Time in Ethel Wilson's *The Innocent Traveller* and *Swamp Angel*

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To a parent attempting to draw her child toward a responsible and loving independence or to a child attempting to resist such moral suasions, Ethel Wilson's writing will seem strangely familiar. Repeatedly, Wilson's fiction seems to teach us that to be fully human we must become conscious of ourselves as creatures within time and as such must become responsible for the consequences of our actions as they affect our human family. Typically, through the words of John Donne, Wilson reminds us—and especially by means of Maggie Vardoe—that time (and our own mortality) does not permit us to exist as separate indissoluble islands. But surprisingly, she exhibits a fond understanding for those children of nature—especially Aunt Topaz—who remain "free" of our temporal community. Moreover, beyond both the child and the adult, she suggests a shadowy cosmos in the making, a cosmos so large and unpredictable, its powers so vast and fleeting, so far beyond our ken, that even with our humane or "adult" prudence, we are left with no promise of a secure existence. Despite the fixed routines of nature and society, Wilson's only assurance is that no one thing finally holds.

To Desmond Pacey, Wilson's time in *Swamp Angel* becomes "a continuous cycle of movement, a rhythmic round,"[1] an orderly and thereby manageable flow. Thus Nell Severence gives up her beloved Swamp Angel, the gun which is a memento of her glorious youth as a circus juggler, in order to bring herself into accord with this flow: Pacey says that Nell now "freely accept[s] change, the forward rhythm of life and her own approaching death as a natural part of the cosmic cycle" (152). While Pacey does take note of the vastness of Wilson's time, time "profoundly indifferent" to man's purposes (136), time's "mysteriousness and [the] potential violence of the extra-human universe" (155), time as a "web of great, if sometimes terrible, beauty" (158), he is still overly optimistic about the efficacy of man's efforts in harmonizing himself with time.

[1] Desmond Pacey, *Ethel Wilson* (New York: Twayne, 1967) 147.

W.H.S. New dwells upon the "fluidity" of time and place in Wilson's fiction and shows that her fictional characters are made in terms of this fluidity.[2] Using Wilson's own summary of Aunt Topaz's life in terms of a formless and surface flow, New also extends this "fluidity" to Wilson's own narrative method in *The Innocent Traveller:* "'Aunty's long life inscribes no significant design. Just small bright dots of colour. Sparkling dots of life.' [This] is an accurate description, too, [says New] of the method the author used to present her central character; what we see are 'dots of life', the moments of vitality that seem to have created and to illustrate Topaz's personality" (86). Indeed the movement of Wilson's story does become a sparkling, pointillistic surface, a sunlit meandering flow onward and outward, anecdotal, without any hard outline, pattern or point beyond the life of Topaz herself, the "innocent traveller." And despite Wilson's final eulogistic promise that in death Topaz has found her final rest, Wilson's story, her series of picaresque triumphs, celebrates not rest or arrival but the flow, the exuberant adventures of an eccentric soul forever young.

W.J. Keith takes up Wilson's religious perspective, her vision of the eternal hovering at the edge or below the surface of time, and so he dwells appropriately upon Wilson's supple and inclusive narrative which allows "her readers to see the complete pattern even if her characters do not. Hers, then, is invariably a providential vision, and her authorial intrusions, so culpable to the advocates of modernism, are justified because they reflect and interpret a world view that presupposes a larger meaning."[3] In the complex inter-relatedness of Wilson's images from book to book, Keith sees the "recurring sense . . . of an overall pattern, of regulated if still mysterious laws within the universe, of a larger world beyond our own that can be seen and experienced in part but never apprehended as a whole . . . the world of eternity, if you like, only fitfully discernible in the world of time" (110). Certainly at the opening of *The Innocent Traveller* (as young Topaz sits underneath the diningroom table examining the shoes of her elders above), this intrusive authorial overview accompanies and humorously enriches Topaz's childish view of the world of adults. Again in the world above (the world to the north, which the British ladies do not see as they travel by train across the expanse of Canada) Keith points to an "expansion of viewpoint": "the movement is from what the travellers see to what they do not see, what they cannot see . . . . The sense of two complementary

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[2] W.H.S. New, *Articulating West* (Toronto: New P, 1972) 81.

