

ETHEL WILSON'S NOVELS

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ETHEL WILSON'S FICTION is remarkable for a mannered simplicity which hides both artful invention and philosophical complexities. The characteristic grain of Ethel Wilson's imagination and a clue to her thematic concerns are revealed by her style. In a letter to Desmond Pacey she says that what she likes best is "the English sentence, clear, unlush, and unloaded . . . the formal and simple sentence."¹ Yet, while the "simple" style forms the matrix of her prose, her writing is at the same time full of stylistic quirks — curious repetitions, illogical statements, ellipses, lacunae — which arrest our attention, direct us to something unspoken, covert. The failure of men to communicate with each other is one of the obvious thematic corollaries to such a style, the gaps in the writing constituting palpable forms of arrest and discontinuity in the flow of human relationships. Indeed Mrs. Wilson gauges in her fiction the many ways by which human contact is broken — through guilt, shyness, fear, jealousy, will to power, hate. The recurrent drama in her novels and stories is the withdrawal from familiar surroundings of the central character who sets out on a lonely quest of self-discovery. This character is usually a woman who has no mother and who, deprived of this intimate bond of family, must establish on her own a link with the larger human community. The pattern is mythic and familiar, but what, I think, involves and disturbs us as we read Ethel Wilson's fiction is a certain *froideur* in the narrative voice, an implied emotional preference for retreat, evasion, and distance, which is always in tension with the author's vision of unity and her theme of human responsibility.² In the following examination of Ethel Wilson's novels I want to indicate the range of the author's imagination (she writes family epic, pastoral, satire, romance) and the actual complexity of her prose which, in a deceptively simple style, grapples with the most difficult of problems — human relations.

In Ethel Wilson's first novel, *Hetty Dorval* (1947),³ the theme of human community is struck at once in the epigraph from Donne, the familiar "No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe." The heroine of the title is a spoiled, attractive

woman whose life illustrates the very reverse of Donne's counsel: Hetty Dorval islands herself in a world of selfish comforts and amusements and leaves behind her a long string of broken commitments. Her story is narrated by Frankie Burnaby, a young school girl who is initially infatuated with Hetty, but who eventually comes to see her without romantic illusions. At the outset of this pastoral novel Frankie is going to school in Lytton, a pioneer ranching community in British Columbia, when the mysterious Hetty Dorval takes a bungalow near the town. In a few brief scenes (much in the manner of Willa Cather's "novel démeublé") the author defines the relationship of the young girl and the older woman. In the eyes of young Frankie the various images of Hetty (on horseback, watching a flight of wild geese, in the cottage surrounded by her elegant furnishings and library of "yellow" books) fall together to create a forbidden, romantic picture of sophistication and freedom. This is enhanced by Hetty's unwillingness to become involved in the mundane affairs of the small town.

But Hetty's romantic image gradually tarnishes with time. After a period of school in Vancouver, Frankie goes to live in England and on the ship crossing the Atlantic she and her mother encounter Hetty Dorval deep in intrigue to marry a wealthy old gentleman. Previously Mrs. Burnaby had confided to her daughter that an ugly story had followed Hetty from Shanghai to Vancouver. Frankie thinks of Hetty's refusal in Lytton to become involved in the community and at the same time she thinks about Donne's admonition. What was once for Frankie a romantic manifesto — "I will *not* have my life complicated" — now becomes a complex problem for the girl: "'No man is an Iland, intire of it selfe;'" said Mother's poet three hundred years ago, and Hetty could not island herself, because we impinge on each other, we touch, we glance, we press, we touch again, we cannot escape. "No man is an Iland. Who touched me?" Hetty appears again in Frankie's life, this time smashing up the friendships Frankie had made for herself in England. Hetty's selfish and thoughtless ways are this time thoroughly exposed; the final revelation is that her chaperon, Mrs. Broom, whom she has always treated with impatience and indifference, is really her mother. When Hetty finally leaves London for yet another marriage, Frankie finds that after what she has been through with Hetty she cannot bear to have her life complicated either.

The "complications" and community theme dominates the book, but in Ethel Wilson's fiction the evasion of human contact ("Who touched me?") forms a persistent counter theme. The style of *Hetty Dorval*, typically, conceals much of the experience it describes. Notice in this excerpt from the first paragraph the number of words and phrases repeated:

Mr. Miles, the station agent, was in his shirt-sleeves; the station dog lay and panted, got up, moved away, lay down and panted again; and the usual Indians

stood leaning against the corners of the wooden station (we called it "the deepo") in their usual curious incurious fashion, not looking as though they felt the heat or anything else. The Indians always looked as though they had nothing to do, and perhaps they had nothing to do. Ernestine and I had nothing much to do, but school was out and supper wasn't ready and so we drifted over to the station.

