

# ETHEL WILSON, WARY MYTHOLOGIST

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WHEN MRS. SEVERANCE in Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel* has her vision "with words" — "symbol symbol symbol . . . destroying reality,"<sup>1</sup> Wilson's own vision in the novel suddenly takes a remarkable turn. Until Mrs. Severance's dream, Wilson does not much disturb the reader's trust in the conventional novel narrative she has carefully crafted; she had until then built a traditional relationship between author and reader: she has directed the reader to a safe, comfortable detachment while she, by virtue of the guise of third person omniscience, has become almost invisible. But with Mrs. Severance's vision, Wilson undermines the reader's trust in convention and throws a spotlight on the artist pulling levers in the wings. In the manner of writers better known than she for the devices of metafiction, she draws the reader into what Coleridge called the work's magic circle where the reader's new contract with the author contends with his desire to believe in the old one. In the conventional narrative of *Swamp Angel*, Wilson gives form to the drama of this struggle in her portrayal of Maggie's escape from a restrictive perspective on her environment to a fuller view — her search for her "place." *Swamp Angel* is literature about literature, but more than that, it explores those complex operations of the mind — an author's mind or anyone's — which are attempts to possess somehow the world around it. Wilson makes a connection between Maggie's search for her place, and a reader's search for belief; the richness of *Swamp Angel* lies in the interplay between these two quests. The reader's new role in relation to *Swamp Angel* produces a greater sensitivity to the exhilaration and danger of Maggie's quest. Likewise, Maggie's story is a cautioning guide to the reader who is hoping to possess a world.

The world around Maggie is clearly different from the environment in which many other creatures of Canadian literature, contemporary with the appearance of *Swamp Angel* or earlier, find themselves; whereas Maggie's world ultimately balances the hope of possession and the consequences of the absence of hope, theirs is often either a cheerful place unfamiliar to us or a terrifying wilderness empty except for a force of efficient and anonymous destruction.

Northrop Frye has mused over this quality of place in an essay on imagery in Canadian poetry called "Haunted by Lack of Ghosts." He takes his title from the last line of Earle Birney's poem "Can. Lit.": "It's only by our lack of ghosts

we're haunted." There are gods here in Canada, says Frye, "and we have offended them. They are not ghosts; we are the ghosts, Cartesian ghosts caught in the machine that we have assumed nature to be."<sup>2</sup> Frye, of course, employs terminology in his argument from Gilbert Ryle's refutation of the Cartesian conception of self.<sup>3</sup> According to Frye, the Cartesian self was brought to the New World along with two other "cultural imports":

One was the revolutionary monotheism of Christianity, with its horror of "idolatry", that is, the sense of the numinous in nature. For Christianity, the gods that had been discovered in nature were all devils: man could raise his consciousness toward the divine only through human institutions. It followed that a natural religion like that of the Indians simply had to be extirpated if the Indians were to realize their human potential. The second was the Baroque sense of the power of mathematics, the result of which can still be seen in the grid patterns of our cities, in the concession lines in rural areas, and in the great burden of geometry that North American life in particular carries.

The third import, the "Cartesian egocentric consciousness," he describes as "the feeling that man's essential humanity was in his power of reasoning, and that the nature outside human consciousness was pure extension: a turning away from nature so complete that it became a kind of idolatry in reverse." If one pauses for a moment to reflect on Frye's three "imports," the conviction grows that they are powerful evidence for a theory of the kind of people we are in North America as refugees from the Europe of a particular period.

Still, the cultural importation of seventeenth-century Europe to the New World does not necessarily account for the particular reaction of Canadian poets to their environment that Frye goes on to explore. The Americans, after all, inherited this tradition as well, yet their literature more often reflects bravado in the face of nature. Frye recognizes this in his opening sentences:

Very few historical and cultural statements can be made about Canada that do not have obvious counterparts in the United States. At the same time, social developments in a country which has amassed a huge population and has become a great imperial power may have a quite different imaginative resonance in a country with a sparse population and a minor world influence.