[3] W.J. Keith, "Overview: Ethel Wilson, Providence, and the Vocabulary of Vision," *The Ethel Wilson Symposium,* ed. Lorraine McMullen (Ottawa: U of Ottawa P, 1982) 113.

viewpoints—the human one, bound by time and place, and another verging towards the divine—becomes increasingly evident in Wilson's later work" (108).

I question, however, whether Wilson's writing shows a "complementary" relation between the divine and human viewpoints, for Wilson emphasizes the disjunction between the human and the divine viewpoints, the finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal; indeed her irony (her rich humour, her whimsy and playfulness, her startling turns of phrase and image and plot) arises from this disjunction and repeatedly reminds us of the self-reflexiveness and incompleteness of the human viewpoint. Thus while celebrating Topaz's longevity, her duration of a hundred years, Wilson holds this tiny and perhaps insignificant life against the shadowy macrocosm of historical necessity and eternity. And again despite Wilson's promise of everlasting rest for Topaz, despite her applications of John Donne's homilies regarding our brotherhood in time and our final salvation in eternity, Wilson's story and her central character do not fit neatly into a Christian scheme of time. Her "innocent travellers" are not earnest pilgrims climbing the difficult upward path toward spiritual rest or eternal redemption; her innocents, who occupy a central position in her fiction, "float" or "slide," unaware and easy, on an unmeaning surface and flow of time —while their creator, Wilson, questions and explores the dark depths below. If the flow means something, if time contains or leads to a human destination or to a larger divine purpose, Wilson implies that the end is not known. Indeed Wilson's self-consciously artful writing, her peculiar blend of visionary and ironic perspective, hides almost as much as it shows.

Consider the pattern of Topaz's story. As New points out, Topaz's character, her free life, has been assured by the protective or restrictive confines of a genteel Victorian family—a "canal" through which she slides at a leisurely and unconscious pace. Her "almost Blakean innocence" and freedom depend upon the "world being ordered around her" by society (*Articulating West,* 87-88). However, even Topaz in her unconscious freedom and delight—"She enjoyed music as she enjoyed food, with pleasure, but without passion, like a warbling unimportant bird"[4] —is subject to the larger movement of time: "Time slides into time, and the extroverted Topaz did not consider that time, even one's own specific piece of time, slides into Eternity" (40).

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[4] Ethel Wilson, *The Innocent Traveller* (1947; Toronto: Macmillan, 1960) 45.

Only two or three times does Topaz become more than the unaware "water glider" or slider floating on the surface of time: first, when she curses William Sandbach upon discovering that after all he does not love her. Much later, when she "hears" the voice of Pan in the rubbing of a log and dock together, she thereby discovers "panic" in the night silence of the British Columbian sea coast,[5] the world in its natural state,"as new as Greece ever was, and newer, newer, much newer" (193). Here for a moment, Topaz's delightful adventure in the natural world is transformed into utter horror: inside the "satin white body" of Topaz "there opened a dark unknown flower of fear . . . . She, all alone, became only a frightened part of the listening elements" (193). Finally, Topaz discovers unexpected depths or complexities in the family itself when her beloved sister Annie on her death bed calls not for Topaz but for Annie's daughter, Rachel, to leave her final blessing.

Yet Topaz herself is no more changed by these discoveries than she is by her first experience of the Northern Lights. The vast electric whorls—"banners which flapped in silence across half the sky made vaster by the antics of the unexplained and ungovernable heavens"—are received by the happy and optimistic Topaz as no more than welcoming "portents," in fact self-fulfilling or self-reflecting assurances that she and her relatives "have made the right decision in coming" to Canada (97). But Ethel Wilson points sardonically to dimensions that Topaz cannot see or hear: "'I can do this again any minute that I want to. I can do more that this. I am independent of you, uncontrolled by you, indifferent to you, and you know nothing at all about Me. Behold!' said the mighty heavens rolling up like a scroll" (99). Again Topaz and her family cannot see beyond the horizon given from the railroad or beyond the vivid colours of autumn; they do not see the forbidding and ironic vistas that Wilson makes available to the reader: the "dark unreachable, anonymous lakes of blank water . . . [which] would be sealed with iron cold, and the silence broken only by the ultimate shot-like crack of frozen wood and water" (114); "the illimitable prairies . . . defeating the imagination like eternity" (118); and the broken minds of prairie wives who end in asylums.

