

ETHEL WILSON'S CHARACTERS

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I

In her first published novel, *Hetty Dorval* (1947),¹ Ethel Wilson sets the pattern for character in her subsequent writings. While attending school in Vancouver, Frankie Burnaby boards in a house overlooking Stanley Park, and from her bedroom window she can see the mountains across Burrard Inlet. The image of one mountain in particular, the Sleeping Beauty, is reflected in a large mirror that stands in the bedroom:

The mirror had been placed, probably by chance, so that it isolated and held a reflection of the Sleeping Beauty. . . . This reflection, held in the circular frame, had more unity and significance than when you turned and saw its substance as only a part of the true, flowing, continuous line of the mountain.²

This framed picture, to which Frankie is curiously drawn, can be seen as a metaphor for Ethel Wilson's fictional world, a world of peaks and valleys governed largely by "chance" and peopled by characters yearning for independence, at times even solitude, while simultaneously seeking to establish a firm "link with the larger human community."³ Such a link remains elusive, though, because Mrs. Wilson's universe is essentially unpredictable and disjointed, with no apparent moral or ethical foundation. The motivation behind her writing derives, I believe, from the need to discover such a foundation amid the chaos about her. Her progress toward that discovery is mapped out in her characters, who range from the indifferent, immoral Hetty Dorval to the sensitive, forgiving Ellen

¹*The Innocent Traveller* was actually written before *Hetty Dorval* but not published until 1949. I have not included it in this study of Ethel Wilson's protagonists because it seems to have grown out of a very different impulse than its successors and, for this reason, its main character, Aunt Topaz, is atypical of Mrs. Wilson's other heroines.

²*Hetty Dorval* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1947; rpt. The Laurentian Library, 1967), p. 42. All subsequent page references in my text are to this edition.

³David Stouck, "Ethel Wilson's Novels," *Canadian Literature*, #74 (Autumn 1977), p. 74.

Cuppy. My purpose here is to trace the emergence of a moral dimension in Ethel Wilson's fictional world, as it is reflected in the development of her characters.

Frankie's fascination with the reflection of the mountain parallels her attraction to Hetty Dorval, of whom the *Sleeping Beauty* is clearly symbolic. When she first meets Mrs. Dorval in Lytton, she is impressed by the beautiful line of Hetty's profile, especially "the soft curve of her high cheek-bone, and the faint hollow below it" (p. 14). Later, on board a ship bound for England, she again encounters Mrs. Dorval, and realizes that Hetty's "very activities were passive, not active — if you can call it an activity to sit still and appear unconsciously lovely" (p. 53). And near the end of the book, when Hetty, now Lady Connot and soon to be Mrs. Jules Stern, stays the night in Frankie's hotel room, she is the sleeping beauty in fact: "She turned over in the bed and made a beautiful S with herself. . . . I looked down at her in mystification, for almost before I had time to turn out the light, this woman, whose mind should have been full of consuming sorrow or of rage or even of compassion, was sweetly asleep, the curves of her lips were innocent and tender" (pp. 88-89). Like the mountain, and the fairy-tale heroine after which it is named, Hetty Dorval is unconsciously lovely in a passive sort of way, but also like the fairy-tale, her story is rich in mystery, deception, and accidents of chance.

Though initially captivated by Mrs. Dorval's beauty and sophistication, Frankie soon discovers that Hetty's loveliness is a deceptive screen for an inherent selfishness and immorality. With this discovery comes the more profound realization that she has never known the real Hetty Dorval at all — "I only knew the story of Hetty by inference and strange chance" (p. 57) — but only a fragmented reflection of her: "I could not see Hetty plainly. I could not tell what Hetty was really like. I was subject to all her charm, but I felt no confidence in her" (p. 69). Hence, it is not only the ugly rumour of adultery and suicide that follows Mrs. Dorval from Shanghai to Vancouver or her incipient flirtatiousness, both of which confirm her immorality, that provoke public suspicion and censure, but also the fact that she remains solitary and unknowable, an island unto herself, *terra incognita* to Frankie and the "Menace" to Mr. and Mrs. Burnaby. Within the novel's symbolic structure, Hetty logically becomes associated with the equally enigmatic and destructive menace of war.