The vastness of the American landscape the American backed by the strength of his nation can identify with and exult in, whereas the vastness of the Canadian landscape becomes a terror to the Canadian already conscious of his relative weakness. The three cultural imports worked together on the Canadian mind in a special way. By exterminating divinity from nature, by confining the definition of "man's essential humanity" to the small, clean, well-lighted room of reason, where what roamed outside could only be imagined fearfully, and by imposing a product of reason — geometry — on the natural world as if that world were a machine built by geometry, the imports bred an oppressive sense of futility in the Canadian

mind, which Frye supposes underlies a “curious schizophrenia” he sees in much “nineteenth-century Canadian poetry, the sense of loneliness and alienation urgently demanding expression along with a good deal of prefabricated rhetoric about the challenge of a new land and the energetic optimism demanded to meet it.” When the impulse behind the writing of poetry is rhetorical, Frye judges the result to be poor because it is detached from genuine emotion and imagination. Canadian writers often sounded a false note with this kind of poetry, a product of the regarding of reason as the “distinctly human element in consciousness.” They succeeded, however, when they abandoned this detached, rhetorical stance and attempted to express what they felt most profoundly — the sadness of being isolated from their environment, and a longing for union with it. As Frye puts it:

the nostalgic and elegiac are the inevitable emotional responses of an egocentric consciousness locked into a demythological environment.

Death is the only possible heroic achievement in such a consciousness.

But also central to that consciousness was the understanding by those nineteenth- and early twentieth-century poets who were not rhetoricians “that the central poetic impulse is imaginative and not rhetorical, and that its most direct product is mythology, which is essentially the humanizing of nature.” An especially effective mythological strategy found in this poetry is the casting, in the role of nature, of a huge beast, commonly the leviathan, or as in Pratt’s *Towards the Last Spike*, a dragon, “the symbol of a nature so totally indifferent to man and his concerns that it is irrelevant to wonder whether it is dead or alive. Man swallowed by nature, like Jonah by the whale, Frye considers an appropriate mythological dilemma for Canadians who approached the New World by water; earlier poets who were not rhetoricians attempted to make inhabitable the “green belly” of the monster. Later poets of Newlove’s and Atwood’s generation thought of this “outer leviathan as a kind of objective correlative of some Minotaur that we find in our own mental labyrinths.” Wilson, before the arrival of those poets who encounter the Minotaur, is already using landscape in this new way.

**E**THEL WILSON’S ACQUAINTANCES attest to her love of the natural setting of the West Coast, how she lived in a succession of West End apartments whose windows had to frame Stanley Park, the Pacific Ocean, and the North Shore mountains. She herself, in “The Bridge or the Stokehold,” an essay fashioned from a talk on creating characters, writes of gazing out her study window at a freighter on English Bay:

On a grey evening, the ship was a lovely ghost. On a fine morning the freighter was a dazzling white where the sunshine fell and the silver gulls flew over. The

light faded, and the ship became a dirty tub. The ship was the same ship; the light was different; its effect was perhaps false. Upon us all, light falls, and we seem to the beholder to change. . . .<sup>4</sup>

To this should be compared a passage in *Swamp Angel*:

Mrs. Vardoe had become attached to, even absorbed into the sight from the front-room window of inlet and forest and mountains. She had come to love it, to dislike it, to hate it, and at seven-fifteen this evening she proposed to leave it and not to return.

In this short passage two important ideas of the novel are introduced: its universe is relativistic and subjective, and in that universe the human mind and nature can merge — in a manner, it will be seen, along the lines of Frye's mythological objective correlative. Mrs. Vardoe does not merely find the sight absorbing; she is "even absorbed *into* . . . inlet and forest and mountains," a significant emphasis. And the much discussed "fluid" mountains described in the paragraph immediately preceding this passage, which complete the introduction of the theme of process in the novel — "Ten twenty fifty brown birds flew past the window" — also invite Maggie to submerge herself, her consciousness, in her environment, as she will later submerge her body when she swims in Three Loon Lake. There the merging with nature is made more explicit — perhaps she almost becomes Frye's leviathan — though not complete for a reason which shall be discussed later. The effect of extremely subtle craftsmanship in the swimming section is to expand Maggie until she is a figure nearly of the proportions of Blake's Albion lying on his rock. Her movements are grandiose, hugely important.