The repetitions of course crystallize the feeling of monotony in a small town on a hot summer afternoon, but they also create, here and elsewhere, an opaque surface in the style, as if the author were to say, "this is all I am about to show you." (This technique of limited disclosure is the principle of style in Mrs. Wilson's first published piece of fiction, "I just love dogs."⁴ The repetition of events and dialogue gives this brief sketch the innocent charm of a children's story which contrasts sharply with the deliberate ambiguity of the story's title.) In *Hetty Dorval* the repetitive style and the surface allegory of involvement and responsibility veil an emotional drama of initiation involving the relationship of mothers and daughters, older women and young girls.

Hetty initiates Frankie into life's disillusionments (a process symbolized perhaps by the Fraser River that muddies the Thompson), but why, we must ask, does Frankie come to dislike Hetty so intensely. Possibly it is because her relationship with Hetty is the first in a series of guilty involvements. Frankie's early affection for Hetty is guilty because it is secretive. Frankie's mother forbids her to keep company with a woman of dubious reputation and the girl is forced to play "peeping Tom" in order to keep sight of her heroine. Hetty in fact supplants Mrs. Burnaby in Frankie's affections: their rivalry is reflected in their parallel affinity for the secluded bungalow which Mrs. Burnaby eventually owns. Frankie for a time deserts her mother's love and this is perhaps why the emotional climax of the novel is a scene in which a rejected mother's love is revealed. Hetty's heartlessness towards her mother thus has guilty implications for Frankie. There is also another reason, I think, why Frankie becomes embittered towards Hetty and that is because she eventually becomes her rival for a young girl's admiration. When Frankie goes to England she becomes protectress to a girl named Molly Tretheway. Frankie dreams of some day marrying Molly's brother Richard, but in the meantime it is Molly's innocent and gentle charms that attract and sustain her. Hetty, however, threatens to take Molly away from Frankie by marrying Richard, and to her chagrin Frankie discovers that Molly feels exactly the same way about Hetty as Frankie once did herself. The final showdown between Hetty and Frankie comes after the revelation by Mrs. Broom. Hetty leaves her mother and shares Frankie's bed for a night. This scene fulfills the emotional logic of those earlier scenes set in Lytton in which Frankie feels such a strong attraction for Hetty, no small part of which was her singular physical beauty. But Frankie's emotions are poisoned with guilt and jealousy, and when she gives Hetty a smack on her "round silken bottom" she renounces the life of desires and involvement

altogether. The author makes us aware of Frankie's negative action in the final prophetic glimpse of war approaching. Hetty has gone to live in Vienna with another man, but around that city in 1914 there has grown up a wall of silence — the negation of man's humanity writ large.

ETHEL WILSON's second novel, *The Innocent Traveller* (1949),⁵ is very different from *Hetty Dorval*; it celebrates in loving fashion the life of a woman who lives to be one hundred years old, but who learns less about living in that time than does Frances Burnaby in one night with Hetty Dorval. The subject of this novel is the author's personal family history. It is a memory book and as the first fifty years of Topaz Edgeworth's life set in Victorian England are being narrated, we are continuously reminded, by means of interpolated speech from later years, that these are family stories being remembered. *The Innocent Traveller* is probably Ethel Wilson's most artful novel; certainly it affords the greatest pleasure of her books. The character of Topaz Edgeworth, effervescent, irrepressible, superficial, is one of the most delightful and authentic creations in Canadian literature. The book is a pastoral of innocence celebrating the domestic joys of family and old age rather than youth and erotic love.⁶ There are unforgettable comic episodes such as great-grandfather Edgeworth's courting at the age of ninety and later Topaz, also in her nineties, thinking she has had a stroke when her bloomers drop around her ankles on the street. The whole world, as seen through the eyes of Topaz and the older members of the family, is providentially ordered and secure. Great-grandfather Edgeworth, drowsing in the sunshine of his garden, is content because "his world was a good world. His Queen was a good Queen. His country was a good country . . . His family was a good family and God was good." For Topaz's saintly sister, Annie Hastings, the world is a reflection of the divine order of the next world, while for Topaz herself it is completely defined by the existence of her father, Queen Victoria and Mr. Gladstone. Even the Canadian wilderness in this book has the childish and animate aspect of a pastoral landscape — with mountains that "skip like rams" and "the innumerable laughter" of the sea. But above all it is the sense of Family which gives the world its unity.