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[5] See David Stouck, "Ethel Wilson's Novels," *Canadian Literature* 74 (1974): 74-88. Stouck deftly notes the sexual undercurrent in Wilson's writing and in the cry of Pan: "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 that she wishes she could identify them: 'If only they would turn right side up I might be able to see'" . . . . 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'—as the etymology of the word implies, she fears a revelation that will turn her mad. One can hardly miss the sexual implications of this experience" (76).

But this is not to say that Topaz's leisurely journey across Canada and through life is presented as if it were a shaky trestle, a false passage over modernist or postmodernist abysses, for her life is too much a life of gusto. Thus, as Topaz arrives in Vancouver, she "dr[ew] long breaths of the opulent air , [and] began to run about, and dance for joy, exclaiming, all through the open country" (122). From the mixed perspective of a moving railroad car and Old Testament metaphor, the physical world of Topaz seems then rightfully eternal and vital, and so trulyon Topaz's lyrical present "the world blossom[s] daily into incident " (68), and forever "the mountains skip like rams" (120).

However, Wilson ironically offsets Topaz's world of innocence and delight , the gusto of her perfect present, against a larger awareness of time. Thus while Topaz's life itself may "inscribe no sweeping curves upon the moving curtain of Time . . . no significant design. Just small bright dots of colour, sparkling dots of life" (243), Wilson ironically points to the historical necessities looming over the unaware Topaz. In the extreme old age of Topaz comes the Great Depression with its masses of unemployed living an arbitrary and timeless life: "They have no past, and they certainly have no present, and cannot see a future . . . . they would rather have a job" (250). But the imminent future, the impending war is already shaping their lives and giving them "something to do" (250). "Terrible designs" are already "blocked out" and "take shape and meaning with the present and the past" (257). In this fated world where the "battle had always been, and was completed before it had begun," Topaz remains unaware of the "two worlds and their relation" and unaware of the terrible necessity of pain; she eagerly awaits her daily newspaper and remains undismayed by the catastrophic news. In her unawareness she takes pleasure in the "permanence of the fleeting and prodigal joy of this timeless world . . . without responsibility or question" (258). In her natural cosmos, "morning departs and is eternal"; a permanent order is found in the "frail flower," "sunshine on clover," the wave on the shingle, or the "beauty of structure of a tree or mountain" (258). And yet even here as Wilson relates the diurnal arc of the herring gull's flight to the ordered pattern of Topaz's life—the aged Topaz herself an anxious and eager bird about to migrate to another world—Wilson does not picture the birds or Topaz in simple romantic or lyrical tones. The gulls are predatory and intense—"He has a fine life. But he is too earnest" in his search for food (262)—and the gulls would, if they could, devour the diminutive and diminishing Topaz. Meanwhile as Topaz remains unaware, unaffected by historical or human time, she too seems almost heartless, unnatural or even inhuman in her appetite for life—especially when Wilson herself closely

relates the indifferent purposefulness of Topaz and the gulls (their diurnal flight) to the great historical design of time: "In the evening while the sea-gulls fly westwards with lazy purposeful flight , and the great and terrible events are massed by Time and Plan upon the slow-moving curtain, Aunt Topaz gathers the rattling newspaper" (263). Yet even the simplicity and the vitality, the natural gusto, of Topaz is finally shown to be subject to Time's natural design; in time, her life inexorably shrinks to bed, voice, milk, no memory, habit, and finally to no more than an eager and anxious "point of departure" toward the one last "adventure" of death (274-75).

For the overly earnest reader (who may ask, "departure to what?"), Wilson leaves a consoling answer. Thus in the "late sunshine," Wilson does not end with the declining light of day but with images of loving duration and eternal return—with the sunshine "reflected from the leaves of the trees whose branches would soon be grown to touch across the road," and above, unseen by the funeral-goers, with "the customary westward flight of the sea-gulls over the sea through the evening sky . . . as always, a curious and ravishing sight" (276). In answer to "whither" the soul is gone, Wilson points through John Donne's words to a "more and better life." Donne's "Charity" speaks Wilson's last words: "'He [the soul] is gone to everlasting rest, and joy and glory . . . . We are . . . transported, our dust blowne away with prophane dust, with every wind'" (277).