Maggie stands on the dock and looks around her. She is contained by the sparkling surface of the lake and the pine tree shores and the low hills, and is covered by the sky. She dives off the dock, down into the lake. She rises, with bubbles, shakes her head vigorously, and strikes out.

Water, forest, and mountain are invoked again, a kind of code for this merging with nature. Maggie's rising with bubbles is an echo, in this context, of the goddess born of the sea, with whom a comparison should not be carried too far, though one remembers that when she refused Zeus' advances, he gave her in marriage to his ugly and deformed son, Hephaestus, to whom she was unfaithful. Maggie's "avatar tells her that she is one with her brothers the seal and the porpoise"; and "then, quite suddenly she turns on her back and floats. . . . She is a god floating there." With a god's composed regal grace, she "inclines her floating face towards the shore where the vertical pine trees make a compensation with the horizontal lake on which she lies so gloriously." Her royal gaze restores harmony to the universe, connotative of a type of Elizabethan order. Maggie is both natural creature and god — she partakes of the mystery of the Minotaur.

By accepting nature's invitation to submerge herself, she floats and has discovered her own physical and divine nature.

Wilson has prepared the way for this powerful scene throughout the novel so that it should have the integrity its subject requires. Obviously, a description of a harmony of this kind must not seem a set piece formally. Maggie is associated in the novel with the natural world. The best early example is the simile of the bird. Maggie's desire to depart is like the survival instinct of a natural creature, a "bird who obstinately builds again its destroyed nest." But what immediately follows this description helps to elevate the novel to something extraordinary. Maggie has a hobby — fly-tying. Embodied in this revelation are resonances of many themes of the book, all rendered more effective through the subtlety of the device. Fishing flies require patience and skill to manufacture: so we learn of Maggie's strength of character. Her repeated quiet response to the question of what she is going to do now she has left on a journey — "Going Fishing?" "Yes, I am." — tells us the journey is on one level a quest romance with hints of a wasteland and a Fisher King. The fishing fly has feathers, like a bird, and the comparison of Maggie with a bird is unobtrusively continued: "That was how it had begun and she had been so clever: never a bright feather blew across the room." Incidentally, a dresser of hooks like Wilson would know that a tied fly has a body, head, and wing — so does a fly — but it also has a cheek, a shoulder, and ribbing, like our species, a further note of the unification of man and nature, more evidence of man's humanizing of his environment.

At first Maggie's need to leave her husband, whom she married in a moment of weakness and unhealthy compromise, is mostly instinctual; she knows she must run to live. While she lives with Vardoe, she is attracted by the exotic world of the immigrant Chinese (as characters are in Canadian novels). Within her prison of humiliation, she imagines worlds of escape and can hardly grasp where the true road to freedom lies. She finds in Chinatown a preliminary gratification of her long formed "habit of seeking and finding, . . . private enjoyment of the sort that casts nothing but an extension of the imagination." The syllables of Chinese names on signs "ravished her as with scents and sounds of unknown lives and far places." To get feathers for her hobby, she goes to Chinatown, which links it to all the ramifications of her hobby, specifically to the quest, and indeed she finds there a "small six-sided yellow bowl," as seemingly insignificant as Aladdin's battered old lamp, and yet which represents to her "all beauty." The bowl is also a talisman of a type familiar to readers of romances, even a grail perhaps, and imbues with a magical significance her journey of true escape from her past life. The bowl is her spiritual ticket out, and connects the exotic immigrant world, which for Maggie is just a warm-up to escape, not her "place," and the river road of her quest. The object of the quest, though she cannot know it yet, is primarily a proper awareness of the mythological in her life, as it is described