As Frankie prepares to leave her uncle's home in England to study in Paris, she receives word from Canada of her father's fatal truck accident, the unhappy effects of which are intensified in her mind by the threat to Europe of impending war. Seeking temporary relief from her problems, she escapes to London with her cousins Richard and Molly for a pleasant lunch at Scott's in Piccadilly. There they bump into Mrs. Dorval. Hetty's enchanting influence reduces Frankie to a Lytton schoolgirl again, robbing her of her new self-confidence, and she leaves the restaurant in "a rare state of perturbation" (p. 67). But the idea of Hetty ensnaring Richard and Molly in her web of selfishness and immorality preys on Frankie's subconscious, and one night she awakens in her small Paris apartment to see in her mind's eye "the amiable Hetty menacing our peace" (p. 69). She determines to return to London "to tackle the experienced Hetty alone . . . to battle her if necessary" (p. 74); and the success of her crusade, Frankie realizes, depends upon her finally seeing Hetty Dorval as she really is.

Hetty's first line of defence is her faithful housekeeper, Mrs. Broom, who meets Frankie at the door with "the look of a woman who defended, and was at all points wary, and closed herself in from all people" (p. 76). But Frankie easily breaks through this preliminary resistance, confronts Hetty face-to-face, and demands to know her intentions regarding Molly's welfare in particular: "'what will you do about Molly? She'll be your care, too. You'll be her sister, but you'll have to be more like her mother . . . and Molly's never had a mother'" (p. 81). Hetty declares with an indifferent laugh that she has never had a mother either, at which point Mrs. Broom suddenly enters the fray and, with horrible vehemence, reveals herself to her thankless daughter: "Mrs. Broom looked on Hetty and said, 'Hester . . . I am your mother,' and the silence in the room was as though drums had stopped beating" (p. 82). The battle is over and Frankie, cognizant for the first time of Hetty's vulnerability, of Mrs. Broom's grief and need, and of the profound implications of her own actions (she has unwittingly severed the tenuous link between mother and daughter), quietly leaves the house: "In this thankless and questionable fight I had handled dynamite, and in so doing had exploded the hidden mine of Mrs. Broom to my own great astonishment ('No Man is an Iland')" (p. 86). When Hetty subsequently appears at Frankie's door, "nothing headlong, nothing lost, nothing distraught" (p. 87) despite her mother's shocking

revelation, and unabashedly proposes to spend the night, Frankie asks herself "What is Hetty?" and then proceeds to scrutinize this woman as if for the first time, not in the reflected light of a looking-glass but in the hard light of the electric bulb above the bed: "Her clever make-up was not there, and she no longer looked ageless, but a little old" (p. 88). Hetty is human after all, and notwithstanding the various images she projects of herself through her many identity changes — Mrs. Dorval, Lady Connot, Mrs. Stern — she is at bottom a "frail envelope of skin," (p. 89) whose link with the continuous line of humanity is evident as Frankie watches her sleep:

The soft rise and fall of the unconscious sleeper's breast is a miracle. It is a binding symbol of our humanity. . . . A sleeping human being is all people, sleeping, everywhere since time began. . . . I looked at Hetty and could almost forgive her because she was Hetty, sleeping; but that did not prevent me from prodding her and saying, 'Hetty, move over, I've got to get to sleep!' (p. 89)

Frankie's sense of fellowship with her nemesis is only momentary, for even asleep Hetty creates problems, as she gradually relaxes her body into a spacious S, selfishly forcing Frankie to sleep on a chair.