Wilson's story, however, has not shown the "innocent traveller" ascending the difficult and purposeful path of Donne's pilgrim soul struggling through a fallen, sinful and transient world toward a safe and everlasting world. Instead, Topaz's "story" is a series of comic and picaresque celebrations, loosely tied together by the vitality of an adventuring eccentric, of a pagan completely at home in the fullness of an eternal morning and springtime. This 'impossible joy'—this 'impossible' character—is sustained not only by the protective family but also by the loving and richly ironic overview of Ethel Wilson. Thus Wilson's "innocent traveller" becomes a special case, an allowed exception: an Eve whom we must imagine to be unfallen and chaste; a Thel whom we must imagine to be blameless and vital; a strange innocent who has never known what is beyond the bounds of her protected garden, her spot in time, except as she has felt momentarily the shrill call or cry of the Greek god Pan, the sharp pain and anger of her one unrequited love, the confused glimpse of a family love beyond her own understanding.

Thus Topaz's "eternal" present seems to arise from a natural vitality which leaves her with little or no "awareness of the

human relations which compose the complicated fabric of living" (255). By the way, it is this unaware vitality, this natural carelessness, that attracts (and is rejected by) Maggie Vardoe in *Swamp Angel*; and it is this natural/amoral, uncaring and yet artful life of Hetty Dorval that attracts (and is rejected by) Frankie in *Hetty Dorval.*[6] In each of these novels, Wilson touches ironically (and yet with surprising sympathy) upon a lost or impossible world of innocence, a careless and unseeing life outside human time.

While this lost world of awareness, of natural time, is also central to *Swamp Angel,* the story starts from an all-too-aware and anxious moment of departure and returns repeatedly to the recognition that the human being cannot and must not escape responsibility in time. Maggie Vardoe prepares to abandon her husband, Edward, to flee from the ugly realities of a bad marriage. While the background resonates with migratory birds, flying by Maggie's window and the very mountains seem unsubstantial or "fluid," and while the moment itself seems to be "flowing, flying, past,"[7] Maggie herself anxiously times her routine of making her husband's supper and making her getaway taxicab. For the all-too-conscious and anxious Maggie, time seems at once unendurably stilled and also quickened.

But now having tidied her kitchen and timed all well, having descended the path to her awaiting taxicab, the forward motion of the taxi becomes a "sliding" and effortless return from the actual human world of suburbs and despoiled orchards to nature itself: the heroine sets herself adrift in a flow that carries her back to the wilderness interior of British Columbia. This sliding motion, this effortless return to the basic rhythms of nature, is underlined by Wilson's description of a strange maternal wind—"endless, soft fluent, still, blowing, moving, cleaving, closing, sliding"—that encloses and separates not only the victim from the abuser but also "mother from child" (30, 34). At this point, Maggie has given herself up to her momentum away from her husband, and she only partially imagines her destination—a job as cook in a lodge which she might take over later (60).

This floating upon the natural momentum, this liberation or abandonment of the self in nature, can be read as little more than a cliched instance of escapist or wish-fulfilling literature of mar-

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[6] See my article on *Hetty Dorval,* "Serious Whimsy," *Canadian Literature* 63 (1975): 40-51, where I argue more fully Wilson's close linking of innocence and amorality. Stouck makes the point more sharply when he points to the paradox of the supposedly "moral" Frankie excluding Hetty because Frankie refuses to have her life "complicated"—see Stouck's article above (75).

[7] Ethel Wilson, *Swamp Angel* (1954; Toronto: McClelland 1962) 17.

ital escape dressed up in the clothing of nature worship. Certainly Maggie's three day stay on the Similkameen River is likened to "the respite that perhaps comes to the soul after death" (40), an interlude outside time in which the soul supposedly regathers itself. The pleasure that Maggie takes in the "lovely silly eyes" of a doe surely reflects back her own peaceful security in nature (38). However, having returned to the bus, pestered by an amorous man and a garrulous woman, she attempts to escape once again into the static beauty of a graveyard, into her contemplation of the regular turn of the seasons and of the human return in death to the cycles of nature. But Wilson's clichéd word "nice" (opening and closing the passage) and her repetition of the subjunctive "would" indicate that such a meditation as this upon time is little more than a wishful and questionable speculation:

