

ETHEL WILSON

Innocent Traveller

Frank Birbalsingh

“**D**O WE ALWAYS LIVE ON A BRINK, then, said Nora to herself, lying there in the dark. Yes, I believe we do.” This quotation, from Ethel Wilson’s novel, *Love and Salt Water*, reflects the thoughts of the heroine’s sister, soon after the heroine, Ellen Cuppy, meets an accident that leaves her face permanently scarred. Why should this disaster occur so unexpectedly during an ordinary outing in which Ellen takes her nephew to the seaside? Are all ordinary, everyday actions marked by unpredictability and filled with the same potentiality of disaster? These are some of the main questions that Mrs. Wilson’s novels and stories try to answer; and altogether, they brilliantly project the luminous truth of Nora’s observation — that we all live continuously on a brink, and that our commonest actions have the capacity constantly to frustrate, delight or, at any rate, surprise us. Since we live on a brink without knowing the exact outcome of our actions, we are innocent. It is the underlying purpose of Mrs. Wilson’s fiction to record the facts of our innocence by illustrating the critical significance of seemingly trivial events in our lives; and her underlying theme, throughout, is an unpredictable future which, by means of coincidence or unimportant incidents, asserts an unfailing ability to inflict apparently undeserved grief and unmerited injury on unsuspecting individuals.

Although her first short story appeared in 1937 when she was forty-nine years old, Ethel Wilson’s published fiction adds up to no more than six short novels and one collection of stories. In spite of its unimpressive volume, however, or perhaps because of it, her work — I suggest — achieves a higher standard of

literary excellence than that of any other Canadian writer of fiction except Stephen Leacock. Her excellence is due principally to a fresh and engaging style, the splendid detachment and graceful poise of which no other Canadian, again except Leacock, has been able to rival. Indeed, even the much-vaunted chronicler of Mariposa would sometimes be hard pressed to equal the purity of Mrs. Wilson's limpid prose, the accuracy of her dialogue, and the fastidious delicacy of the whole tone of her writing.

All Mrs. Wilson's books illustrate the sudden shocks and abrupt shifts of fortune, like Ellen's accident, which can be produced by unforeseen events. Mrs. Wilson's universe is one of complete chaos, where anything can happen to anyone at any time; but she shows no willingness to question this disorder. She takes her strange and haphazard universe for granted, and nowhere reveals the slightest interest in investigating its philosophical foundations. Thus her books do not probe or analyse the action which they describe. Instead, they impose on this action a view of life that is slightly whimsical and which effectively neutralizes the actual risks and inherent dangers of an unpredictable future. The two essential features of Mrs. Wilson's fiction therefore, are her illustration of the inimical capacity of the future, and a predilection for a whimsicality that evokes the supernatural realities behind everyday appearances.

These features can be seen in the first novel, *Hetty Dorval*, which consists mostly of fortuitous episodes contained within a melodramatic plot. The arbitrary selection and association of episodes represents only an imperfect presentation of the author's consistent subject of people living innocently in a world where each new experience brings them unsuspectingly to the brink of catastrophe. A prevailing feeling for fantasy suffuses the plot and reinforces a powerful sense of indwelling mystery in ordinary events. The heroine, Hetty Dorval, is a ruthless "femme fatale", a freakish creature of doubtful virtue, who is suspected of dark dealings and sinister intentions wherever she goes, whether to Canada, England or Europe. Her capricious movements and implausible relationships are marked by a whimsical fancifulness that flavours the entire narrative.

The Innocent Traveller, Mrs. Wilson's second book, is a mixture of fact and fiction which gives, in outline, the one-hundred-year biography of Topaz Edgeworth, an English lady, who emigrates in the middle of the last century and settles in British Columbia. The action chiefly provides situations "for a household of women to gather in and read their letters to each other, drink tea, mend, and turn sheets sides-to-middles," though, we should add, these trivial, spinster-

ish events are not nearly as claustrophobic as they sound. Touched by Mrs. Wilson's humour, they provide a narrative that is far from dull.

As in the previous book, fortuitous coincidence dominates the action so thoroughly that even factual incidents from the heroine's biography take on almost hallucinatory significance or convey implications that border on the supernatural. The opening chapter ends:

Above the table the future hung implicit, almost palpable, around the family. Above the table Mother sighed, caught the adult eyes, smiled her sad smile, and arose.