The following morning Frankie and Hetty part company for the last time, Frankie to return to Paris and Hetty to accompany Jules Stern to Vienna. Hetty is "a picture of elegant sweetness" (p. 92) as they exchange good-byes, but although drawn once again by her irresistible charm, Frankie knows her too well now to regret her departure: "As I watched with satisfaction Hetty going down the narrow stairs, I knew that before she had taken three steps she had forgotten me. . . . She was on her way" (p. 92). Ethel Wilson appends a brief postscript to Hetty's departure, reporting that within six weeks the German army occupied Vienna and "there arose a wall of silence around the city, through which only faint confused sounds were sometimes heard" (p. 92). David Stouck sees the war as the ultimate "negation of man's humanity writ large"⁴ and indeed the wall of silence surrounding Hetty in Vienna is aptly emblematic of her own chronic self-centredness, her capacity simply not to mind. Nevertheless, throughout the book her desire to island herself is at odds with an equally strong impulse to survive, which leads her to

⁴Stouck, p. 77.

pursue a series of convenient and lucrative marriages. The tension between these conflicting human needs — for solitude on the one hand and for society on the other — is at the heart of Hetty's immorality as, lacking the internal resources to resolve the conflict, she chooses instead a life of moral and ethical deception. Moreover, this tension remains unresolved in the novel as a whole, because although the heroine achieves a kind of forced isolation in war-torn Vienna, her survival is doubtful, giving ironic proof to Mrs. Wilson's constant theme: "No Man is an Iland."

II

The moral tone of Ethel Wilson's writing changes slightly with *The Equations of Love* (1952), a book comprised of two novellas, "Tuesday and Wednesday" and "Lilly's Story," both of which give us, as Desmond Pacey has suggested, "glimpses of the boredom, the horror, and the occasional glory of ordinary human life."⁵ The imaginative world of *The Equations of Love* is governed by chance to as great an extent as that of *Hetty Dorval*, the most ominous examples being Mort Johnson's fatal encounter with the drunk Eddie Hanson and the untimely appearance on Lilly's doorstep of Yow, the irascible Chinese cook. The characters, who are defined and motivated largely by their own insecurities, are drab reflections of what we normally expect interesting fictional characters to be like: there is no exquisite beauty like Hetty Dorval to brighten the dismal procession of daily life; indeed, at one point Myrtle Johnson is pointedly described as having no beauty at all. But if Hetty's elegance is missing, so is her willful immorality, for the characters in *The Equations of Love* are essentially amoral in their responses to life. Thus, when Mort Johnson, by the force of his confident appearance and his disarming conversation, convinces Mrs. H. Y. Dunkerley that he is an expert gardener, we can look back to a previous editorial comment to put his brief success with Mrs. Dunkerley into proper context: "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."⁶

⁵Ethel Wilson. *Twayne's World Authors Series*, ed. Joseph Jones (New York: Twayne, 1967), p. 99.

⁶*The Equations of Love* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1952; rpt. The Laurentian Library, 1974), p. 5. All subsequent page references in my text are to this edition.

Here is a very different character from the consciously immoral Hetty Dorval, for in not considering the moral rightness or wrongness of any of his actions, Mort is genuinely sincere in every act, even if that sincerity is only momentary. It is the narrator's remark about Mort's well-meaning nature, then, that elicits our sympathy for him as for his interlocutors. Similarly, the narrator gives us a clearer picture of Myrtle Johnson's timorous cousin Victoria May Tritt's naiveté, demonstrating once again that "people are very deceiving and you never can tell" (p. 31): "Mortimer Johnson . . . alarmed Vicky in a pleasant masculine fashion. She thought him handsome, noble, and kind, like a movie star, which he was and he wasn't" (p. 66). And again, Vicky "had never seen Myrtle demonstrate her thoroughly bad temper with Mort, and so it was she thought humbly that Myrtle and Mort were an ideal couple" (p. 66). Oblivious to the moral implications of her actions, Vicky blurts out a lie about Mort dying a hero, a lie springing not from any premeditated impulse to deceive but almost inadvertently "from the depth of the life that she lived in her dreamings and her imaginings and the newspapers which were her fairy tales and the movies which were her other life" (p. 122).