> Yes thought Maggie, it was lonely but it was nice there. The picket fence and the crosses would be covered by snow in the winter. Then the spring sunshine beating on the hillside would melt the snow, and the snow would run off, and the crosses would stand revealed again. And in the spring the canada geese would pass in their arrows of flight, honking, honking high over the silent hillside. Later in the season, when the big white moon was full, coyotes would sing among the hills at night, on and on in the moonlight, stopping, and then all beginning again together. Spring flowers would come—a few—in the coarse grass. Then, in the heat of the summer, bright small snakes and beetles would slip through the grasses, and the crickets would dryly sing. Then the sumac would turn scarlet, and the skeins of wild geese would return in their swift pointed arrows of flight to the south, passing high overhead between the great hills. Their musical cry would drop down into the valley lying in silence. Then would come the snow, and the three wooden crosses would be covered again. It was indeed very nice there. (56)

These endless harmonies of nature parallel the narrator's earlier aside about the Quong family in Vancouver, the family of Maggie's taxi driver. In the midst of busy Chinatown, Wilson superimposes what may seem merely the exotic and simple (and bogus) harmony of a Chinese folktale or a China pattern:

> The family lived in harmony from morning till night and slept in harmony from night till morning. When one of the older boys returned quietly from taking his shift as despatcher or driver and

> poked another boy who woke sleepily, got up, pulled on trousers and a sweater and went downstairs to sit by the telephone or to drive, the family did not waken, although the Mother never failed to be vaguely aware of what was going on among her children, what with the partitions that did not go up as far as the ceiling.
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> The father, whose name was Joe or Mr Quong or Dad, had the kind of benevolent influence that spreads as far as he has jurisdiction, and, by virtue of his character, usually radiates a little farther still. Moreover he was strict. So it was that Joe's word ran through the connecting rooms where his children slept, played, studied, ate, and it flowed up and down the stairs and into the taxi office, and sometimes onto the sidewalk outside the door where he often stood surveying the scene—always changing, always the same—which he knew very well. (42)

One should notice here that this communal harmony is not guaranteed by some benign external agency; it arises from the ever caring, ever vigilant awareness of the mother and father. It is not a human harmony that Maggie can easily live, for her story begins as an escape from the imperatives of love.

Thus in the interlude of peaceful mountain wilderness, Maggie's catching and killing of a fish brings back to her mind an intrusive "thought as cruel and thin as a pipe fish" (39), a guilty glimpse of the pain she has caused her husband. And again as if to frame the unavoidability of our social bonds, Wilson returns Maggie not only to her getaway bus but to the unwelcome intrusions and demands of the amorous man and chattering woman.

Indeed, the two strands of Wilson's story suggest that the demands of love must be met and managed if order is to be maintained in the family: Maggie Vardoe must manage the neurotic resentment of Vera Gunnarson who (rightfully) fears being displaced by Maggie;[8] Mrs. Severance must manage the resent-

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[8] Leaving Vancouver, Maggie tells Joey Quong that she does not know where she is going but that she wants "a certain kind of business" and a "partner with a good head who's got a car and who's a good driver. To go halvers or nearly halvers" (27). Before reaching or knowing of Three Loon Lake and the Gunnarsons, she tells Mike Graham she wants a job at a lodge: "I'm a good cook for a fishing lodge, and I can run a place too. But . . . it sounds funny . . . I'd like a nice place-where it's running down a bit and I could take over gradually . . . myself . . . and maybe next year . . . or the year after . . . " (60). At the close, Mrs. Severance imagines Vera Gunnarson "housebound without an opening window; hellbound, I think. Poor Vera. Poor people" (152), and indeed one of the Quong boys is about to become Maggie's partner at least in the work of the lodge. Is it unfair to ask then whether Maggie wills the defeat of Vera Gunnarson? Wilson herself trolls the fable of the eagle defeating the osprey past us, and she could just as well have fitted the cowbird into her bestiary.

ment of her daughter, Hilda, and the anger of Maggie's husband. Yet while Mrs. Severance successfully brings together her daughter and Albert Cousins, at the close, Maggie Vardoe has yet to succeed in bringing the Gunnarsons together as a family and including Angus Quong as a partner.

The logic or momentum of Wilson's story, however, is oblique rather than straightforward. Maggie loses her patience in trying to manage Vera Gunnarson and sees that in escaping marriage she has not escaped to a "lagoon" (90). To her chagrin, Maggie realises that precisely because she is "stronger and wiser" than Vera, she is the one obliged to "establish and maintain relations" (89). But the route to this realization is oddly arranged by Wilson: Maggie observes an eagle robbing an osprey of its salmon; in this distant and silent battle of wills, Maggie cannot tell whether the end is one of rage, acceptance or triumph but finds herself uplifted and refreshed (90-91).