in the swimming passage. But Wilson understates the function of the bowl for the same reason she restrains Maggie in the swimming scene from committing herself wholly to a unification with nature: the solution is not so simple; she does not live alone in paradise. Nature is no longer anthropocentric. Maggie lives in a fallen world, and she must deal with other men and women, and the final indifference of the universe. The bowl's Keatsian connotation suggests the coldness of paradise, its inhospitableness for living man. "It's beyond all reason, she said to herself." When she, "like a seal, like a god," swims back to shore and climbs up on the dock:

she feels very fine but she is not a god anymore. She is earthbound and is Maggie Lloyd who must get the fire going and put the potatoes in the oven, and she must speak to Mr. and Mrs. Milliken and their two boys from the far cabin who are standing on the dock and are not gods either.

Maggie's final relation with the numinous, with the mythological, is subtle and ambivalent. Wilson is not just a remodelled nineteenth-century romantic searching for transcendence, the spirit rolling through all things. She is a twentieth-century writer in that she strives to reconcile that very necessary urge with Einstein's relative universe of lonely, subjective islands of humanity. The idealism of the Romantics is not ultimately possible, Wilson seems to say, yet it must be worked toward in our era of alienation. She prepares her readers for a relativistic universe early in *Swamp Angel*. The subjective character of the vista from Mrs. Vardoe's Capitol Hill window is the first indication. Einstein's relative universe acquired a new constant, of course — light, or rather the speed of light — and light in *Swamp Angel* can be a kind of reassuring constant for human beings. But the old constants, absolute time and absolute space, lost their status, became relative, and Wilson exploits this in the first few chapters. Time and space merge — each is a little like the other. Maggie "had arranged with herself that she would arrive at this very evening and at this place where, on Capitol Hill, she would stand waiting with everything ready." If something goes wrong, "she would build in time again." "Now she advanced, as planned, along these same minutes." "These actions . . . took on, tonight, the significance of movement forward, of time felt in the act of passing, of a moment being reached." On her flight through the Fraser Valley Maggie feels time slide behind her: "she could feel it and count it and the road slid behind her." Passing time and vents on the road assume "their places as elements on her side. . . . Everything was on her side. She exulted in each small sight and sound, in new time, in new space, because now she had got free." Even in the midst of exhilarating subjectivity, Maggie reminds herself, however, that there is a reality greater than her own impressions — "Time, she knew, does irrevocably pass" — but at this stage in her quest the delight of unambivalent innocence prevails.

WILSON MAKES QUITE CLEAR what Maggie is escaping, on the cosmological level. She is leaving behind the world of Frye's three cultural imports, as represented by Eddie Vardoe and the city. Eddie is a "human doll," a Cartesian ghost in the machine. Frye speaks of "the ghost of an ego haunting himself," a phrase nicely suited to the "Poor human doll" raging in the empty house when he discovers Maggie missing: "The whole small house was listening." "Unhappy" Vera is described later by Mrs. Severance as "housebound without an opening window." She is haunted by "phantoms" which drive her to attempt suicide. Eddie is victimized by the universe he has reduced to a machine — "all objects conspired against him." Wilson's short sentences in the description of Eddie's behaviour underscore his mechanical, doll-like nature, as does his staccato outburst to Hilda: "If she . . . if there's a man . . . where would there be a man? . . . I been a good husband . . . her wearing that good suit tonight . . . I knew . . . she's quiet and artful as the devil . . . planned all this . . . if there's a man by God I'll find her . . . I'll fix her . . . I'll . . ." One connotation of his "fixing" her is consistent with Eddie's reduction of nature to a machine. That devils inhabit nature, too, does not jar with Frye's view of the seventeenth-century Christian outlook. Wilson uses inanimate imagery for Eddie ("His life was broken off, splintered like a stick . . .) as well as for characters, like Vera, who fatally isolate themselves. When Eddie is associated with the animate he has the "spaniel eyes" of a suitably domesticated beast. Maggie dreams of him as a mink with sharp teeth — his status in the chain of being is low. The repetition of the "I" in the preceding passage is further evidence of Eddie's ghostly egocentricity, and when one recalls Eddie's parvenu pride in his new car, the mobile god of the North American geometric universe; his boasting, redolent of what Frye called "pre-fabricated rhetoric"; and when one recalls too that his relationship with nature entails selling it as real estate, the picture of him as exemplar of the old cosmology is complete. Frye tells the story of a doctor from southern Canada

