

THE NOVELS OF ETHEL WILSON

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THE DISTINCTIVE ELEMENT in Ethel Wilson's fiction is its tone. It seems as if the centre of each book were not a main character, or a theme, or a plot, but an attitude toward the life of the tale. The subject matter with which Ethel Wilson deals varies considerably in event, character, setting. So does the form. But the tone, though not the same in each work, has certain recognizable characteristics.

It is, for one thing, quiet. It is persistently undramatic, allowing no sustained plot interest, no profound involvement with any character. Moments of wonder or sharp delight are followed by ordinary distractions; moments of concern or intense sympathy are commented on with wry humour. The tone is often funny, urbane, curious, inclusive. And what it primarily does is to render any subject matter in such a way that the reader's journey through it is very like his journey through any natural landscape, any ordinary day of his living. Meaning, in these novels as in living, comes upon him and fades. He encounters these characters as he might people in his own life, watching their surface, their manner and acts, knowing them, drifting away, doubting, hearing again, sometimes losing sight of them entirely. Should he for a moment lose himself in a scene or a gesture or mood, he will be brought back to his role as observer; he will have restored to him a perspective that persuades him to regard this fiction with a kind of equanimity.

Gertrude Stein says, "A long complicated sentence should force itself upon you, make you know yourself knowing it. . . ." These short complicated books make a similar requirement. The reader meets people, discovers places, knows things, and he knows himself knowing them, is kept aware of the process. The sense of living given is that the way is the truth; it is the journey that matters, not the arrival

points. When one looks back, he doesn't say, "Oh, so that scene was being used to this end." He looks back over the natural landscape of the journey.

To create this tone, this meaning, Ethel Wilson does extraordinary things with point of view and with narrative line. Not so much in her first novel, *Hetty Dorval*. Yet even here there is a pushing at the edges of the controlling voice. There is, in fact, nothing in the book, no reflection, no view that the narrator, Frankie Burnaby, might not have thought or said. But she does seem to shift her point of view in time. Sometimes she speaks as if she were, in imagination, very close to the experience she is recalling; sometimes it is as if she were taking a much more distant view of a scene wider and richer than the one actually being presented to us. In one passage the boundaries of the tale are described very clearly, precisely because the narrator's untold life is to her a more important one than Hetty Dorval's. The things that are not told are not important to the story; but the knowledge that there are untold, unknown things and that other things are only guessed at informs *Hetty Dorval*.

I should like to describe Molly and Richard . . . because they are very important to me and have meant a great deal in my life, and now they always will. But this is not a story of me, nor of them, in a way, but of the places and ways known to me in which Hetty Dorval has appeared. It is not even Hetty Dorval's whole story because to this day I do not know Hetty's whole story and she does not tell. I only knew the story of Hetty by inference and by strange chance. Circumstances sometimes make it possible to know people with sureness and therefore with joy or some other emotion, because continuous association with them make them as known and predictable as the familiar beloved contours of home, or else the place where one merely waits for the street car, or else the dentist's drill. Take your choice. But one cannot invade and discover the closed or hidden places of a person like Hetty Dorval with whom one's associations, though significant, are fragmentary, and for the added reason that Hetty does not speak — of herself. . . . Any positive efforts that one could discern on the part of Hetty were directed towards isolating herself from responsibilities to other people. . . . But . . . [she] 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 island." Who touched me? . . . And so I will write down something about Richard and Molly. . . .

There are also, in *Hetty Dorval*, scenes or events whose value seems not to depend on their relevance to this particular tale. Descriptions of the Fraser and the Thompson River, of the desolate hills around Lytton, of the English sky, comments on the genius of place, the story Marcella Martin told: such passages seem to have an absolute value, a vivid life outside the main line of the story. Each

one could have seemed, to the narrator, relevant; she could have justified them, as in the passage quoted above. But there is in them some force barely contained by the narrative.