We are left to puzzle what this renewal means. Surely the fable of the eagle and osprey means that the strong take what they want; yet the fable leads next to the renewal of Maggie's compassion—at least to the extent that the narrator abruptly observes that Maggie may "serve" the unconscious Vera as would the merciful onlooker who covers one who is asleep and cold, "a beautiful action that is divine and human in posture and intention and self-forgetfulness" (91). The narrator, however, refuses to leave any final assurance: "Maggie was compassionate and perhaps she would serve Vera Gunnarson in this way, forgetting that she did so, and expecting neither praise nor thanks—or perhaps she would not" (91).

While, then, Maggie seems for the moment renewed and liberated by the natural world, Vera's child Alan is "still one" with the natural world—in which "there was no passing of time, world without end"—though he carries his parents' painful division within himself. At play in the silence of the woods, observed by Maggie, he changes himself in his free imaginings from boy to Mexican and/or African leopard (95). In her sympathy for the child freely at play in nature, Maggie tells Vera "with some truth" that she has not seen Allan.

But again as in the *Innocent Traveller,* the Northern Lights appear, displaying in louder terms yet a magnificent free will at the heart of nature, like that of an arbitrary and powerful God who comes and goes entirely as he pleases:"I do as I wish; I am powerful; I am gone but I am here" (96), Following this nocturnal display, Maggie is given an Edenic display of "faun and tiger" at play: a dappled deer and a kitten frolicking in their morning

innocence, the faun watching the kitten transform itself in its primal freedom through the stages of the curious, playful, feral, domestic and predatory. While this chameleon spirit of play may again suggest a simple lyric song of innocence, Wilson (like William Blake) implies surely that both tiger and lamb remain potential in the human being—a complex primal freedom still present in Maggie herself.

This series of tableaux is brought to a climax when Maggie in her mastery of her work and her managing of Vera decides that "serving" is like swimming: both are done "alone" and are "self directed"; both permit the "strong" to swim freely around obstacles (99). While the lavish play of Wilson's description surely implies the attractiveness of this natural self reliance, Wilson turns around upon herself to warn that Maggie's avatar had better remind her that after all she is not one with the seal and porpoise, that she is not a god floating in the water, that while it is a "nice life in the cool water"—again the ironic cliché—the water will not necessarily buoy her up: she is after all a creature of the "earth"and not the "water" (99).

This point is sharpened when Maggie writes a letter to Mrs. Severance: Maggie confesses to there being "one recurring bad obstacle" (still the jealousy of Vera) and admits that she pretends to be a swimmer—"and I just swim around it" (129). Later yet, after she has rescued Mr. Cunningham from the treacherous lake and he has offered her another job, she declines, and Wilson's narrative voice freely summarizes her reasons : "It was not so easy sometimes to say that I am a swimmer . . . [for] the family remains strong, dear, enraging, precious, maddening and indestructible" (140). At this point Wilson seems to have concluded with the self subordinated to the human community.

Wilson, however, does not deliver a simple uplifting sermon. Vera continues to be jealous. Like the eagle and the osprey, the two women remain locked in a silent conflict, and so Maggie is forced to conclude that the family "will fall apart again"; "and with all her high thinking she has not been able to cope with one unhappy human being." In her dejection, she wishes that she could be with "old Nell" with no pretense of swimming around obstacles (142). And yet in Maggie's comforting of Vera after Vera's attempt at suicide, it seems clear that Maggie's practical managing nature and her inherent kindness do predominate over the contrary forces of fear, doubt, jealousy, anger and despair. But once again Wilson turns and asks: "what words do you use to exorcise the Evil One?" (147).