The escapist pleasures of celebrating an innocent and uncomplicated past, however, are undercut by the narrator's preoccupation with Time and Meaning. We are told, in a particularly effective metaphor, that gradually the members of the family "slipped one by one with acceptance or amazement through the strangely moving curtain of Time into another place." Death is softened through the various strategies of pastoral style (the death of Topaz's mother becomes a comical ritual of dress and decorum; Topaz's father and sister die of ripe old age;

the tragic death of Topaz's niece, Rachel, is simply not described), yet its inexorable presence is an important part of the family history: *Et in Arcadia ego*. But more disturbing than the passage of time with all its attendant anxieties of change, illness and death is the difficult question of life's meaning. The author describes bubbly Topaz with such evident pleasure, but there is always the nagging problem of the significance of her life — of what "use" was she? Mrs. Wilson writes: "Aunty's long life . . . inscribes no significant design. Just small bright dots of colour, sparkling dots of life." In the course of the narrative she is described as a "warbling unimportant bird," a creature as ephemeral as "the dimpling of the water caused by the wind" and, most memorably, as a water glider who skims along the surface of life "unaware of the dreadful deeps below." When she has died she is but "a memory, a gossamer." Seen with something like a cosmic eye, Topaz looks foolish and pathetic in all her commotion of living.

As an innocent, Topaz has within the reference of her family a kind of comic sanctity. But outside that framework she is a creature of little worth — without resources, without imagination or character. In a finely crafted chapter titled "The Innumerable Laughter" the author exposes that innocence by taking Topaz (one of Mrs. Wilson's motherless orphans) on a brief journey into isolation. The chapter opens with a splendid comic sequence: Topaz, who is holidaying with the family at their summer cottage, discovers nine young men swimming naked in the ocean. She dashes off to tell Rachel and says she wishes she could identify them: "If they would only turn right side up I might be able to see." (Mrs. Wilson is capable of delightful bawdy humour: when Topaz's father decides to re-marry, we are told in a series of *double entendre* that there is "Something Up," that he is going to Switzerland, which on the map is "pink," and that he is going to bring back a "piece.") Topaz's experience at the beach is followed by the threat of Yow, the devilish Chinese cook, to put a snake in the supper stew. That night Topaz decides to sleep outside on the porch alone. She takes all the accoutrements of her civilization with her — shawl, walking stick, umbrellas, biscuits — but gradually the sounds of the night begin to frighten her. She thinks of the bearded decorum of her Victorian father and relations and then of the nude men swimming. She imagines she hears a flute and "panics," and as the etymology of that word implies, she fears a revelation that will turn her mad. One can hardly miss the sexual implications of this experience. The images from the day (the nude men bathing, the invincible Yow with the snake) culminate in a metaphor of sexual terror: "Inside the white satin body of Topaz . . . there opened a dark unknown flower of fear . . . Her whole body dissolved listening into fear which flowed into the terrible enclosing night." She rushes inside the cabin and Rachel, to quiet and comfort her, massages her body gently; gradually her innocent world of family is restored. In this chapter we see that Topaz's innocence is not the Blakean kind that perceives order and harmony in all things,

but is pathetically dependent on a social order which is evasive and artificial. Topaz is not exposed in this manner again; she remains a water glider who never probes beneath the surface of appearances. But her innocence has been discredited and in the images of Topaz being absorbed at death like a drop of water in an endless cycle or like one of the gulls going out to sea, there is something just a little sad, for we are made aware not only of her insignificance but that as a human being she never experienced the fullness or unity of being alive.

Ethel Wilson's next book opens with the image of a golden dawn yielding to "mere flat day" and that image defines the change in mode from *The Innocent Traveller* to *The Equations of Love* (1952).⁷ The two novellas which comprise *The Equations of Love*, "Tuesday and Wednesday" and "Lilly's Story," are both works of the satirical or critical imagination; they take their direction not from memory and nostalgia but from a cold eye cast on contemporary reality. "What is the Common sort of Terewth" is the question Mrs. Wilson poses in the epigraph from Dickens and the answer in the first story, "Tuesday and Wednesday," seems to be that man is vain, sentimental and pretentious and that it is his egocentricity ironically which saves him from recognizing the meaningless, destructive void that surrounds him. The story describes two days in the life of several lower-class characters in Vancouver. For Myrtle and Mort Johnson it is the last two days of their life together, for Mort is about to die in an accident. Around these two central figures are grouped several others: Myrtle's aunt, the radiant Mrs. Emblem; Myrtle's cousin, the neurotically withdrawn Vicky Tritt, Mort's friend, Eddie Hansen, and others whose names — Pork, Flask, Mottle, Uren — imply character type in the manner of Dickensian satire. The narrator is superior and constantly exposes the empty and pretentious nature of her characters. She says, for example, that Mort spoke "with a simple-sounding nobility which had no basis in fact." Indeed characters like Myrt and Mort are minimal in their humanity and the motiveless conduct of their lives is reflected in flat, throwaway statements like "because he had to get up some time or other, he got up" — an example of Mrs. Wilson's simple style with its calculated intention.