THAT FORCE IS RELAXED in *The Innocent Traveller*, an episodic book about a life which “. . . inscribes no sweeping curves upon the moving curtain of time . . . no significant design. Just small bright dots of colour, sparkling dabs of life.” Here scenes occur or recur as if by chance, as if this event or that landscape had simply snagged the attention or the memory. They are arranged in a roughly chronological order from the time in the 1840’s when Topaz Edgeworth was a very little girl to the time in the 1940’s when she died. But even so simple an order is interrupted almost at once.

If Father had ever faltered in his faith, how deep would have been the crack, the fissure, the ultimate chasm into which he would have fallen. You and I, who pick our way unsurely amongst the appalling wreckage of our time, patching the crack here, avoiding the split there, anticipating the unsure footing, rejoicing in a bit of solid ground and going ahead again until we trip and fall on our noses — we can take our troubles much more easily than Father could have done. But Father never tumbled down.

The reader’s attention is drawn away from then into now, from there to here, from small chaos to large, increasingly often as the book goes on.

There is a similar shifting round of point of view from one generation to another, from one member of this large family to another. The reader stays with no one view long enough to become ultimately acquainted with it. The effect is kaleidoscopic. There are relationships and patterns, but they seem temporary, transitory, as if made by chance.

In the early part of the book, the actual physical point of view is near, although it is not really in, the young Topaz. Much of what we see and hear is determined by what she saw and heard. We know little if anything of her unspoken thoughts. She is given as a person who had none, who said everything and “was congenitally lacking in any private or inner life and did not seem to miss or need it.” She is a woman of great gusto, determined and able to take pleasure in small things, and “quite unaware of the realities of the lives of the people whom she met day by

day." Any tale she tells, therefore, is fairly superficial, no matter how lively and amusing the surface. But as the book progresses, as Topaz the youngest daughter, the youngest sister, becomes aunt, great aunt and great great aunt, the point of view moves further from her. Comments on her life and the life of the family in Vancouver have a growing distance. The point of view which is established finally as the view of the book comes from no character in it. It is an author voice, whose tone, not at all omniscient, is tentative, detached, reflective. It arises out of the minor and major events, the tangential and direct relationships of these hundred years.

Two chapters of *The Innocent Traveller* were published separately. Others could be, having a kind of enclosed life. But the tone of wonder, of mingled admiration and despair, grows only gradually through the whole book, through one episode simply "coming in beside" another in a grouping as accidental, a sequence as casual as any natural order. Topaz, who delights in coincidence and is interested in accident, asks for no meaning or purpose. She takes each event as it comes, with relish; she makes nothing happen. ". . . if the book of her life had been shut up bang at an early age, history would have gone on just the same." One young relative, half listening to her ancient great aunt, wonders if there is a connection between her "unquenched vitality" and her lack of human awareness. In chapters that shorten and shift to the present tense as Topaz gets to be ninety years old and then a hundred, the author voice muses on time and history of which Topaz has had both much and little.

In the evening while the seagulls fly westward with lazy, purposeful flight, and great and terrible events are massed by Time and Plan upon the slow-moving curtain, Aunt Topaz gathers the rattling newspaper together and with her embroidery scissors cuts out a picture of the King and Queen, an account of a wedding, or an advertisement for garlic pearls because they sound so odd. She may send for these pearls some day. She puts the newspaper cuttings into a large overfull box with a red plush cover on which some seashells still remain. She is very old. She will soon be a hundred.

The tone Ethel Wilson has created in *The Innocent Traveller* seems natural for a family tale. The combination of apparently exact and detailed accounts with frankly fanciful reconstructions implies a point of view like that of some younger member or friend of the family. The quiet, companionable voice which shares amusement, raises questions, and occasionally makes a fragmentary judgment precludes any final judgment. No pattern, no ultimate meaning in the life

of Topaz Edgeworth could emerge from an author view which encompasses the many points of view of the family.

Tuesday and Wednesday, a novella published three years after *The Innocent Traveller*, is entirely concerned with the number of meanings that do not add up to one, the number of impulses and motives which are not links in a chain of purpose. Will and intention play some part in the lives of these characters, but not so much as accident and coincidence. The arrangement of episodes is loose, so that one becomes aware only gradually of a pairing which holds all things in balance: the intention acted upon and the intention deflected; the coincidence that alters a mood and the coincidence that doesn't; the accident that ends a life and the accident that is scarcely noticed.