The meaning of Maggie's story and the image of the swimmer is drawn out further through Mrs. Severance's final preparations for her death. Mrs. Severance gives up her gun, her "endeared symbol" of her life to Maggie, for the gun is not really safe; it cannot hold her life intact or restore her glorious youth as a circus juggler. She also hopes that, by giving up the gun, she may release her daughter from the painful memories of childhood associated with the gun, the strange circus parents who leave Hilda behind in boarding school. Most important, Mrs. Severance sees that she has "nothing now but the reality" of her remaining life—her future is not the glittering and fixed memory of youth but is "life and the evening . . . closing in." Yet while the gun may now be safe, her daughter "being only a human being, would never be truly safe" (83)—nothing is guaranteed. Not only does this aside closely echo the narrator's earlier warning that Maggie's trust in herself as a swimmer is specious; not only are the two physical arts of juggling and swimming (and, perhaps writing?) finally made out to be vanities—given the precariousness of human existence in time—but the two women are made to think as one when Maggie's thought follows the same path if not in the exact same terms as Mrs. Severance's "symbol" and "reality." In her letter of reply to Mrs. Severance regarding the gun, Maggie decides that to "throw away the substance, to lose all and yet to keep the essence is very important" (129). (Whatever the "essence" is remains, as yet, unanswered.)

Whatever, the two women realize that time does not permit the simple security of a "desert island" or "lagoon," for even in its bounty the world is unreliable. Thus, Mrs. Severance's comic parable about a would-be suicide who becomes a successful-cookie manufacturer because at the last moment he realizes that he has forgotten his false teeth and therefore returns home and makes his fortune. While Mrs. Severance presupposes a world in which "everything happens again", she also sees that "it's never [quite] the same" (150); while the world is repetitious, it is also unpredictable; while "coincidental," also unstable and vain. It is a web forever in the weaving and without any final assurance of reward or triumph. Indeed, in Mrs. Severance's vision of arbitrary time, the most trivial act can be the "cause" or beginning of one's changed or changing fortune. (Similarly Ellen Cuppy in *Love and Salt Water* becomes partially aware of the unforseen contingency of time; "She had begun to be teased sometimes by the discrepancy between the trivia of life and its purposes. Unexpected results came from insignificant happenings; significant moments brought revelation; history and time and change

disclosed these things."[9] Indeed in the logic of this novel, Ellen Cuppy's [Gypsy's] momentary carelessness brings about the near-drowning of herself and her nephew and thereby, oddly, the reconciliation of herself with her family and with marriage itself.)

Yet while we "cannot know what will happen" next, Mrs. Severance believes in the mysterious interconnection of things, for chance or coincidence or providence do give rise to the success story of Nigel the cookie maker. More seriously, she believes in "faith" itself, and it is partly because of this faith in unseen connections that she cuts herself off from her cherished but finally vain idol of her life, the Swamp Angel. Beyond, Mrs. Severance glimpses the eternally ongoing web of existence:

> I sit on top of my little mound of years . . . and it is natural and reasonable that I should look back, and I look back and round and I see the miraculous interweaving of creation . . . the everlasting web . . . and I see a stone and a word and this stub . . . and the man who made it, joined to the bounds of creation—has creation any bounds Maggie?—and I see God everywhere. (150)

She is not anxious to distinguish the created world of things from the omnipresent creator; indeed, she speaks as if the two are virtually one—would not a "boundless" creation be the Eternal or the Infinite? Whatever the answer, Mrs. Severance explains to Maggie what she refuses to explain to her rationalist son-in-law: she has no faith in mankind ("we have no immunity and we might as well realize it" [150-51])"; when she speaks to her son-in-law, she believes in "faith" itself; but in her last letter to Maggie, she qualifies this to a belief in faith in God—"faith in God is my support" (151).

But the ironies are compounded once again as Mrs. Severance virtually defines God (from her position in the complex web, with her conflicting loyalties to her husband and daughter) as the humanly impossible capacity of "being fair to two different people at once" (151). The application is obvious as Maggie "almost jumped at the words which had risen so often in her own mind" (151, and see 95). Indeed how can Maggie (harmonize or) be "fair" to herself and her abandoned husband, herself and Vera? However serious or frivolous Mrs. Severance's last words may be, however much they may suggest our human inability to

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[9] Ethel Wilson, *Love and Salt Water* (1965; Toronto: Macmillan, 1956) 102.

achieve justice, she implies a higher and larger and unseen possibility in the "web"—within the eternal order of time.

The application of Mrs. Severance's understanding is worked out consistently in the closing of Maggie's story. After the death of Mrs. Severance, Maggie and Angus Quong return in springtime to Three Loon Lake and Maggie arrives at two related conclusions. First, Vera needs "petting" by all of the family, but "petting" (human love and good works and fairness) cannot guarantee Vera's recovery nor necessarily secure the harmony of the family. And yet, secondly, in her management of the lodge, Maggie feels the "things [of the lodge] falling into place" (156). Obviously, in the battle of wills Maggie verges upon triumph—indeed she may be about to take over the lodge that she had imagined even before seeing the Gunnarson's lodge—and the question of being Godlike, of being fair to two at once, is left, not simply as an unattainable ideal but as an open and disturbing question: can we be "fair to two different people at once"?