traveling on the Arctic tundra with an Eskimo guide. A blizzard blew up, and they had to bivouac for the night. What with the cold, the storm, and the loneliness, the doctor panicked and began shouting "We are lost!" The Eskimo looked at him thoughtfully and said, "We are not lost. We are here."

Wilson tells her version of the same story when she has the driver of Maggie's Greyhound bus, himself a servant of the geometric god, warn Maggie against getting off "somewhere near the river."

The driver did not answer at once. His eyes were on the road. Then he said, "We don't usually set folks down here, lady. There's nowhere near. . . ."

Maggie's quest for a new understanding of her place in her environment is initially a "river" journey, paradoxically a trip both out of the heart of darkness

and into it. The way ahead becomes perilous when Maggie wrestles with Vera, and the way behind is the imprisoning world view. From the taxi she sees the geometric city of "every modern convenience," the "rows of neat homogeneous dwellings" obliterating the "delicate impression" of cherry trees in blossom. Once on the river road she imagines nature as dominant, an attitude which cannot be permanent, for already the city is bulldozing over any rebellion. This ties in with Wilson's tone of ironic detachment: we must not slip so far from the real world into nature worship and idealism that we escape from our responsibility to fight desecration. Free of the city Maggie begins her initiation into a new life. The first stage is a ceremonial rebirth, appropriately a song of rustic innocence. She is "as free of care or remembrance as if she had just been born (as perhaps she had, after much anguish). . . . The cabin was a safe small world enclosing her." She takes up her talisman, the yellow bowl, "like a drowsy child feeling its toy." Copying an earlier pattern of following a preparatory path before finding the true one, as she had done in Chinatown, Maggie chooses "between two forks of high-roads," obviously setting out on the one less travelled by. Although she will return to the two forks and take the main road to Kamloops, making a choice by which she acknowledges the demands of reality versus mere escape into nature worship and idealism, the preparatory trip to "the dancing river with the dancing name" is an indication of her commitment to new spiritual awareness. The device of a fork in the road is at least as old in mythology as *The Aeneid*, where in Book Six Aeneas in the underworld comes to a splitting of the road: in one direction lies Elysium, in the other Tartarus. Maggie's contact with nature affects a change; her sense of smell, "vitiating" in the city, is purified in an extension of the water metaphor, the living water of her quest: "her breath drank and drank again the scent of firs and pines and juniper." Through her fingers she sees the "rich and elegant brownness" of a pinecone. She sits in the dark and "lifts her heart in desolation and in prayer," lifting "her spirit to God by the river." After "three days" (not the only Christological reference in the novel), which "had been for Maggie like the respite that perhaps comes to the soul after death," she leaves, "refreshed," spring "pouring in over the whole countryside" and in over her, presumably. The rejuvenation of a wasteland with Maggie as healed Fisher King is entwined here with Christian symbolism as complexly (and perhaps, finally, as impenetrably) as the romance Holy Grail stories, though both are always fastened to the earth. Maggie realizes she is on "a margin of life," a margin of a "world which was powerful and close."