The lives of Myrt and Mort, structured by only a very basic routine, are almost without pattern or purpose, and yet, as if to emphasize this by contrast, Mrs. Wilson creates an intricate literary design around Mort's death. Mort (his name — the French word for *dead* — is prophetic) plays with the idea of death the day before his fatal accident. He accompanies his friend Pork (his name suggests flesh and mortality) to the funeral parlour where the latter works, and there he has a sentimental vision of Myrtle lying in her coffin. That night he takes her some flowers left over from a funeral. Again, the next day, he implies to Mr. Mottle at the greenhouse where he is looking for work that his wife is suffering from a fatal malady. Mort's own death is precipitated by his trying to save a drunken friend from drowning. That final struggle is witnessed in preview, as it

were, through the eyes of Vicky Tritt who, on her way to church, sees Mort struggling to keep Eddie upright as they make their way along the street. Mort dies while Vicky is at the service and the description of him with outstretched arms over the water trying to save his friend invites a comparison with Christ.⁸ Mort's death as a hero becomes formally ritualized when Vicky several times tells her story of how Mort valiantly dove into the water, hands pressed together, to save Eddie's life. For Vicky, Mort's heroism is more Hollywood than Christian (the common sort of truth?) and when she arrives back at her boarding-house, another of the tenants, taking in the wash, asks appropriately if she has seen a good show.

Vicky Tritt holds a special place in Ethel Wilson's fiction for the extended description of her lonely, cheerless existence is paradigmatic of countless lives depicted or suggested in the course of Mrs. Wilson's writing. Vicky lives alone in a boarding-house; her room is lit by one bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. She has a job in a notions shop, but except for church services and an occasional visit with her cousin, Myrt, she has no other human contacts. Her one pleasure in life, carefully meted out, is to read a movie magazine each week — an image of life lived vicariously and at a complete remove from other people. The shyness and pathetic anonymity of this girl-woman are contrasted sharply with the "golden effulgence" of Mrs. Emblem, whose "geniality and human success emphasized to Victoria May her own inadequacy . . . her lack of the gorgeous possession — popularity." The description of Mrs. Emblem's room with its fussy, ornate furnishings and softly glowing lamps is a kinky vision of something grotesquely pink and maternal. Yet even for the personable Mrs. Emblem the best part of the day is when she is alone, tucked up in bed, reading "the Personal Column" of the newspaper. Mrs. Wilson is fascinated with people whose lives are completely anonymous and depersonalized, people who live in lonely retreats with only the barest essentials of existence. In this novella, as well as Vicky Tritt, there is Maybelle Slazenger whose flat is filled with a family of dolls, and there is "old Wolfenden," a recluse who lives in the hollow tree in Stanley Park. In the short stories there are lonely characters like Mrs. Bylow, the old woman in "Fog" whose monotonous existence is relieved by reading the ads in the newspaper, and the blind man in "Beware the Jabberwock, my son . . . Beware the Jubjub bird" who, after losing his sight, lives in a little cabin by himself rather than return to a life of dependence on his wife and friends.

The central figure in "Lilly's Story" can be grouped with the above; her life too is minimal in terms of human relationships. Lilly is another of Ethel Wilson's orphans (her mother abandons her when she is still a girl) whose life becomes a lonely journey. Mrs. Wilson tells us that the story began with a chance phrase about Yow's girl friend in *The Innocent Traveller*: "she made other connections."⁹ The phrase teased the author's imagination, perhaps because "connec-

tions" between people in her fictional world are so tangential and tenuous at best. The emotion which prevents Lilly from establishing lasting relationships with others is fear, an animal instinct which keeps her "on the run" all her life.¹⁰ The different phases of her life are marked by experiences of terror. When she is a small child living with her mother in a wretched cabin in Vancouver, she is stopped and questioned by the police about her part in delivering stolen goods. Afterwards she has nightmares and whimpers "The police! The police!" in her sleep. Her first lover is Yow, the Chinese cook, who brings her gifts stolen from the Hastings family and starts her running in earnest from the police. On Vancouver Island Lilly lives temporarily with a Welsh miner named Rannie who fathers her child. When her daughter Eleanor is born Lilly resolves to bring up the child respectably and moves to another part of the Island where she will not be known. She fabricates a story about her past and her husband's death; her constant fear now is that she will be recognized by someone and exposed.