The tone of this book, both more detached and more comic than that of *The Innocent Traveller*, is also more controlling. Each event and each character is made to seem as ordinary as can be. On Tuesday and again on Wednesday, Mort and Myrt Johnson get up in the morning, dress, eat, go off to work — or not. The course of each day is determined partly by habit, partly by character, and partly by so casual a circumstance as the fact that the woman across the aisle in the bus is wearing alligator shoes. Even when the apparently irrelevant assumes relevance, affecting mood and action, the tone of the passage makes the shift seem perfectly ordinary.

Of all people, Myrtle loved herself in whatever guise she saw herself. If her parents had been alive, she might have loved them, too. If she had had children she might have loved them too, since they would have been her children. She had Mort, and . . . she really loved him in her own way. She reserved the license to dislike him, to hate him even. For very irrational reasons she would end the day disliking Mort, even when she hadn't seen him all day; because, perhaps, the butcher had said that so upstanding a man as Mort deserved the best steak in the shop, or because Auntie Emblem in her luscious fashion had said that *there* was a man, if you like! Or even because his socks had gone at the toe, or because he was darn lazy, which he was, or for no reason at all. Then she knew herself wasted on this louse. But let her friend Irma Flask who lived three blocks away ask how many jobs it was Mort had had since Christmas, and say she pitied Myrtle she certainly did, and whether that was that souse Hansen she seen him with on Thursday, and what a wonderful provider her sister Ruby's husband was — then Myrtle displayed Mort as the perfect husband, hers and none other, and let them that couldn't keep their own husbands lay off of hers, whatever she had said about him fifteen minutes before.

Mood and motive shift about, on these ordinary days, not only for the Johnsons but also for "Aunty Emblem in her luscious fashion" and Vicky Tritt in her spare fashion, for the top-rigger Eddie, "that souse Hansen", and for the journalist Wolfenden whose "troubles [were] the wrong women and the wrong drinks and himself." Like the balance of episodes, the balance of characters (not at first noticeable) makes it seem the oddest chance that two very different people should find themselves in similar or echoing circumstances. The effect one character has on another seems also accidental. One encounter may be a direct hit; another, a glancing blow; a third, abortive, so that neither character is really aware of the other at all. A missed connection is made to seem as fortuitous as a meeting which alters the course of a life. It is by a chance encounter that Mort is drowned early Wednesday evening. For good reason, but, as it happens, wrongly, the police believe and tell Myrt that her husband was drunk. By chance, Myrt's cousin Vicky has seen Mort just before his death and is able to tell Myrt that he was cold sober. All this, and the fact that Myrt is not at all pleased by Vicky's information, the reader takes with amused detachment. But something is building up to the moment of Vicky's lie.

As she hurried along the dark wet pavements, life and time continued as usual everywhere under heaven with practised ease their ceaseless fluid manipulations and arrangements of circumstance and influence and spiked chance and decision among members of the human family — such arrangements as had caused Victoria May to be what she was; and had caused her that night to see Mort sober and Eddie drunk; and had caused her to force her small will upon Myrtle Johnson; and had caused her in one instant by means of a lie to turn Myrtle aside from her fury, and had thus enabled Myrtle to become the widow of a hero, not of a louse, and so had enabled Myrtle to remember Mort with half grudging tenderness and with her best and sleazy love; and had caused her (Victoria May) to do Mort a great service by so establishing him in general reputation and in memory; and had caused Myrtle to esteem herself a woman not preferred — for one fatal moment — to that souse Eddie Hansen, thereby adding to the power of her eyelids by being a wife widowed and deeply injured by this non-preference; and thus had caused Myrtle to continue to dominate Mrs. H. X. Lemoyne and Victoria May and even Irma Flask — more than ever before — and sometimes by virtue of her cruel loss to dominate Mrs. Emblem; and still to be very lonely.