Throughout "Tuesday and Wednesday," all characters are shown to be insecure, self-deceptive, and amoral in varying degrees. These qualities are particularly highlighted in the protagonists, Mort and Myrtle, by the revealing technique of internal personification, whereby their consciences or psyches become their "angels." This concept is integral to Ethel Wilson's perception of character, as she explains the advantage of the angel's point of view at the outset:

A man's angel, after a long residence within or around a man, knows its host (or charge) very well indeed; far better than you or I, who, looking, see perhaps only a stocky middle-aged man, strong but now flabby, frowsty at the moment but when his face has been washed and shaved and his hair parted on the side and brushed back . . . are justified in believing that this is Mr. Johnson who is coming to do the garden, and seems a very nice man and you hope you'll get a little satisfaction at last. (p. 4)

In short, given the overwhelming appeal of external appearances and the inevitable complication of self-interest, it is nearly impossible to assess another's character objectively without recourse to the indecisive word "seems," the incumbrance of which is not felt by an angel who knows its host very well indeed. Mort's angel therefore

has no illusions about its charge, having "some time ago found out that the insecurity of the quarters wherein it often rocked . . . was due to a weakness in Mort's potentially strong inner structure, but, as it had discovered that it could do nothing about this weakness, had rather given up" (p. 4). As for Myrtle's angel, it had "long since become a nervous and ineffectual creature because Myrtle's various entities and impersonations were enough to keep any angel thin" (p. 8). Both angels are battered about continuously — Mort's until it is released by his death and Myrtle's until she feels assured, however temporarily, that Mort died a hero — and their ineffectuality points up the uncertain moral condition of the chaotic world to which their hosts must somehow adapt.

This same moral vagueness pervades "Lilly's Story," the account of a young woman's struggle to bring up her daughter in a thoroughly respectable fashion. In its essential details, Lilly's story parallels Mrs. Broom's as we glimpse it in *Hetty Dorval* when the distraught housekeeper defends herself to Frankie: "'A lot you know, you comfortable ones. Wait till you've had your baby in secret, my fine girl, in a dirty foreign place, and found a way to keep her sweet and clean and a lady like her father's people was, before you talk so loud'" (p. 83). Lilly's foremost thoughts from the time she gives birth to Eleanor, more or less in secret, in the dirty, foreign mining town of Nanaimo, are to keep her little girl sweet and clean and to raise her to be like other people, not an unloved street urchin as Lilly herself had been. To be sure, the respectability of Eleanor's "father's people" is one of Lilly's many fabrications, like her newly assumed name, Mrs. Walter Hughes, a distinct refinement over Lilly Waller, but Ethel Wilson's obvious sympathy for her heroine causes us to look beyond the morality of these deceptions to view with interest and ultimately with sympathy the progress toward respectability and internal happiness of a character who, in her youth, had never "looked below the surface of things as they occurred," had never even "looked within herself" (p. 160). Lilly's amorality is simply a condition of her progress: "Of course Lilly would lie (for Baby) if need be (as she had lied her own way along her life), and she would steal for Baby as long as she would not be discovered. She would rather not lie nor steal, because lying and stealing so often mean Trouble, don't they; oh, yes, they often mean Trouble" (p. 174).