Her life at Comox, where she is housekeeper for Major Butler and his wife, is almost a pastoral retreat for Lilly; despite Butler's amorous advances, which Lilly quickly rebuffs, there is peace and security in this life where order and good taste prevail. The Chinese pottery figures of a horse and a hound on the mantelpiece (hunters in still life) reflect something of the aesthetic harmony that can be achieved in life. At the same time Lilly is not allowed to forget that life consists of real hunters and of the hunted — she watches Eleanor's kitten stalking a robin who is trying to kill a snake while overhead flies an eagle ready to pounce on the kitten. For Lilly it is the nexus that spells fear. Later, when she hears her daughter described casually as "the maid's child," she decides to move, this time to the Fraser Valley where again she hopes to live unknown. Lilly is like a frightened animal seeking a secure hiding place in which to raise her child. Her protean existence, shaped by her fears and by her desire for conventional respectability, is recorded in her many names: born Lilly Waller, she calls herself May Bates when she runs from the police; then to create a father for Eleanor she becomes Mrs. Walter Hughes; then finally and legitimately she becomes Mrs. J. B. Sprockett. From the Fraser Valley Lilly is forced to run once again; after twenty years, Yow turns up at the hospital where Lilly works, and so she flees on a train for Toronto. Yow's reappearance is one of those many coincidences in Mrs. Wilson's fiction which point up the gaps rather than the "connections" in human relationships. In Toronto Lilly, working as a chamber-maid, meets a widower, J. B. Sprockett, and we are told that eventually they will marry. Lilly appraises her new situation in a characteristic way: "She would be without fear; nothing, surely, could touch her now. There would be security and a life of her very own in the house of Mr. and Mrs. Sprockett." Lilly does not change fundamentally, for when she decides to tell Mr. Sprockett about her past, her sole confession is that she is wearing a wig. There is almost an element of self-parody

at the end of the story when the author tells us sentimentally that the couple will be married in the "United" church.

Fear estranges Lilly from other people, as it does the women in "Hurry, hurry" and "Mr. Sleepwalker." For another group of women, including Hilda Severance in *Swamp Angel*, social relations are anxiety-ridden because of shyness and lack of self-confidence. Mrs. Wilson has never written an artist's story, but we glimpse something like a self-portrait in the heroine of the short story "Mrs. Golightly and the First Convention." In a transparently simple, almost confessional style ("Mrs. Golightly was a shy woman. She lived in Vancouver. Her husband, Tommy Golightly, was not shy. He was personable and easy to like") the story describes the plight of a Canadian woman attending a convention with her husband in California. Her husband who has "the gorgeous possession" of social ease, leaves his wife to get on as best she can with the other wives. In spite of her desperate desire to conform and please, situations become awkward, speech faltering. At one point during a car ride arranged for the wives, Mrs. Golightly escapes her situation temporarily by glorying in the sportive freedom of the seals in the ocean. (Animals are frequently an index to intense emotional experiences in Ethel Wilson's fiction.) The story comes to a climax when, to her grief, Mrs. Golightly insults a woman twice, only to discover later that the woman is not aware she has been injured. The supposed victim says to the apologetic and fumbling Mrs. Golightly " 'You are too earnest, my child'." Mrs. Golightly then recognizes the necessary superficiality of society and its operations, which gives her confidence but which ironically disappoints her just a little as well.

I
N *Swamp Angel* (1954),¹¹ a quest romance, Ethel Wilson develops her theme of running from human responsibility into a complex and subtle piece of symbolic fiction. Here, to catch the ebb and flow of experience, to create a surface texture in the prose that mirrors the formless and chaotic aspect of reality, the style is strikingly elliptical and fragmented. Chapters do not always appear to follow one from another; scenes are juxtaposed beside each other without linear connectives in the narrative. The failure of human beings to connect with each other is reflected in tiresome monologues, in speeches tortured with slang and in chapters which consists of only one clipped statement or an advertisement from the newspaper. But beneath this jarring, rough-textured surface there is a pattern of interconnected symbolic incidents which, carefully considered, have much to say about human relations, especially the dilemma of modern woman.

The plot itself reveals little. A woman named Maggie Vardoe, living in Vancouver, leaves her husband and starts life over as a cook at a fishing lodge in

the Interior of British Columbia. Her success and satisfaction with her new life is marred by the jealousy of the lodge owner's wife. In the meantime Maggie's husband is rejected by a series of women and her friends, the Severances, continue their lives in the city — Hilda Severance marries and her mother Nell, after a little accident, dies. A more rewarding approach to the novel is through its title, which is also the book's central symbol. As Pacey has pointed out, the two images yoked together suggest the range of human experience — from the primal and inchoate emerges the human form divine.¹² Even more suggestive is the title's historical origin explained in the novel's epigraph: " 'Swamp Angel. An 8-inch, 200 pound . . . gun, mounted in a swamp by the Federals, at the siege (1863) of Charleston, S.C.' " The gun had its origin in a battle fought to prevent the abolition of slavery and this is the direct clue. The Swamp Angel is an image of power, and its possession and relinquishment symbolically describe a drama of will and power in the novel.