It was the next night that mother died.

And towards the end of the novel, another chapter opens as follows:

Topaz has for the last time left Vancouver for her summer holiday, but, of course, she does not know this. We do not know these things. Henceforward she will stay at home.

It is not that the author dabbles in the occult. Nothing as extreme as that. But often she is on the verge of prescient statements momentarily illuminated by a glimmer of clairvoyancy, as when she reminds us of unusual connections between apparently unrelated actions, or when she pauses, suggestively, to meditate on the unknown possibilities of the future. Yet, she employs no crude or macabre conceits. She hints quietly at unusual happenings or comments knowingly in passing when notable events take place; and her hints and comments are always, as it were, accompanied by a gentle smile that suggests wonderment or fascination. Her narratives delicately avoid eeriness or terror, and the tone of her writing never betrays "negative" emotions such as fear, or even disappointment.

The third novel, *Tuesday and Wednesday*, gives a closely-observed account of two days in the life of Mortimer Johnson, a feckless and irresponsible odd-job man who, towards the end of the story, tries in vain to save a friend from drowning, only himself to be drowned as well. The police assume that Mort and his friend were drunk, but luckily, Mort's cousin, Victoria, has seen him shortly before the accident, and is able to tell his wife, Myrtle, that he was not. The accident itself gives a totally unexpected reversal to the former drab routine of Mort, Myrtle and Victoria. Victoria's life, in particular, is of withering banality. Describing her, Mrs. Wilson writes:

However insipid, or unimportant, or anonymous you are, your humanity imposes upon you certain conditions which insist that you spend twenty-four hours a day somewhere, and that you spend, somehow, twenty-four hours a day.

But even insignificant Victoria, whose life is a mere filling up of time, proves significant in the end when, by coincidence, she is able to vindicate Mort posthumously. Mrs. Wilson again exemplifies her theory that our lives are largely a collection of commonplace occurrences any of which can suddenly assume great and critical importance.

The realistic aspects of *Tuesday and Wednesday* are embodied in the detailed documentation of the domestic routine of Mort, Myrtle and Victoria. This realism, however, is transfigured by vivid dreams and fantasies which produce, in the end, a narrative that is a subtle blend of realistic and fantastic elements. Ministering angels attend Mort and Myrtle on their daily rounds as well as in their beds at night. But even these bizarre creatures are not fully bizarre; certainly they are not frightening. Mort's angel is a friendly, sympathetic fellow who can be very patient with his protégé, and down-to-earth, human, in his reactions:

Mort's angel used to kick him a little when Mort said things like this; but the angel doesn't kick anymore, because it — the angel — realizes that the two things Mort really loves are his wife Myrtle and himself — the first inconstantly and the second with a varying intensity that sometimes includes his fellow man in some vicarious way identified with himself; and that when Mort makes these statements (that he loves being a gardener, or a shepherd, or a plumber, or a horse-breaker, or a plasterer), he really means them, at the moment, and it often gives his interlocutor a great deal of pleasure and a sense of security, poor thing.

The passage is typical, and it shows that though Mrs. Wilson's characters are visited by flashes of the supernatural, they themselves are never ghostly. Nor is the action wholly mysterious, though it has its elements of mystery. Mrs. Wilson is too delicate an artist to yield completely either to the drab monotony of everyday life, or to the imaginative flights of our best moments. Hers is a fine and subtle art, feminine in essence, one that perhaps no man and few women can reproduce exactly. It is this subtlety that saves her portrait of reality from being dull, and her flights of fancy from being incredible.

Lilly's Story, the next novel, tells of a Vancouver woman's uphill struggle to conceal her disreputable past for the sake of her illegitimate daughter. For thirty-two years, under the assumed name of Mrs. Walter Hughes, Lilly Waller labours ceaselessly to acquire and maintain a conventionally "respectable" image. Her efforts succeed when, in the end, the daughter is suitably married. Lilly's story is a frank and objective account of her original waywardness, her later iron-willed determination to change, and her subsequent decline into dowdy middle age.