That this world is a nature revitalized by man's mythologizing urge, Wilson does not want us to miss. The repetition of the name, "Hope," gives that village an expanded significance, much the way Wilson engineered our acceptance for awhile of Maggie as more than a mere mortal in the swimming scene. At Hope, the Fraser "deplays dramatically from the mountains," a phrase which links the



natural world to the human, particularly to the human history Wilson relates in the same paragraph. Such an introduction to the portrayal of Maggie's rebirth into spring and hope produces a background of tension, for the drama of Maggie's escape from the cosmology of Frye's cultural imports is set in the very spot where the old cosmology hopefully launched itself against nature in an invasion of exploitation, the Cariboo Trail superceding the Fraser River, the latter a "route — not a highway" and, as civilization advanced, the former being transformed from "earthen trail" to "a fine winding well-graded motor road." The geometric demon has conquered, Hope's "dreaming age has gone," but now Wilson is showing us an alternative. The trees by Hope are "noble" trees, the river is "great and wicked," the hills and mountains have "rumps," the waters at Hell's Gate Canyon are "raging waters," the Similkameen, of course, dances and is "alive," "sweet and equable"; shafts of light "smote" the trees, the west wind "sighs in the pines." The mythologizing vision has the power to vanquish the geometric demon: "What a land! What power these rivers were already yielding, far beyond her sight! Even a map of this country — lines arranged in an arbitrary way on a long rectangular piece of paper — stirs the imagination beyond imagination. . . ." The merging of man and nature into a mythic unity receives wonderful treatment in Wilson's description of fly-fishing at Three Loon Lake. Again, time is banished; there is only now. The Ovidian aspens have just metamorphosed: "in the early springtime, a group of aspen trees standing slender, white bodied, like dancing girls, poised as if to move away, and beginning to be dressed about their slender arms and shoulders in a timid unearthly green. They are virginal."

**T**O RETURN TO THE REBIRTH CHAPTER, one must remark upon Wilson's use again of the "new time" and "new space." "Time dissolved, and space dissolved." Here, more than earlier in the novel, the author is developing her complex relativistic world, and for the rest of the novel, her handling of multiple perspective complements the development. Above all, awareness of one's subjectivity is both a liberation and a danger. The tension engendered by the contrast of Hope's history and Maggie's forgetfulness is brought home to the personal, individual level when, clothed in natural images, the dark side of the natural life, which is also human life in the unified vision, ripples Maggie's serenity: "A thought as thin and cruel as a pipe fish cut through her mind. The pipe fish slid through and away." Maggie has forgotten "her own existence," yet she is not like the eagle and the osprey from whom she learned the lesson of survival at Three Loon Lake. Of the beaten osprey she wonders then: "Did a bird's rage or a bird's acceptance possess him?" It is the question itself, not the answer, which is important, for it reveals to the questioner the existence of man's

self-awareness, whether other animals share such awareness or not. At the dancing river Maggie is not entirely ready to face the consequences of human self-awareness; she is recharging her instincts, gaining hope, refreshing her spirit, and reacquiring the habit of going for succour to nature, a mythologized nature that is a symbol of her own expanding humanity. When she returns to the main road to Kamloops she is becoming ready to battle the dark side; Kamloops means "meeting of waters," and on the way Maggie stops in Lytton, where the clear Thompson and the dark Fraser flow together. Again perhaps a parallel with *The Aeneid* is being invited. At the end of the Book Six Aeneas is shown the twin gates of sleep. Through the gate of "flawless ivory" the "dead send false dreams to the world" but the gate of the less pure horn is "a ready exit for real shades."<sup>5</sup> Maggie's leaving Vardoe was instinctual and right; however, in Wilson's view humanity's self-awareness demands we act on a more than instinctual level, and to this end she ties the novel together with the character of Mrs. Severance and her Swamp Angel.