The Swamp Angel belongs to Nell Severance, "a powerful and wilful old woman" who was once a brilliant circus juggler. The gun symbolizes her past triumphs, but it is still a potent weapon in the present for it represents Mrs. Severance's power over her daughter Hilda. For Hilda the gun is an emblem of her unhappy childhood, a childhood filled with shame at the fact that her mother was a vagabond circus performer. In the elliptical, non-sequitur style of the novel we are given a vivid glimpse of Hilda's confused relationship with her mother: "She loved her mother dearly and hated her a little. People should not be so powerful. People should not always succeed, and so she made tea." The gun also carries the traditional phallic association of male authority. In her interviews with the rejected Eddie Vardoe Mrs. Severance twirls the gun absent-mindedly but menacingly; in bed she keeps it pressed against her thigh. The gun enters directly into the symbolic action of the novel when Mrs. Severance falls and sprains her ankle on the street. The gun slips out of the old woman's grasp and a small scandal ensues involving the police. Mrs. Severance feels she is no longer strong enough to control its destiny and so she sends the Swamp Angel to Maggie for safe-keeping.

The transfer of the gun opens up the significance of Maggie's story. Maggie is Nell's spiritual heir for, like Nell, she is a strong woman who wants to be free and to have control over her own life. (Maggie's type is anticipated by Rachel in *The Innocent Traveller* who feels such a release of the spirit when she reaches the open spaces of Western Canada. Rachel imagines herself running a farm "with everything dependent upon her and upon her industry." She would have no husband or lover. Maggie is also one of the author's motherless women who, we are told, was "brought up from childhood by a man, with men" and "had never learned the peculiarly but not wholly feminine joys of communication, the *déshabille* of conversation. . . .") Our first impressions of Maggie are wholly posi-

tive. She is calm, intelligent, resourceful, and when we meet her husband Vardoe, a truly unsavory individual, we admire her courage in breaking away. Her strong, creative instincts are such that she can build up the fishing resort in one season, forget her tragic past in New Brunswick (her husband, child and father have all died), and before the first season is over at Three Loon Lake, save from death a wealthy businessman, Mr. Cunningham, who offers her an attractive position in the East as a reward. But we must ask whether Maggie's actions are entirely admirable; remembering that Mrs. Wilson is fascinated with the meshing of contraries we can expect a negative side to the heroine's character as well. Why, we should ask, does Maggie break her marriage vows and leave Vardoe? Certainly he is an unpleasant man and the two- and three-sentence chapters about his life after Maggie leaves (chapters 28-35, 37-38) encapsule brilliantly the emptiness of his character. But from Maggie's point of view the one reason given and dwelled on is the "nightly humiliation" she endured while she lived with Vardoe. She thinks of her marriage as a period of "slavery." When she is preparing to leave Vardoe she thinks only of freeing herself from the outrage of "the night's hateful assaults." But if Maggie does not enjoy the marriage bed, then why did she marry Vardoe in the first place? The implied answer is that she was attracted to his weakness. Vardoe, the poor boy with "spaniel eyes" working in her father's store, physically unfit for the army, seems to have attracted Maggie by those very qualities which elicited pity in others. Perhaps Maggie subconsciously felt she could dominate this man and that marriage would not mean any loss to her freedom. We are told nothing about Maggie's first marriage to Tom Lloyd, but the one time she thinks of him her thought is cold and almost comic in its impersonal stylized nature: "Dear Tom, casting, perhaps, with a crystal fly for a quick jade fish in some sweet stream of heaven." Vardoe, however, turned out to have very conventional ideas about marriage (male supremacy, female subjugation) and so Maggie leaves him.

Swamp Angel is peopled largely by strong, forceful women and weak men. In the world Maggie creates for herself at Three Loon Lake, her contact, Henry Corder, is old, the proprietor, Haldar Gunnarson, is crippled and Alan Gunnarson is still a boy; in her service are the biddable Chinese brothers, Angus and Joey Quong. Only the jealousy of Gunnar's wife spoils Maggie's haven, for it curbs her freedom (she must constantly watch herself so that Vera's suspicions are not roused). The irony is that Maggie does not want Vera's husband or her son; she prefers no social obligations or responsibilities. Yet Vera's jealousy creates them. "Human relations . . . how they defeat us," thinks Maggie.