The facts of her career are not idealized, but are presented successively in all their irretrievably mundane detail. At the end, her patient labours are at least temporarily retrieved from total insignificance when, as she goes about her job as cleaning woman in an hotel, she meets a widower who proposes marriage.

The pattern of events is identical to that of the author's preceding works: Lilly uncomprehendingly faces the future which at first fills her life with adversity, and, just as unexpectedly, brings her prosperity. Throughout, she lives on a brink, for each of the unexciting episodes in which she is involved takes her unknowingly to the verge of happiness or grief. Mrs. Wilson's theme could so easily have been sombre and grey. After all, Lilly's experiences are scarcely happy ones, except for the widower she meets at the end. But it is the whole purpose of the author's writing to avoid gloom and dejection, and she achieves this repeatedly by a judicious admixture of whimsicality that effectively neutralizes the tragic implications in her work.

Lilly is driven by misfortune from pillar to post; first there is her Chinese lover who gets into trouble with the police; then a Welshman who abandons her, pregnant; and throughout there is the malignant threat of "respectable" society. But Lilly faces each episode as it comes. Always, she shows an energetic wantonness that makes her appear either extraordinarily brave or utterly stupid. The truth in fact is in the middle. She may sometimes be a little brave and at other times a little stupid. At all times, she has the capacity to yield to romantic and fanciful instincts deep within her.

Swamp Angel, the fifth novel, relates the story of Maggie Vardoe, who flees from confining married security in Vancouver to the free, Cariboo country of British Columbia. She takes refuge in a camp with Haldar Gunnarsen and his wife Vera, but her happiness is soon shattered by Vera's unexpected jealousy. The very trivial undertakings which make Maggie happy — fishing, cooking, and general helpfulness in the camp — nourish Vera's jealousy, thereby asserting the author's consistent belief in the potentiality of common events to produce both happiness and grief. In the first place, it is the dreary routine of marriage that drives Maggie away from her husband, and, in the second, it is the routine of camp life that destroys her relationship with her new friends. In either case, the lurking unpredictability of the future influences her life critically and proves that she too lives on a brink. But Maggie is no more a tragic figure than either Hetty Dorval or Lilly Waller. She takes each setback in her stride. She bears her misfortunes cheerfully because she cultivates deep spiritual longings, and relies

implicitly on the advice of an old friend whose life is almost entirely given over to fantasy.

The esoteric affairs of this seventy-year-old friend, Nell Severance, are closely interwoven with Maggie's adventures. The frequent time-shifts between Maggie's adventures in the woods and those of her friend in the city can be irritating; but the main point of the relationship is that Maggie's substantial, down-to-earth activities are inevitably tinged by the mysterious atmosphere surrounding Nell. The result, as always in Mrs. Wilson's fiction, is a tantalizing description of a reality that is not as real as it seems. Nell Severance is a romantic who dreams of her former days in the circus, of which the gun "Swamp Angel" is a precious souvenir. In a typical gesture, reminiscent of Arthurian romance, she commissions Maggie to throw the gun into a lake when she dies. But Nell is not fooled even by her own fantasies. To prove that her feet are planted on the ground, the author endows her with piercing insights and uncanny wisdom. Of all her characters, Nell provides Mrs. Wilson's best illustration of the hidden sapience and discernment of our intuitions.

Love and Salt Water, Mrs. Wilson's last novel and her best full-length work, furnishes the most comprehensive treatment of her theme. The main action, dealing with domestic relations, family visits and humdrum social intercourse, is true to form. After her mother's death, Ellen Cuppy and her father leave Canada for a holiday abroad. The father remarries and Ellen returns to work in Saskatchewan. She keeps in touch with her family and regularly visits her sister, Nora, in Vancouver. Like Mort's cousin, Victoria, she leads an unremarkable life for a young girl; just her family, tennis, boy friends. Then comes her accident which is a direct result of one of the unremarkable, humdrum social activities in which she normally engages. Ellen, no less than her predecessors in the other novels, lives on a brink, as her sister Nora clearly realizes.