Mrs. Severance is another fine example of Wilson's ability to convey a sense of concrete reality while suggesting mythic overtones, as she does with Maggie and the village of Hope. And she does this not just to ground her fiction in the sensuous reality of everyday life: "Somewhere, I think, the person in a story must touch not only the constructive imagination, but also the earth (that is to say, the writer's own experience) in the course of the struggle, and receive life and strength from that earth."<sup>6</sup> In this comment one should note how Wilson is typically thinking mythologically. The reference is certainly to Antaeus who was invincible while he touched the earth, but whom Hercules defeated by holding him in the air. But more than this, the two lives, in a sense, of her characters operate to display a crucial theme in *Swamp Angel*, a theme implied in Mrs. Severance's lecture to Maggie: "I knew I was in the web, I did the best I could in the web, and it takes God himself to be fair to two different people at once." Mrs. Severance is speaking about her conflicting duties toward Philip and Hilda; the problem cannot be avoided because no man is an island. Wilson has already pointed out that perhaps our species differs from others by our self-awareness, and therefore we cannot act on a purely instinctual level, as the escape into pure subjectivity would seem to invite. To exist on our terms, we must employ other human attributes — the intelligent will and compassion — to complete our participation in the "everlasting web" of creation. The employment of these is based on faith — "Albert says Faith in what, I can't tell him" — faith, if not in an incomprehensible God, the faith that the intelligent will and compassion will be enough.

Wilson prepares Mrs. Severance skilfully for her role as dispenser of this wisdom of balanced commitment and detachment. She was of course a juggler. But there is more that is intriguing in Mrs. Severance. Wilson very deliberately

injects a scene in the novel whose theme is nature's indifference, the Northern Lights episode: "After declaiming lavishly, the great Northern Lights faded with indifference as one who is bored — and deploring display — says I may come back but only if I choose; I do as I wish." Recalling Frye's mention of the dragon as a symbol of indifferent nature in Pratt's *Towards the Last Spike*, one is struck by a certain similarity in the old woman to the fire-breathing, aloof creature of myth who sits upon his mound of treasure. Gender is not a problem; dragons of myth have often been female. When first introduced, Mrs. Severance has a kind of mythical, uncanny size, she appears fatefully indifferent, and not for the last time does she breath fire, or at least smoke. She

walked with a ponderous softness into the parlour. She stood in the doorway and looked at Edward Vardoe without expression. She crossed the room, lowered herself into a chair, took out a cigarette, tapped it firmly, lit it, drew heavily and blew twin spirals through her nostrils. Above the spirals she looked at Edward Vardoe. She did not speak.

The spelling out of Vardoe's full name shrinks him before the judicial bench of fate. Later, in the lecture to Maggie, Mrs. Severance sits "on top of my little mound of years." Her attachment to the Swamp Angel has the mythic, romance ring to it, like Maggie's attachment to her yellow bowl. And Hilda calls her mother "a wicked old woman." By these devices, Wilson portrays Mrs. Severance as a force in a mythological drama, a personified allusion to the universe's indifference to human problems. Yet Wilson quickly assures us both that Mrs. Severance is also a human being and that the mythologizing the author is engaging in is a figment of the human imagination — a piece of information to bear in mind in our lonely isolation: it will preserve us from the delusion of those fanatics who behind the mists of solipsism imagine themselves God or go hunting at night for Satan disguised as a man. Mrs. Severance helps the pitiful Vardoe, "He's an unpleasant object, but worth salvation I suppose," just as Maggie learns to help the unhappy Vera — sympathizing, then moving on, not escaping, but rather bowing to the truth of process which states that life is flux. Still, even the compassion Mrs. Severance finds for Vardoe has larger-than-life nuances; her "saving souls," along with Maggie's Christ-like actions, enlarges her character. Wilson, however, wants us to have no doubt we are reading of fallible human beings, so she exposes a very human flaw in the old woman: her neglect and then domination of her daughter (the future), caused by her clinging too much to the past. When she recognizes her error the new generation can be born. All these levels of character illustrate Wilson's concept of a relativistic universe, in a part of which is the human animal, struggling to survive. Mrs. Severance's name then takes on many of the meanings readers ascribe to it. On the mythic level, the name suggests Fate; on the Christian level, its meaning is ironic and therefore

interesting as a literary trick. On the immediate "real" level, it names her flaw, her isolation from the present, and the clue to reparation, the severing of the past.

