Rose's dilemma is precisely that she is neither dog, happy in dependency, nor sea-gull, free of all ties; she is a human being with the desires of both.<sup>13</sup> No choice is made by her or by the author. They remain poised between the need for love and security — here seen metaphorically as shelter from the rain — and the need for freedom and independence. But the sea-gulls undeniably suggest a welcome feeling of liberation. As Rose walks down Granville Street she hears the gulls' cries

"like the call of the muezzin in the minaret at the end of the crowded Galata Bridge," and "her thoughts fly away" to "Land's End, the gusty Channel, the sun on the striped awnings at Ostend." Topaz, as the novel's minor-key freedom fighter, is connected also with the gulls, but only with a tame one: he sits on her window-sill and eats the crusts she pushes out to him. "He has a fine life, but he is too earnest," comments the author. Only at Topaz's death does this "small, warbling bird" achieve the freedom of the gulls. After her funeral, Wilson writes:

The sea-gulls were flying westwards in their ordained evening flight, in twos, threes, and companies, high overhead on account of the wind; but neither Rose nor Georgia noticed, because they were each preoccupied. The customary westward flight of the seagulls over the sea, through the evening sky, was, however, as always, a curious and ravishing sight.

The quotation from Donne's Eighteenth Devotion which follows repeats the theme of the transcendence of this life in language similar to that of Raleigh's poem "Even such is time."

Through the novel's structure and imagery Wilson both celebrates and deplors the conformity necessary for free spirits like Topaz if they are to survive economically and emotionally. Harmonious, close family living seems to demand the sacrifice of an imaginative, adventurous approach to life for fear of the fall into deep waters which might result from real risk-taking. To view the novel in this way is not to deny that actions of worth take place in it, but it is to become painfully aware of the other areas of human experience that must be excluded. Heterosexual relationships — except for those between relatives — are scarcely present. The pepper-pot house consists entirely of women, with the exception of the cook, Yow. Such relationships as exist are either comfortably familial, as with Father and the Stepmother (referred to only by their family roles); or, if truly sexual, disastrous, as with the case of Mr. and Mrs. Porter (she finds his sexual advances repellent), or Mary and Edward, or Topaz and Mr. Sandbach; or else they are simply omitted, as with Rose and her husband Charles, whose courtship and relationship, though presumably romantic and occurring well within the timespan of the novel, are never described. No serious disagreements or lasting animosities are allowed to exist among the major characters: Rachel's intermittent irritation with Topaz is expressed to us through the omniscient narrator, but to Topaz only in the form of mild nagging ("Oh, Anty, *will* you be quiet . . ."), and is balanced by genuine affection. We are told that people have jobs, but we do not see them at work, with the concomitant tensions and problems. The Hastings sons must have careers, but we do not know what they are. Grandfather Edgeworth manufactures teapots admired by Queen Victoria, and John is a person of importance, but certainly for the women, the business of the home is their only concern. When Topaz aspires to the executive positions of her many clubs, she quickly finds decision-making oppressive and resigns as soon as possible. What people want,