These two novels provide insights that are only hinted at in the earlier works. *Love and Salt Water*, in particular, reveals an acute awareness of unforeseen events linking up without warning, to affect different sets of people who are far apart and who sometimes don't even know each other. In a typical incident, Ellen is in Vancouver expecting a visit from her friend, George Gordon, who works in Montreal, but the manager of George's firm, Prendergast, is abruptly taken ill and George has to take his place. The author knowingly comments:

The circle of life is extraordinary, and Miss Cuppy was drawn up into the circle of Mr. Prendergast's life when his secretary had to telephone the doctor that he was ill, and then telephone Mrs. Prendergast, and the doctor telephoned and made

arrangements at the hospital, and the lives of George Gordon in Montreal and Miss Cuppy in Vancouver were affected, perhaps temporarily, or perhaps permanently and fatally.

The passage points to the inter-relatedness of human experience which is a direct product of the unpredictable future, the actual agent that is responsible for linking up the various people and bringing their disparate roles together in a single network of human relationships. Mrs. Wilson is not primarily concerned with this network, which is, after all, a result; it is the agent that generates the network which most interests her — in this case, the accidental illness of Mr. Prendergast which neither Ellen nor George could predict.

MOST OF THE STORIES IN *Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories* deal with familiar subjects of routine domesticity. In these stories Mrs. Wilson's customary blend of mild fantasy and solid reality is very happily expressed when dreary, everyday proceedings are touched by almost hallucinatory implications. A visit to the London church where two of Shakespeare's fellow actors are buried, arouses not merely admiring nostalgia, but also an enthralling sense of the past that seems to bring us into direct contact with the ghostly presences of the two men. Many stories have similar supernatural or quasi-supernatural overtones, which may astonish or briefly puzzle, but never frighten us. We wonder, but do not scream. It is the characteristic subtlety of Mrs. Wilson's art that it often takes us to the verge of horrifying emotions but never beyond.

In a way, Mrs. Wilson is the feminine counterpart of the film-maker Alfred Hitchcock, who skilfully exploits the hidden mysteries of familiar scenes and objects by simple, unpretentious techniques as, for example, when he uses a slightly unusual camera angle to photograph the depth of an ordinary armchair and awaken unsuspecting terror. But his trade is horror, while Mrs. Wilson's is merely fascination. It is the fascination that Mrs. Golightly discovers in the mechanical ring of a common telephone. Who is it? What should she say? What if she says the wrong thing? Her uncertain approach, cautious reply and final relief embrace a range of feelings that fascinate without terrifying her. Like Mrs. Golightly, many of the author's characters are able to perceive a possibility of fantasy, romance even, in ordinary day-to-day incidents. The unpredictable future should not frighten us, Mrs. Wilson implies: the very uncertainty that it imposes on us also provides an opportunity of supplementing the arid monotony of everyday living with the lush excitement of fantasy; if living on a brink is

dangerous, it can also be thrilling. Innocence does not exclude us from happiness on our journey through life.

Since her novels record the facts of our innocence by constantly stressing our ignorance of the future, and by warning of the possibility of good or ill-fortune in each new experience, we must agree that the author is projecting a point of view that is essentially hopeless. If the future is a blank, and catastrophe can take place at any time, then men are simply pawns of God, and human effort or optimism is surely irrelevant. This, one supposes, would be the logical line of argument implied by the author's stress on our innocence. But Mrs. Wilson distinctly avoids any such logical exploration of her themes and the hopeless or even tragic significance they may carry. Deliberately she ignores implications. Even when the future brings catastrophe, as it invariably does, her books show no sign of regret. Hetty Dorval, Myrtle Johnson, Lilly Waller and Maggie Vardoe are women to whom the future is far from kind; yet in no case does the tone of the novel become commiserating or plaintive. On the contrary, each narrative recreates a prevailing mood of splendid fascination as if to suggest that the author actually enjoys the limitations imposed upon us by our common ignorance of the future. Mrs. Wilson acknowledges these limitations, and sets her mind to relieve, not to investigate, their unpleasantness. This is why she does not probe the philosophical problems that underlie her novels for she is not really interested in philosophical inquiry or intellectual searching. She accepts human experience as it is, and simply suggests that we should accommodate to its limitations by invoking the immanent wisdom of fantasy to relieve its worst restrictions. To accommodate, all we need is faith.