We are told that the world of the invisible senses was closed to Lilly, that she would never "experience love and friendship and beauty, joy, sorrow and the poetry of experience" (p. 194) as Eleanor later would. Consequently, her development throughout the story is characterized not by great moral and spiritual insights but by the simple ability to differentiate between the relative importance of things versus people. Initially, Lilly is described as having "an inordinate desire for *Things*," (p. 137) and in this context the small room she is given when she is hired as the Butlers' maid represents "security." When Mr. Butler makes a half-hearted pass at her, she admits to herself that "she would have played, she would not have spared Mrs. Butler — human relations were not [her] concern"; nevertheless she declines, not for moral reasons but "because of Eleanor and security" (p. 189). When Lilly later overhears Eleanor referred to as the maid's child, her immediate concern is that her daughter will be forever just "the maid's child," with "never a home of her own, and never a life of her own" (p. 195). Only when she moves to the Fraser Valley does Lilly acquire the least empathy for other people, and even this limited feeling results from her taking possession of her very own cottage: "Her room at Mrs. Butler's had been a better room, yet it was not Lilly's room in the sense that this small square uncompromising place was hers. A warmth of affection rushed from Lilly as she looked about her shabby house. It humanized her" (p. 206).

The humanizing process precipitates an awareness in Lilly of the various equations of love from which, she realizes, she has been excluded all her life: "So this was love, each for each, and she had never known it. . . . She was outside it" (p. 239). Yet the habits of a lifetime die hard, and notwithstanding her new appreciation of life and love, Lilly seals her marriage to Mr. Sprockett, the happy note on which the story ends, not with the truth about her past but with the revelation that she wears a wig, appropriately called an "adaptation." Immensely pleased with the image Lilly projects of herself, Mr. Sprockett congratulates himself on having found "this perfect perfect woman!" (p. 281).

III

In her essay, "A Critical Approach to Ethel Wilson's 'Tuesday and Wednesday,'" Sister Beverley Mitchell traces Mrs. Wilson's use in that story of classical and contemporary versions of the Ulysses

myth; Mitchell points out the humour and pathos of Mort Johnson's fatal voyage compared to the voyages of Odysseus and Stephen Daedalus.⁷ The quest motif informs all of Ethel Wilson's major fiction and particularly *Swamp Angel* (1954), which is, among other things, the account of a soul's deliverance out of bondage. *Swamp Angel* represents a significant philosophical shift in Mrs. Wilson's imaginative vision, for she moves out of the classical frame of reference into the realm of Christian mythology. Armed with the liberating thought regarding her husband, Edward Vardoe, that "He is he and I am I"⁸ — the phrasing is vaguely reminiscent of the Old Testament God's revelation of himself to Moses, the archetypal liberator, as "I am who am" — Maggie Vardoe begins a journey that in detail symbolically parallels essential Christian doctrine, wherein Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified and buried, descended into Hell, rose from the dead after three days, and ascended into Heaven, the Redeemer in all his glory: Maggie leaves her husband and oppressor, under whose influence she has suffered, journeys through Hope to a spot on the Similkameen River and for three days experiences "the respite that perhaps comes to a soul after death," (p. 40) continues along the Fraser Canyon past Hell's Gate, past a Calvary scene of three wooden crosses on a wild hillside, and on to the comparative paradise, Three Loon Lake (a name suggestive of the Trinity), where she ultimately redeems the Gunnarsens.

But Mrs. Wilson is not interested here in writing allegory, Christian or otherwise, and therefore the mythic framework of Maggie's story is important primarily for its emotional evocations. As Desmond Pacey has illustrated, the essence of *Swamp Angel* is rooted firmly in Ethel Wilson's previous books, to which it bears a strong family resemblance.⁹ This affinity is especially apparent with respect to the major characters: Myrtle Johnson's aunt's self-indulgent authoritativeness is amplified in Nell Severance; Vicky Tritt's childhood experience of peer ridicule is exactly Hilda Severance's; Myrtle's bad-tempered jealousy emerges sometimes in Vera Gunnarsen; and Lilly Waller's courage and determination are invested in Maggie Vardoe. It is the Christian framework, however,

⁷"A Critical Approach to Ethel Wilson's 'Tuesday and Wednesday,'" *Atlantis*, 4 (Fall 1978), 111-22.

⁸*Swamp Angel* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1954; rpt. New Canadian Library No. 29, 1962), p. 39. All subsequent page references in my text are to this edition.