It is no wonder that the character of Mrs. Severance, containing so much, is a strong force in the book. Understandable, too, is Maggie's sense of her as closest to her in spirit, and her description of her as a "worldly unworldly woman." Wilson has led us to see in her an intelligent compassion struggling against the ultimate indifference of things, and this is Wilson's over-all view. If there is a difference between Maggie and Mrs. Severance, perhaps it is that Maggie learned sooner through her closeness to the natural world, like Wilson, the lesson of change; perhaps that makes Maggie more of a Canadian than Mrs. Severance, who travelled throughout the world most of her life.

Much has been written about the Swamp Angel as a symbol. It is certainly "at least a double symbol: a symbol of the ambivalence of creation, and a symbol of the past."<sup>7</sup> The relinquishing of it in its role as symbol of the past is a sign that characters have understood the lesson of change. More relevant to this study of myth in the novel is David Stouck's notion that the Swamp Angel is "an image of power,"<sup>8</sup> like Excalibur. Both are weapons, after all — "She had almost forgotten that the Angel was a gun" — and *Swamp Angel* is "a drama of will and power."<sup>9</sup> All the characters seek to survive. Eddie must strive at one point; Hilda battles Mrs. Severance, who eventually becomes aware she has been "playing God." Therefore in this light, the relinquishment of the Angel is an admission of the necessity to limit the individual's wielding of power in the human community with its potential for destruction, if the community is to operate as well as the natural world where instincts are cruel but just. Yet, Wilson is also echoing the message of the Arthurian myth when the myth rose up to comment upon itself. She sounds the echo in two places. The first, to which we return, is a dream, which in medieval literature was the vehicle for relaying meanings beneath the surface of events. Mrs. Severance lies in a dream state after discovering she no longer has the strength to control the Angel — "It will live longer than I shall."

All this nowadays of symbol symbol symbol . . . destroying reality . . . too much power, people worship symbol . . . obscures something . . . what . . . obscures . . . she drifted

. . . She closed her eyes again . . . The Angel must go . . . because it is a symbol and too dear . . . and some other reason . . . what other reason . . . she drifted.

The second, of course, is the tossing of the Angel into the lake. In these parts of the book Wilson is relating the theme of change to the very language the human brain constructs for its desires and fears. When Arthur ordered that Excalibur be thrown into the waves he admitted he was mortal. And he reaffirmed that the realm of symbols is a different one from the human world. Man creates symbols — angels — from the swamp of his existence, but God creates man. Man's

symbols can only be approximations of what he and his environment are, approximations which destroy reality when they are relied upon too much. Of the mythologizing urge in *Maggie*, which helps her understand her place, Wilson seems to say "Beware." The imagination must never renew itself. Its products are necessary and transient. Perhaps, like the "little survivor," even *Swamp Angel* must not be depended upon too much.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This and subsequent quotations refer to Ethel Wilson, *Swamp Angel* (1954; rpt. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1962).
- <sup>2</sup> Northrop Frye, "Haunted by Lack of Ghosts," *The Canadian Imagination*, ed. David Staines (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1977). This quotation and the following ones can be found on pages 29 to 45 in the essay.
- <sup>3</sup> Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson, 1949).
- <sup>4</sup> Ethel Wilson, "The Bridge or the Stokehold," *Canadian Literature*, 5 (Summer 1960), p. 46.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Aeneid*, trans., Frank O. Copley (Indianapolis: The Library of Liberal Arts, Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), ll. 893-96.
- <sup>6</sup> "The Bridge or the Stokehold," pp. 46-47.
- <sup>7</sup> Desmond Pacey, Introduction to *Swamp Angel* (1962), p. 10.
- <sup>8</sup> David Stouck, "Ethel Wilson's Novels," *Canadian Literature*, 74 (Autumn 1977), p. 83.
- <sup>9</sup> Stouck, p. 83.

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