Mr. Cunningham's offer of a position in the East is the turning point in the novel. Will Maggie "run away" again from a difficult situation (she has run from New Brunswick and from Vancouver) or will she stay with the Gunnarsons and try to make their relationship work? Mrs. Severance's visit with Maggie at Kam-

loops is decisive. The old woman accuses Maggie of escaping to the woods from the reality of human relationships: "Everything of any importance happens indoors" she insists. Then she urges Maggie to recognize that all things are interconnected in "the everlasting web" of creation and the Donne theme "No Man is an Iland" is sounded again in Ethel Wilson's fiction. Earlier in the novel Maggie had an intimation of this herself when she considered how many people were involved in designing and creating the English crockery Mr. Cunningham had sent her as a gift. In this conversation Mrs. Severance admits that, pre-occupied with her juggling and her mate Philip, she had lived on an island herself and had made Hilda suffer — binding her to an unhappy childhood and a quest for maternal love. Only after the old woman has given up the gun (symbol of selfhood and power) does Hilda begin to live a "normal" life. The latter marries Albert Cousins, another of the novel's gentle men, and though Mrs. Severance describes Albert as a "lamb" she also tells Maggie that "he rules [Hilda] with a rod of silk" — perhaps Ethel Wilson's ideal vision of the marriage relationship.

The final scene in the novel shows Maggie, after Nell's death, throwing the Swamp Angel into the lake; the act is coincident with her decision to stay at the lodge and strive for a workable relationship with the Gunnarsons. The reminder of Excalibur in this gesture and of the grail in Maggie's yellow Chinese bowl (her "household god") suggest a specifically Christian dimension to Maggie's quest, as does her instinctive act of compassion in kneeling and rubbing the feet of both Mr. Cunningham and Vera Gunnarson when they come out of the cold waters of the lake. But the larger significance of Maggie's throwing away the gun is her relinquishment of power and freedom in order to become part of the web of creation, part of the human community. As the gun settles to the bottom we are told in a repetitive style that now knits things together that "the fish, who had fled, returned, flickering, weaving curiously over the Swamp Angel. Then flickering, weaving, they resumed their way."

DEATH IS THE AGENT of separation and loneliness in Ethel Wilson's last published novel *Love and Salt Water* (1956).¹³ This novel is a "romance" in the sense of Shakespeare's last plays where characters are tested through a series of misfortunes and misunderstandings before being fully integrated into society. As in every one of Mrs. Wilson's major pieces of fiction the journey motif is the central element of structure. Here it is coupled with a symmetrical narrative design that takes the heroine, Ellen Cuppy, from the unity of a happy family life to almost total isolation and then back again into the larger fabric of the human family. The novel begins with an idealized picture of family life (only

Ellen's brother-in-law, Morgan Peake, nearly twenty years older than his wife Nora, is a little out of place). On their walks through Stanley Park the members of the Cuppy family make plans for the future, talk about the ocean voyage they will take some day together. Then, suddenly, Mrs. Cuppy dies. When she finds her mother's body, Ellen's first instinct is not to tell anyone (as if this would prevent it becoming true) and this impulse marks Ellen's gradual withdrawal from the confidences of other people. Her nickname is "Gypsy" and she becomes a wanderer. Ellen and her father, to distract themselves from grief, take a long Christmas voyage on a freighter from Vancouver through the Panama to Europe. Death again brushes Ellen and hardens her toward life. On the boat there is a beautiful boy-sailor ("A Botticelli angel in bathing trunks") whom the other sailors tease mercilessly. Ellen feels much pity and affection for him, but in a heavy storm on Christmas Day the boy is swept overboard and lost at sea. Also on the voyage Ellen becomes alienated from her father, who meets and eventually marries one of their fellow-passengers.

Love and Salt Water is divided into three parts. In the second part several years in Ellen's life are compressed into a series of brief chapters in which we watch her grow more isolated from other people. During the war she serves as a Wren in England, almost losing touch with her sister and friends in Vancouver. When she eventually comes back she meets and becomes engaged to Morgan Peake's temperamental half-brother, Huw. But Ellen lives the carefully-examined life; she recognizes Huw's bad temper and fears loss of self-possession for herself, so she breaks off the engagement and goes to live in Saskatoon. There she works for Mr. Platt, an old man who also lives without friends or family, who boasts he has "neether chick nor child" and even depersonalizes Ellen by calling her "Miss Um." He represents the furthest point reached by Ellen in her withdrawal from human concourse. But while she is working for Platt, she meets George Gordon which marks a significant turning point in her life. Gordon, who has withdrawn from society because of the failure of his marriage, is at first only interested in Ellen as a tennis or skating partner — they share the detached camaraderie of sportsmen. But his respect and affection for Ellen gradually changes to love and he slowly warms Ellen back to a personal and intimate involvement in life again.