The author's thinking is strongly influenced by the disillusionment of the immediate post World War I era which the poetry of T. S. Eliot expresses so well. It may be that Eliot's poetry itself directly influences Mrs. Wilson, but even if it does not, we are certain that both writers draw a substantial part of their literary inspiration from a common source — the gloomy philosophical climate of the 1920's and 30's:

Hot water at ten
And if it rains, a closed car at four,
And we shall play a game of chess.

The spirit of these lines is identical with the spirit of the discussions about Major Butler and his wife which "went on and on and never arrived." The difference

is that Mrs. Wilson sees the meaningless triviality of these discussions as a "merit," whereas Eliot regards it with a sense of tragic disillusion :

And what essential joy canst thou expect
Here upon earth? What permanent effect
Of transitory causes?

There is no such plaintiveness in Mrs. Wilson's novels. She feels as strongly as Eliot about the transience limiting our lives, but she conceals the extremity of her feelings and sublimates them in a kind of bemused fascination. The facts of our innocence do not challenge her intellectually as they do Eliot: she patiently records them, then sits back, fascinated, but unwilling to delve behind the facts themselves.

It is revealing to recall the antics of Mortimer Johnson's cat in *Tuesday and Wednesday*:

Feral, wise, with her inscrutable little hunter's nose and whiskers she felt and explored and recorded each chair leg, each table leg, each corner. She prowled and prowled on silent paws, and sometimes she stopped to wash. When she was satisfied, she accepted and adopted the room. Then she slept fitfully. She slept anywhere, lightly yet deeply, waking and moving often. Chiefly she slept on Mort and Myrtle who lay deep in sleep, warm and approved by her. But sometimes she awoke, remembering something pleasant. Then she jumped lightly down and ran to her box. She scrambled up the side of her box and sat down, quivering, still, looking into the transparent dark with bliss.

The last word of this passage corresponds with the author's own fascinated attitude, and it represents the whimsical view of life that Mrs. Wilson's fiction advocates all along; for fascination neutralizes and transcends the limitations of our innocence by exploiting its capacity for fantasy. The future may be dark and fraught with danger; but if we look into it with the bliss of Mort's cat, we relieve the shock and hurt of danger if and when it comes. We know from Nell Severance that the source of bliss (or fascination) is faith, but Nell does not reveal the ultimate source of faith itself, and we must try to trace it on our own by picking up what clues we can from both internal and external evidence within the author's work.

The best internal evidence consists of the characters who exemplify Mrs. Wilson's faith. Usually they are imaginative women who are willing, at the right moment, to yield to an inbred instinct for fantasy. Maggie Vardoe can flee from the security of marriage, to the freedom of a British Columbian forest because

she yields readily to deep, inner yearnings. Most of the women in the *Golightly* volume also show similar propensities. And the queen of them all, the aged, half-mystic, half-prophetic Nell Severance, by her vatic utterances, strongly reminds us of Mrs. Wilcox and Mrs. Moore in the novels of E. M. Forster. Both Mrs. Wilcox and Mrs. Moore abjure what Forster calls the "life of telegrams and anger", and cultivate instead the fertile intuitions of the spirit. Basically, this means exploiting the possibilities of fantasy provided by their immediate environment; for they too, in their innocence, cannot understand the reasons for so much that goes on around them. Unlike their friends and relations who allow themselves to be trapped by their innocence, Mrs. Wilcox and Mrs. Moore frankly accept their limitations and blissfully transcend them by developing their inner lives.

Faith is the development of one's inner life, an activity of the spirit that both Mrs. Wilson and E. M. Forster approve of and strongly advocate, but which neither of them fully understands. The most they seem able to do is to illustrate it. The similarity between Mrs. Wilson's outlook and Forster's seems conclusive. After all, it does not take much insight to imagine Nell Severance in India communing with the mystic sounds and silences of the Malabar caves. Forster's theme in *A Passage to India*, as well as in his other novels, is the "connection" between what he calls the "prose" and the "passion" of life. His "prose" corresponds to the material side of our experience, the humdrum everyday events of Mrs. Wilson, while his "passion" largely resembles her reliance on the intuitions of the spirit. The fascination that Mrs. Wilson advocates makes precisely the "connection" that Forster seeks, since it provides an attitude to life that is a compromise between the two basic elements of our experience, the material and the spiritual. As Forster says at the beginning of *Howard's End*, "Only connect the prose and the passion and both will be exhausted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer." This is exactly what Nell Severance, Mrs. Wilcox and Mrs. Moore do. Nor should we ignore the external evidence offered by Desmond Pacey in his book on Ethel Wilson, where he quotes from one of the author's letters in which she expresses her love for three of Forster's novels in particular. There can be little doubt that the faith revealed in her own novels is, to some considerable extent, the result of Mrs. Wilson's close and admiring contact with the tender humour and cautious idealism of a fine novelist who was also one of the most tolerant, gentle and compassionate of men. So far as we can tell, Forster's novels are, if not the ultimate literary source, certainly a radically formative element of Mrs. Wilson's faith.