Wilson's final words sustain this note of irresolution. Maggie knows only that in carrying out Mrs. Severance's last wish, in throwing away the gun, she is participating in some "rite." We know that Mrs. Severance intended a sacrifice for the higher good of the family and for one's own life flow. While Maggie knows the gun's "virtue" as an artifact, its "small immortality," and knows that it is "too good to be thrown away" (156-57), we have been given a larger (and thereby ironic) understanding of Mrs. Severance's purposes. Thus Maggie's act of throwing the gun—higher and farther than it had ever been thrown by Mrs. Severance—proves Maggie's integrity and strength, especially since she does not fully understand her friend's purpose. This integrity and strength is surely very much to the point as Maggie verges upon triumph over the failing Vera.

But what of the gun's final meaning? Maggie knows little of the saving and threatening part that the gun played in Mrs. Severance's encounter with Maggie's husband; and surely Maggie realizes only a part of Wilson's nihilistic overlay of thought upon the final effects of the throwing: "[the gun] will be a memory, and then not even a memory, for there will be no one to remember it. Yet does the essence of all custom and virtue perish? Quick . . . waste no time . . . you must go back to work . . . Angus is hungry . . . throw that little gun in the lake at once" (157). Whether or not these words stand for Maggie's own thoughts—time is time-to-get-on-with-work!—the implication at the end is clear: the person who acts within the web (the weaving) of time cannot be fair to two at once, cannot himself

hold past and present together, cannot stop long to brood upon the darker implications of time, upon the "essence" or upon the vanity, the ultimate emptiness or meaninglessness of one's daily life, one's ongoing present.

The last three sentences show Wilson's complex meaning in miniature. The ascent of the glittering sun seems triumphantly right. The descent into the depths and "ooze" of oblivion seems equally right and in no way tragic. Moreover Wilson's fish put to rest any thought of the injustice of time. In their frightened flight, in their curious return, and in their final "resum[ing] their way," the active "flickering" fish reflect and anticipate Maggie's active life, her momentary pause and the her wast[ing] no time . . . you must go back to work":

> It made a shining parabola in the air, turning downwards—turning, turning, catching the sunlight, hitting the surface of the lake, sparkling down into the clear water, vanishing amidst breaking bubbles in the water, sinking down among the affrighted fish, settling in the ooze. When all was still the fish, who had fled, returned, flickering, weaving curiously over the Swamp Angel. Then flickering, weaving, they resumed their way. (157)

Wilson's words put Mrs. Severance to rest and reconcile the reader to Wilson's vision of time. The gun, the human artifact (this human essence this cherished symbol and potential idol), is returned to the natural realm, to the "ooze" itself—the "ooze" implying the oblivion from which and to which all begins and ends. And yet oblivion (or the world of unconscious nature) is presented lovingly by Wilson, for she reminds us of the beautiful web or weaving of creation in the twice stated "weaving" of the swimming fish. With the "flickering, weaving" as the next to last touch—"flickering, weaving, they resumed their way"—Wilson does not portray a nature or time that betrays or devours us, but an indifferent Creation forever joining the myriad particulars of life into a profuse, brightly lit, ongoing and unified whole. Wilson's fish "resume their way" just as Maggie "must go back to work." The gun and the dead woman are forgotten for the moment; and in time, each and all will be forgotten.

Though Wilson's time seems finally to proceed indifferently or unconsciously, Wilson as the overseeing artist draws forth the beauty of the ever ongoing creative force animating and unifying the diverse whole. With reverence and yet with her own playful, disturbing and unpredictable harmonies, Wilson celebrates individual lives lived to the full; but even more, she

celebrates the awesome and inscrutable power of what she has called "our universal master and servant Time."[10]

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[10] "What has Proust to do with Canadian literature? He has to do with our universal servant and master Time, and with people moving in Time" (Ethel Wilson, "The Bridge of the Stockhold: Views of the Novelist's Art," *Canadian Literature* 5 (1960): 45.