In its quiet way, this novella is technically brilliant. The author voice, established in the opening paragraph, is sometimes omniscient, to show both the irrational connections and the many missed connections. It is sometimes an observing and commenting "I" who addresses the reader as "you". This device, moving

toward conversation, makes observations seem natural, and thereby opens the small particular experiences of a few people into the daily life of anyone.

So the two friends got up, and took their time and walked together along Hastings Street and took the street car and changed twice and got off at a very chic building which was large and spreading and of white stucco with window boxes, and a grass plot all around; the kind of building that caused tourists driving in from Bellingham to say "Oh let's stop here, Momma. This looks a nice kind of place!" You cannot blame these tourists because it does indeed look like a nice kind of place to stay, but it is not, it is not, it finally and inescapably is not. It is a mortician's place, it is a funeral parlour, it is a funeral home, it is the undertaker's and people who approach meditatively and a bit early for the funeral wonder how on earth did we manage in the old days! Back east when Grampa died it doesn't seem to me we had anything swell like this. We just had the funeral right in the house and old Miss Foster came in to help.

The conversational author voice also allows the point of view to flow smoothly into one or another of the characters, whose experiences and responses are given largely through characteristic speech patterns. These speech rhythms, with their repetitions and formulas, their emotional connections and distractions, are like the rhythms of the narrative itself. The rolling under rhythm is established when Tuesday morning, noon and night are followed by Wednesday morning, noon and night. Within this on-going, comic movement, there are all the extraordinary transitions, juxtapositions, repetitions, variations and irrelevance of ordinary daily life.

This novella is one of two published together, in a volume called *The Equations of Love*. The love Myrt and Mort have for each other is an extension of a self-love that is strong and inaccurate. What they and other characters in the story really love are the many images of themselves. In the second novella, *Lilly's Story*, Lilly's motivating love is also — in a way — self-love, but it turns very quickly from self-protection to the protection of her child. Her refrain, "A girl's gotta right to live," becomes "My kid's gotta right to have a chance."

THE SHARPEST CONTRAST BETWEEN *Lilly's Story* and *Tuesday and Wednesday*, is that Lilly's is a story of single-minded purpose and ruthless perseverance. The story angles in by way of Yow, Lilly's lover for a time who was

caught stealing, and then by a second chapter about Lilly's childhood, the period when she "took things as they came, living where she could, on whom she could, and with whom she could, working only when she had to, protecting herself by lies or by truth. . . ." But it settles into the mould of Lilly's purpose from the time she found herself pregnant. As months and years came, Lilly discovers more and more what to lie about, how to make a lie make a world, how to use gesture or silence to build and maintain a new identity. To teach herself and to guard her child, she must be always alert, always aware. To give herself time and the safeguard of space, she must be distant, reserved. In this story, therefore, no event is unused; nothing is unrelated to Lilly's life plan. Each episode and each sentence, economical and scrupulously attentive to detail, moves steadily, as if in single file: this *and* that, this *so* that, this *but* that. The choice is restricted. The point of view shifts less than in any other of Ethel Wilson's novels. The reader either sees what Lilly sees or, more often, watches her, a determined, shrewd and terribly lonely figure in a vague landscape.

There is something unnatural in this rigidly purposeful life. It is not that Lilly is presented as overcautious. ". . . about and behind her spread always her intangible and invisible Then, solid as steel, inescapable as past birth or death to come, making her Now always insecure and always scrupulous — for Eleanor. . . . (But a girl's gotta right to live, hasn't she? Sure she's got a right. No, said Lilly's austerity, she had no rights at all. None.)" The unnaturalness comes about because Lilly's single-mindedness has made her so cautious, so isolated that she is not much affected by chance. She can't risk it. ". . . You see, there's always somebody sees everything. There's never any freedom . . . not for me. Things don't stop, either. They go on and on and on."

Lilly's Story, like many of Ethel Wilson's tales, is about a triumph of the human spirit. This triumph comes not only through Lilly's long endeavour but also through her final release, because of the coincidence of Yow's reappearance, from her prison-haven into the ridiculous world of chance meetings and frivolous adaptations.