⁹See Pacey's introduction to *Swamp Angel*, pp. 5-10.

that makes the characters in *Swamp Angel* more positive figures than their predecessors, for it suggests the possibility at least of a moral foundation upon which to build order and meaning in their lives.

The central image, as the title suggests, is a small revolver called "Swamp Angel," once part of Nell Severance's juggling act and now her constant companion, which she bequeaths eventually to Maggie, a kindred spirit. Though they meet face-to-face only once in the story, the psychic link between the two women is confirmed through the exchange of letters and of the Swamp Angel itself. Nell is a commanding figure as she hefts her "ponderous softness" about the house, continually, unconsciously, fingering the Angel. She is God-like in her decision to rescue Edward Vardoe from his own self-pity — "'He's an unpleasant object but worth salvation I suppose. . . . I'm exhausted I tell you. Saving souls. Very tiring.'" — and God-like in her dealings with her daughter, Hilda — "'Mother, you are so used to playing God and playing so cleverly that you make gross mistakes . . .'" (p. 65). Yet Nell Severance (both her first and last names imply a kind of letting go, if not death itself) is a God in decline, who admits at times to needing "'the human touch,'" (p. 63) and at times to being "'very stupid'" for a woman "'who thinks she is so wise'" (p. 66). Nell's successor is Maggie Vardoe, to whom she mails the Angel shortly before she dies.

Maggie resembles Nell in independence and unconventionality. She is a survivor, a strong swimmer in the literal and metaphoric sense, in contrast to Vicky Tritt, who never learned to swim, or Mort Johnson, who is drowned in an act of salvation. Like Nell, Maggie possesses a household god similar in import to the Swamp Angel, a little Chinese bowl which she carries with her and fingers in moments of contemplation; the difference between the revolver and the yellow bowl is significant in terms of the novel's mythic framework, for whereas Nell is a kind of Old Testament God figure who holds sway through the power and fear the Angel invokes, Maggie is more a Christ figure who redeems through love and self-sacrifice, which the little yellow Chinese bowl symbolizes. Our glimpse of the good-natured tolerance exhibited by the Quongs, the Oriental family that runs the Vancouver Taxi service, augments the Christian-Chinese analogy.

What Maggie shares with Nell is the ability to perceive essences, an ability that establishes their uniqueness among the other characters and makes the quest for a positive moral dimension to life

a hopeful one. When Maggie first meets the Gunnarsens at Three Loon Lake, the narrator makes it clear that she is responding as much to the essence of place as to the people themselves: "Meeting partakes in its very essence not only of the persons but of the place of meeting. And that essence of place remains, and colours, faintly, the association, perhaps for ever [sic]" (p. 75). And writing to Nell after receiving the Swamp Angel, Maggie explains that her old friend was right to send it away: "'I am so sure that our ability to throw away the substance, to lose all yet keep the essence is very important'" (p. 129). The capacity to see beyond outward appearances to perceive essences abrogates superficiality, and therefore Nell and Maggie are less self-deceptive than characters like Edward Vardoe or Haldar and Vera Gunnarsen, who are prisoners of their own short-sightedness; Edward Vardoe blindly claims to have been a good husband to Maggie, Haldar Gunnarsen myopically regards himself as a strong man despite his crippling accident, and Vera, for her part, succumbs to the jealousy she develops against Three Loon Lake. This is not to say that Nell and Maggie escape self-delusion altogether. Even Nell deceives herself where the Angel is concerned, but she has the wisdom to acknowledge her fault: "'it was a symbol to me too and when I had that fall . . . I nearly lost the Angel . . . and it was much dearer than I ever knew and when a symbol becomes too dear . . . it can blot out the truth it represents'" (p. 119). She hastily dispatches the revolver to Maggie without sentiment for herself but with a sense of how intimately the act relates to Hilda's happiness. It is Maggie's triumph, too, that Vera's jealousy and discontent elicit from her only compassion, that attitude of mind and heart exemplified by the selfless act of covering a fellow human being on a cold night: "That is a beautiful action which is divine and human in posture and intention and self-forgetfulness. Maggie was compassionate and perhaps she would be able to serve Vera Gunnarsen in this way, forgetting that she did so, and expecting neither praise nor thanks — or perhaps she would not" (p. 91).