Ellen's reintegration into the human community is effected appropriately in Part III by means of events in the life of her family (just as, earlier, family events had caused her withdrawal). After Mr. Platt's death — in this light symbolic — Ellen goes back to Vancouver for a long visit with her sister, Nora. At first she is highly critical of Nora's smothering affection for her son Johnny, but when she rediscovers that Nora's first son died, that her second son is mongoloid, and that little Johnny is going deaf, she learns to be sympathetic towards her sister's family, especially to Morgan who regularly visits the retarded son. The death of Morgan's cousin Maud Sneddon (a pathetic little figure like an aged Vicky Tritt) also

makes Ellen think about the human condition and the need for companionship among men in the face of death. On a visit to happily married friends living in the Okanagan Valley, Ellen becomes convinced that it will be right for her to marry George. But in the nature of "romance" Ellen and George are to be tested before that marriage can take place. In a sequence with parallels to the first part of the novel (we are reminded of mothers and of tragic death in the sunset that suggest Rossini's "Stabat Mater" and Johnny is referred to as a cherub which recalls the boy-sailor described as a Botticelli angel) Ellen is responsible for a boating accident in which Johnny is nearly drowned. The brutal contraries of love and salt water — the frailness of human life plunged into the destructive element in which we live — are permanently impressed on Ellen by an ugly scar on one side of her face. Ellen's "sea change" becomes the test of love for George Gordon. Ellen goes to the train station to meet him, accompanied by Morgan who is now possibly the most loved member of the family; George's love for Ellen proves genuine, for we are told that her disfigured cheek was repellent to him, but that he kissed her "out of love and pity and delight." The novel comes full circle as Ellen becomes part of the human family, and she and George begin their "happy chequered life together."

As epigraph for *Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories* Ethel Wilson quotes from Edwin Muir: "Life ' . . . is a difficult country, and our home.'" The line reflects the creative tension in Mrs. Wilson's art: feelings of estrangement circumscribed by reasonable and philosophical acceptance. Human relations, their complexity, their fragility, is Ethel Wilson's intimate theme and an oblique, elliptical style is the special signature of her prose. But to say this does not invalidate or detract from the philosophical vision of her novels. Rather Ethel Wilson's "modern" sense of the universe as an ungoverned void carries conviction because it is approached by characters who, for complex, sometimes aberrant reasons, have lived for a time in isolation and without motive. Similarly her insistence on the humanistic values of love and faith and her almost mystical preoccupation with unity, "the everlasting web," assert as antidote the powerful human need of community.

NOTES

- ¹ See Desmond Pacey, *Ethel Wilson* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967), p. 179. The letter is dated July 12, 1953.
- ² In his book (*op. cit.*) Desmond Pacey has made a study of the large themes in Ethel Wilson's fiction focusing particularly on her humanist's concern for love and friendship in a universe that frequently reveals itself to be destructive and without purpose. H. W. Sonthoff's article, "The Novels of Ethel Wilson," *Canadian Literature*, 26 (Autumn 1965), pp. 33-42, is more concerned, on the other hand, with the unique qualities of tone in Ethel Wilson's writing.

- ³ *Hetty Dorval* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1947). All quotations are from this edition.
- ⁴ Most of Ethel Wilson's stories are collected in *Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1961). All quotations are from this edition.
- ⁵ *The Innocent Traveller* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1949). All quotations are from this edition. W. H. New has a fine discussion of irony in this novel in *Articulating West: Essays on Purpose and Form in Modern Canadian Literature* (Toronto: New Press, 1972), pp. 83-92.
- ⁶ For a description of this literary mode see Renato Poggioli, "The Oaten Flute," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, 11 (May 1957), pp. 147-84.
- ⁷ *The Equations of Love* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1952). All quotations are from this edition.
- ⁸ Pacey also notes this parallel. See *Ethel Wilson*, p. 116.
- ⁹ See Ethel Wilson, "The Bridge or the Stokehold?" in *Canadian Literature*, 5 (Spring 1960), p. 46.
- ¹⁰ Pacey lists the animal images used to describe Lilly. See *Ethel Wilson*, pp. 121-22.
- ¹¹ *Swamp Angel* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1962). All quotations are from this edition. For a study of the journey into isolation in *Swamp Angel* see John Moss, *Patterns of Isolation* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), pp. 129-49.
- ¹² Pacey, "Introduction" to New Canadian Library edition of *Swamp Angel*, p. 10.
- ¹³ *Love and Salt Water* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1956). All quotations are from this edition. Frank Birbalsingh in "Ethel Wilson: Innocent Traveller," *Canadian Literature*, 49 (Summer 1971), pp. 35-46, sees this novel as central to Mrs. Wilson's vision of chaos lurking beneath the smooth surface of events, of man living "on a brink."

WINTER

Peter Gellatly

Mount Rainier is burning
 An ember-heap
 On this frosty morning
 Vivid over the city
 A doomed Pompeii
 Or portent
 Of coming rain
 Far in some
 Satellite's eye.
 Slowly the colour
 Diffuses (harms
 Delayed, defused)
 The sky is golden-grey
 Grey alone, then
 Black and ordinary.
 The city starts its day.