and receive, from each other in the book is comfort, shelter, and support, not excitement or stimulation. The rich variety of scene, incident, and character in the novel gives the illusion of a rich and full world until we consider the large areas of human experience that are excluded from it, and the conformity of all action to a predictable and circumscribed pattern. Ethel Wilson's considerable achievement, in this complex and stylistically accomplished book, is the use of structure and imagery to promote a constant awareness of the limitations of Topaz's world, as well as its delights.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> All references to the novel in this essay are to Ethel Wilson, *The Innocent Traveller*, New Canadian Library 170 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1982). The book was first published by Macmillan in 1949.
- <sup>2</sup> Most of the reviews which appeared when *The Innocent Traveller* was first published praised it, but some concluded that the central character was indeed trivial to the point of boredom. See for example the comments by Mark Cohen (*Canadian Forum*), Wilhelmina Gordon (*Echoes*), and the reviewer for *The Times Literary Supplement* all quoted by Bonnie Martyn McComb in "Ethel Wilson: A Bibliography, 1919-1977, Part III," in *The West Coast Review*, 14, No. 3 (1980), pp. 60, 61.
- <sup>3</sup> Irene Howard, "Shockable and Unshockable Methodists in *The Innocent Traveller*," *Essays on Canadian Writing*, 23 (1982), pp. 107-34, gives evidence that the process of trivialization was a more deliberate and radical one in the writing of the book than might at first be apparent. Eliza Edge, from whom the character of Topaz was drawn, was in fact a complex person — certainly no innocent — whose membership on boards, committees, and councils was continuous and involved work of a serious nature. Wilson trivializes this by presenting it as a short-lived and infelicitous excursion into responsibility on the part of Topaz (Howard, pp. 116, 125). Likewise the basis of the Minerva Club incident was a notorious scandal which ended up in the Vancouver courts as a libel case. Eliza Edge was involved in it in an official capacity and her position on the question of tolerance seems to have been more ambiguous than Wilson makes it in the novel (Howard, pp. 126-27).
- <sup>4</sup> Blanche Gelfant, "The Hidden Mines in Ethel Wilson's Landscape (or An American Cat among Canadian Falcons)," *The Ethel Wilson Symposium 1981* (University of Ottawa Press, 1982), p. 122; also published in *Canadian Literature*, 93 (1982), pp. 4-23. This essay contains some excellent insights into the character of Topaz and her restrictive environment.
- <sup>5</sup> W. H. New, "The Irony of Order: Ethel Wilson's *The Innocent Traveller*," *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, 10 (1968), pp. 22-30, examines the ironic presentation of the themes of innocence, independence, and order in relation to time; the essay is reprinted in William H. New, *Articulating West: Essays on Purpose and Form in Modern Canadian Literature* (Toronto: New Press, 1972), pp. 83-94.
- <sup>6</sup> Gelfant, p. 123.
- <sup>7</sup> Howard, pp. 118-19, argues that this dual perception of family had its origins in Wilson's own experience. Both sides of her family were strict Methodists, but

whereas her father's relations were "unshockable" and adventurous, her mother's family was extremely conventional in outlook. Orphaned at an early age, Ethel Wilson was raised mostly by the latter, and while the security and love they offered were warmly appreciated, the restrictions on her behaviour as she grew older were also keenly felt. Howard wonders if this polarity influenced her writing generally (p. 107). Wilson's own comments on writing indicate that she was conscious of it. In "A Cat Among the Falcons: Reflections on the Writer's Craft," *Canadian Literature*, 2 (1959), pp. 10-19, she is concerned with the relationship between writing as a private independent pursuit in which the writer creates and lives an adventurous inner life, and writing as something which must be judged according to the conventions and expectations of the public and the literary critics.

- <sup>8</sup> Desmond Pacey, *Ethel Wilson* (New York: Twayne, 1967), p. 93.
- <sup>9</sup> Christopher Armitage, "Ethel Wilson's English Schooling and its Echoes in her Fiction," *The Ethel Wilson Symposium 1981*, p. 24, finds in the description of Topaz's school-days echoes of the classical education Wilson received at Trinity Hall School in Southport, England, which she attended from 1902 to 1906.
- <sup>10</sup> Rose and Yow share a sense of disreputable camaraderie, as Howard points out (p. 124).
- <sup>11</sup> University of British Columbia, The Library, Special Collections Division, the Ethel Wilson Papers, cited as *WP*, followed by box and folder numbers.
- <sup>12</sup> "For all that Topaz is extroverted and uninhibited by ordinary social conventions, it is those conventions which allow her to exist." W. H. New, "The Genius of Place and Time: the Fiction of Ethel Wilson," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 3 (1968), p. 42; reprinted in *Articulating West*, pp. 68-82.
- <sup>13</sup> The affinities of Rose as a character are with Wilson's independent heroines (e.g., Lilly Waller, Maggie Vardoe, Ellen Cuppy): like them she longs for freedom while also needing to establish strong connections with the human community. However, these yearnings remain largely undeveloped in the novel since Rose is not its central character. For a discussion of character in Ethel Wilson's novels see Paul Comeau, "Ethel Wilson's Characters," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 6 (1981), 24-38.

## THE MOUNTAINS (1882)

Tony Cosier

Packed more tightly than the Alleghenies  
 Strange as Chimborazo  
 Blunt enough and earthy for the pallet smudge  
 Like something wondrous never seen before  
 He thought he had them there  
 To narrow to his canvas frame  
 And make his name forever.