Before concluding, we should mention some aspects of the author's writing that contribute greatly to her success although they are not strictly related to her main theme; for example, her nature descriptions and dialogue. As illustrations of local colour, her books vividly reproduce regional features of Canada's Pacific coast. But there is no need to give any of her descriptions here, partly because they abound in her writing, and partly because they are a merit shared, to a greater or lesser extent, by other Canadian writers. Mrs. Wilson's pre-eminence shines more brightly in her dialogue. She captures authentic qualities of Canadian speech, whether she is dealing with Chinese artisans of Vancouver, naturalised, English-born immigrants or native Canadians. By exactness of diction, rhythm and intonation, she expresses subtle nuances of feeling and illuminates hidden recesses of character.

We must also briefly illustrate the characteristic qualities of Mrs. Wilson's general prose style, for example, its dry humour, judicious economy and serene detachment. The following quotation, from *Lilly's Story*, describes the gossip in a village store:

The talk in the store then resumed the endless discussion of how much older Mrs. Butler was than Mr. Butler; what was they doing in China anyway; Major Butler was in the Customs, why then he wasn't no soldier; he was in the Boxer troubles, but he didn't look like no boxer, too skinny: he was head of the Chinese army, they musta kicked him out: he was in the British Ambassador's office, well, he might be at that; seemed a nice fella: well, they minded their business and paid their bills: kinda funny coming way off here, maybe they wasn't married anyways. Discussions like this were pleasant in the long summer evenings too and had the merit that they went on and on and never arrived.

Provincial ignorance and narrow-mindedness provide obvious humour, while the careful selection of the details that are discussed indicates the spareness and shrewdness of the author's judgment. But the most outstanding feature of the passage is that Mrs. Wilson sides neither with the Butlers nor their detractors, reporting the failings of the latter objectively, without satire or venom. If we were to single out the most significant feature of her style, it would be this placid detachment which enables the author to portray less praiseworthy aspects of human nature calmly, without a trace of anger or bitterness.

For all their entertainment value, however, and despite their brilliant technique, Mrs. Wilson's novels cannot be said to constitute "major" fiction. Indeed, she does not attempt to produce "major" fiction. She does not analyse the problem of an unpredictable future in a way that significantly increases the reader's

understanding of it, or illuminates its precise moral characteristics. Her writing moves at a level that deliberately ignores the more profound aspects of her theme. Her chief aim is not to understand the philosophical basis of an unpredictable future, but to guard against the grief that the future can bring; to achieve this she instils in her best characters a flavour of whimsicality, a gift for fantasy which serves as a protective shield. Thus, Maggie, Lilly, Nell and Ellen are never made desperate by the accidental and unexpected miseries that afflict them. They are either reconciled to their unhappiness, or favoured with happiness in the end.

The desire to protect her characters from the harsher elements of her theme opens Mrs. Wilson to the charge of "escapism". But if "escapism" means that she alters or distorts real dangers and threats posed by the future, then the charge cannot stick. The cruel adversities endured by all her chief characters prove beyond doubt that Mrs. Wilson does not evade or escape the real issues of an unpredictable future. She advocates neither escapism nor aggression. She compromises rather than opposes, acknowledges rather than investigates. Hers is a patient attitude of ample compliance which, while it robs her work of intellectual insight and moral intensity, blesses it with a compassionate view of life that is essentially Forsterian; for her patient compliance embraces most if not all of that writer's tolerance, gentleness, good humour and simple faith. She is an innocent traveller, but none the worse for that.