In fact, Maggie is called upon for such an act when Vera attempts to drown herself, and responds by covering the shivering woman with her own dressing gown: "'There then,' she said with helpless compassion, patting Vera gently as she held her in her arms, 'there then . . . there then . . .'" (p. 147). But the previous remark that perhaps Maggie might not be able to respond thus reminds us that there are no assurances in Ethel Wilson's capricious fictional

world. Relinquishing the Swamp Angel, ostensibly for Hilda's sake, does not absolve Nell of responsibility for her inattentiveness to her daughter's feelings and needs over the years, nor of the nagging realization in retrospect that there were things about Hilda "[she] should have known, things [she] should have seen" (p. 119). And compassion, however selfless, does not qualify Maggie for sainthood. The novel's Christian mythos implies suffering and sacrifice as well as brotherhood, and we are left with the seemingly irresolvable paradox of two conflicting truths, namely that while "No Man is an Island," in this everlasting web of human interaction called life "it takes God himself to be fair to two different people at once" (p. 151).

IV

Swamp Angel concludes on a positive note, with Maggie tossing the revolver into the lake, an act symbolizing the necessary break with the past Nell found so difficult to make. As Maggie releases the gun, she regrets for a brief moment that the Angel will be lost forever: "It will be a memory, and then not a memory, for there will be no one to remember it. Yet does the essence of all custom and virtue perish?" (p. 157). But philosophical conjecture gives way in her mind to the practical demands of humanity; as the Angel settles in the subaqueous ooze, fish flicker about it and then resume their way, for life goes on, the swimming must continue, and Maggie must get back and attend to the needs of her charges at Three Loon Lake. This selfless compassion for others, which ultimately prevails in *Swamp Angel*, is at the heart of Ethel Wilson's next and last published book, *Love and Salt Water* (1956). Pacey has called it her least rewarding novel partly because Ellen Cuppy's story is less moving and her character less compelling than either Lilly Waller's or Maggie Vardoe's.¹⁰ However, while he is correct in noting the decline in intensity between *Swamp Angel* and *Love and Salt Water*, the discrepancy is due neither to the author's failing artistic skill nor to her poor choice of a heroine. Rather, the quiet tone is inherent in Mrs. Wilson's approach to her subject-matter, which focuses less on the particulars of an individual's quest for independence and love than on the implications of that quest in the context of the broader philosophical questions of life, death and immortality. For this reason, *Love and Salt Water* is Ethel Wilson's most philosophical and,

¹⁰Ethel Wilson, p. 159.

coincidentally, her most forgiving novel. Here, the moral dimension sought after in *Swamp Angel* is realized fully.

The philosophical tone is emphasized early in the narrative when Ellen Cuppy, hitherto a carefree girl devoted to her mother, must at sixteen cope with her mother's unexpected death: "Before Ellen, weeping, telephoned Aunt Maury Peake, she knew that this had always been ordained and that Mother's death was already established; as it were a long time ago."¹¹ Frank Cuppy, Ellen's father, though momentarily overcome by the suddenness with which his wife of twenty-seven years "had gone with those years into some abyss of memory," (p. 21) takes Ellen with him on a sea cruise, worrying about enjoying themselves but rationalizing that "it was no kindness or reverence to Mother not to allow happiness because she would know how it was and that they would never for a moment forget" (p. 23). The dilemma outlined here is implicit in *Swamp Angel*; either one lives, like Nell Severance, entirely in the past or one swims on, like Maggie, into the present. Choosing to swim on, Frank meets and eventually marries Mrs. Gracey, while Ellen, "a strong swimmer and careful," (p. 137) recovers reasonably quickly from her initial sense of loss.