In *Swamp Angel* there is also a working out of a plan, but in a manner that is much more flexible. The narrative of this novel spreads out, flowing one way for a while, then bending round to follow another path, another character. The woman who carries out her plan, Maggie Lloyd, is as determined as Lilly, but where Lilly is slight, narrow, rigid with purpose, Maggie is ample, easy in her movements, intuitive. She too is reserved, not from fear but because she "did not require to talk, to divulge, to compare, to elicit. . . . Maggie, brought up from

childhood by a man, with men, had never learned the peculiarly but not wholly feminine joys of communication, the *déshabille* of conversation, of the midnight confidence, the revelation. . . ." What she does, she does "serenely and alone". She is, however, not merely self-reliant. She relies on the land itself, the life of woods and lakes and rivers to which she has returned. Here she can relax, encounter and move with the unexpected.

Maggie's are not the only meaningful experiences in *Swamp Angel*. Another character almost as important is old Mrs. Severance, as strong and self-sufficient as Maggie, more curious and articulate, less active. The lives of these two friends diverge. The lives of Maggie and a Chinese boy from Vancouver converge. There is a working out in the narrative of what Mrs. Severance calls "the miraculous interweaving of creation. . . . We are all in it together," she says. Even Eddie Vardoe, the husband Maggie left, is "in it". Between chapters that flow like Maggie's rivers or Mrs. Severance's memories are comic two- or three-sentence chapters which give the mean, wiry life of Eddie and his blondes. But there is no real plot or theme connection between these characters. When they meet, they meet by coincidence or by some sort of accident.

The accidental or arbitrary encounter or event or vision in *Swamp Angel* is different from the accidental encounters of *Tuesday and Wednesday*. Maggie and Mrs. Severance have an awareness, a deliberateness that indicates some relationship between caprice and will, between the passive and the active. None of them is given as controlling his fate; each of them is in some way aware of it and consents to it.

"Coincidence," said Mrs. Severance, "seems to me to be what a Japanese friend of mine used to call 'a series of combination of events' which meet at a certain point of time or perhaps place. It is not as uncommon as people think, and the older I grew the more I believed in the fantastic likelihood — whether relevant or irrelevant — of coincidence. . . ."

The fantastic likelihood of coincidence does not function as strongly in *Swamp Angel* as in *Tuesday and Wednesday*. *Swamp Angel* is a more fluid work altogether, covering more ground. The movement of point of view and narrative line establishes an attitude or consciousness hard to define but pervasive enough so that no combination of motives and acts turns into an imposed pattern, a plot. Casual or symbolic connections do appear but are made to shift and finally dissolve.

In *Love and Salt Water*, the reader's attitude toward the life of the story is

less clearly controlled. There is, on the one hand, some real power of plot in this novel. Whereas in *Swamp Angel*, Maggie's key decision has been made before the book opens so that her movements were those of relaxation and a natural return to her strongest self, in *Love and Salt Water* young Ellen Cuppy moves toward important decision. Her growth, over a period of fifteen years, gives a sense of motion toward some act, some knowledge or understanding. She is given a natural urgency and restless drive. On the other hand, there are the counter motions of such a passage as this:

She did not at that moment think that there was somewhere some parallel of light and darkness, of illumination and blotting-out, and perhaps our whole existence, one with another, is a trick of light. That may be somewhere near the truth, which is often hard to determine because of the presence of the lights and shadows of look, word, thought which touch, glide, pass or remain.

In *Love and Salt Water*, there are not only comments in the distinctive author's voice but also divisions in the narrative, and several points of view. However, Ellen Cuppy's hesitations and actions, blunders and discoveries pull so strongly toward plot and character development that the counter weights cannot balance them. As soon as the balance tips, as soon as one hears the questions "Why does she do this?" "What does that mean?" one realizes how strongly Ethel Wilson has held, in many books, a difficult view. To see life as accidental, "a trick of light", "a series of combination of events", and to present it so with humour implies some balancing source of strength, some framework. In *Love and Salt Water*, the framework doesn't seem to hold. But in other works, especially in *Tuesday and Wednesday*, the balance is so fine that one gets the kind of impression one gets from a mobile: it moves of itself, by accident, by design.