The details of Ellen's recovery are less important to Mrs. Wilson's purpose than the philosophical musings that old age and death — Susan Cuppy's is only one of several deaths in the book — provoke generally. For example, the number of older people on the cruise ship prompts the narrator to comment on one of the paradoxes of ageing, that "toward the end of life, when one has less time, one has, strangely, more time" (p. 32). Later, old Miss Sneddon's annoying idiosyncrasies cause Ellen to wonder, somewhat philosophically, whether in years hence she herself will "be old Miss Cuppy" (p. 126). In a similar vein, when Mr. Platt, Ellen's employer, dies alone and unmourned, she reflects on the implications of her own solitary existence and draws comfort from what her mother once said about prayer making all men one family. And shortly thereafter her future husband, George Gordon, sends her quotations from *Samuel Butler's Note-books*, one of which reads "'Death is only a larger kind of going abroad'" (p. 108). Subsumed in these persistent allusions to old age and death is the larger question of immortality. *Swamp Angel* ends with Maggie questioning whether the essence of

¹¹*Love and Salt Water* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1956), p. 18. All subsequent page references in my text are to this edition.

all custom and virtue perishes when one's memory fades. If we were still dealing with the intractable world of *The Equations of Love*, the answer might be affirmative. But Ellen Cuppy's world is different; it is a world in which chance, though still a determining force, is mitigated by compassion, a world in which love and human solidarity prevail. Susan Cuppy's memory does not perish, because her essence survives in Ellen's compassion and sense of humour.

Compassion is the hallmark of Ellen's character. Her reaction to her mother's death is to think first of its effect on her sister Nora: "Poor Nora, she thought, and this thought extended beyond herself and her Mother, to Nora" (p. 17). When Nora and Morgan's first baby dies, she feels "desperately sorry for Nora, at the time, and of no use to her" (p. 65). She empathizes with Miss Sneddon even after the elderly soul's death: "'Poor little thing, . . . I'm sure she arrived in Heaven on the wrong day'" (p. 126). And when she is told that her nephew Johnny is deaf, "Ellen felt tenderly toward the little boy" (p. 149).

Ellen's compassion is ultimately reciprocated, as the book concludes with an act of forgiveness toward her, which in the philosophical framework of both *Swamp Angel* and *Love and Salt Water* is a Christian act of the highest order. While visiting with Aunt Maury Peake on Galiano Island, Ellen takes Johnny out in a small boat to see the seals, forgets to observe the changing tide, inadvertently rows out too far into Active Pass, and is swamped by the wake of a passing ferry. She struggles to keep Johnny afloat, until Mr. Abednego, a local fisherman, rescues them; in the process, Ellen's face is gashed by the fishboat's gunnel. Abednego curses Ellen for a "dom bitch" without "the brains of a louse," (p. 177) but Nora's reaction, after she sees that her son is safe and that her sister's face is badly disfigured, is selfless and understanding: "'Don't grieve so, please don't grieve, must she, Morgan? Tell her she mustn't grieve so'" (p. 187). Nora later mars her own nobility here by qualifying her previous compassion — "'I'm sorry for her, but she brought it on herself'" (p. 191) — but in its initial moment her forgiveness, compared to Abednego's abuse, is almost divine. Moments like these, though intermittent, appear to be the most that we can hope for in Ethel Wilson's imaginative world, but when they occur, they make the dreadful coincidences of life almost bearable.

Thus, Ethel Wilson's characters span the moral spectrum from the immoral Hetty Dorval to the compassionate Ellen Cuppy. The

spectrum is impressive both in its breadth and colour, given the fact that it covers the space of four relatively short novels. More than this, though, it reveals clearly the subtle philosophical changes in Mrs. Wilson's creative vision, which is not, I think, a vision without hope. To be sure, her world is the uncompromising real world and remains throughout a tangled web shaped largely by chance, but it can be modified by those qualities that human beings prize above all others — compassion and love.

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