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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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# Ethel Wilson and Sophistication

FAYE HAMMILL

And Ethel Wilson was a very good writer indeed — a quirky and sophisticated writer with an individual style, tilting and elliptical. Witty as well as funny. Unique.

— P.K. Page, Afterword to *The Innocent Traveller* (239)

At that time, two exceptional graduate students, Barbara Wild and Janet Giltrow, began working within my sphere of interests, and both found in Ethel Wilson's writing a sophistication of vision and style that set her work apart from other Canadian novelists they were reading.

— David Stouck, *Ethel Wilson: A Critical Biography* (xii)

“**S**OPHISTICATED” IS A WORD that seems to fit Ethel Wilson's fiction. In criticism on her work, the word recurs, along with a small set of related terms. I would like to understand what Wilson's perceived sophistication consists of, and why (or whether) it “sets her apart.” What do critics mean when they apply this term to Wilson? How useful is it in illuminating her work and in understanding her literary reputation in Canada?

The meaning of “sophistication” has changed considerably over time, and so has the kind of cultural work it performs. Etymologically, it derives from *sophia*, the Greek word for wisdom, which at first designated spiritual insight and, subsequently, knowledge and learning. From this came the name *Sophist*, given to a set of itinerant Greek educators and rhetoricians of the fifth century BCE. Growing resistance to the Sophists centred on their preparedness to argue both sides of a question, their moral relativism and individualism, and their emphasis on self-presentation. Thus, the term *sophistry* came to designate falsification or disingenuous reasoning, and the adjective “sophisticated” remained a pejorative term right up until the nineteenth century. The decline of Romanticism, with its idealization of sentiment, sensibility, and naturalness, opened the way for the elaboration of an alternative set of values that we might now associate with sophistication. To the Victorians,

sophisticated social performance became increasingly important precisely because of their excessive investment in truth-telling,<sup>1</sup> while in the early twentieth century, the word began to take on some of its current meanings, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “worldly wisdom or experience; subtlety, discrimination, refinement” (“Sophistication,” def. 2c).

The *OED* does not quite capture the full range of possible connotation. All its recent examples of usage refer to technical and scientific sophistication, or the formal sophistication of modern art. “Sophistication” is not pursued into the realm of elegance, style, wit, detachment or cosmopolitanism, and none of the quotations reveals anything about its orientation in relation to morality or politics. A broader analysis of literary texts, in conjunction with corpora of modern English usage, results in a somewhat expanded notion of modern sophistication, both as literary subject matter and as narrative strategy.<sup>2</sup> In literature, sophistication may take visible form through clothing or manners, but is nearly always revealed, in the end, as a fundamental attitude to life rather than simply a style of self-presentation. It may range from a healthy refusal of stifling convention to a dangerous inversion of moral codes and a total self-absorption. Sophistication is often associated with hedonism, unshockability, openness to other cultures (especially French culture), generosity and distrust of bourgeois values. Its politics are thus potentially subversive, yet the characteristic detachment of the sophisticate may appear to empty his or her actions of political content. Also, the exhibition of discriminating taste is an aspect of social performance, and thus sophistication becomes a strategy of upward mobility. This has more conservative connotations.<sup>3</sup>

A parallel may be drawn with literary form. In the early twentieth century, the potential alignment of sophistication with modernism was balanced by an apparently contrary affiliation with middlebrow strategies of imitation and appropriation. Many critics have referred to “modernism’s technical sophistication” (Stevenson 196)<sup>4</sup> and as Leonard Diepeveen observes, “modernism was formed on an aesthetics of difficulty,” and exhibited “distrust of both pleasure and simplicity” (xv). Like sophistication, modernism operates by defining itself against its context: that is, against mainstream cultural production. Therefore, both modernism and sophistication are exclusionary discourses, constructing and addressing elite audiences. And yet, modernist formal

practices soon began to be imitated by authors who wrote for broader, middlebrow audiences, and as Sean Latham argues, the commodification of sophistication is an important aspect of middlebrow culture.<sup>5</sup> This is an involved subject, which I will not explore further here, but it is directly relevant to my discussion of Ethel Wilson. Critics have debated the placement of her work in relation to modernist or realist aesthetics, but most agree that her work is formally sophisticated. On the face of it, her fictions are accessible and straightforward, yet critics have disagreed sharply over their interpretation, and this reveals the actual complexity of Wilson's writing. One of her key techniques is irony, and she also uses the doubled discourse of pastoral in presenting her naive characters, achieving what Empson calls a "clash of admiration and contempt" (83). Her narratives construct hierarchies of sophistication, positioning reader, narrator, and characters in shifting and sometimes perplexing relations to one another, and these relations may involve flattery as well as coercion.<sup>6</sup> In her writing, narrative sophistication may be matched with sophisticated characters and settings, or deliberately mismatched with unsophisticated subjects. The fiction of Ethel Wilson, then, offers an ideal case study for the exploration of sophistication as both theme and technique, while a focus on the notion of sophistication opens up new readings of her texts.

Wilson's work is richly deserving of renewed critical attention.<sup>7</sup> Her four novels are *Hetty Dorval* (1947), *The Innocent Traveller* (1949), *Swamp Angel* (1954), and *Love and Salt Water* (1956). Her novellas, "Tuesday and Wednesday" and "Lilly's Story," were published together as *The Equations of Love* (1952), and her short fiction collection, *Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories*, appeared in 1961. In what follows, I shall range across several of these texts, framing my readings with commentary on the critical reception of Wilson's work as a whole. The essay is organized into three sections, corresponding to three aspects of sophistication: experience, complexity, and elegance. The first section offers a reading of a single novel through the lens of sophistication; it concentrates on *Hetty Dorval's* thematization of innocence and experience. The middle section opens out to explore narrative sophistication in terms of the paradoxical simplicity and complexity of Wilson's prose, using examples from *The Innocent Traveller* and other texts. The last section examines critical and (auto)biographical discourses surrounding Ethel Wilson, investigating the repeated description of both author and texts

as “elegant.” Her elegant style, both personal and literary, is often associated with cosmopolitanism, and this, at the end of the discussion, allows me to reflect on her relationship to the Canadian canon.

### Experience and innocence

Was this woman of unknown experience really ever a girl like me?  
— Ethel Wilson, *Hetty Dorval* (66)

The centrality of the term “innocence” in Wilson’s fiction has been considered by several critics,<sup>8</sup> while the other half of the binary, “experience,” is less often discussed, but still crucial. On the first page of *Hetty Dorval*, the association of childhood with inexperience is neatly upended, as the twelve-year-old protagonist, Frankie Burnaby, waits with her friend to see a train come into the small station at Lytton, British Columbia: “Ernestine and I watched these passengers with experienced eyes and saw that there was no one interesting to us. We did not find grown-ups interesting, but were always on the look-out for other children, or for dogs” (1-2). The complex imaginary worlds and intense private experiences of children are important elements to this novel, since Frankie’s visions of romance and capacity for secrecy determine the course of the story. In effect, it is Frankie’s imagination that invests Hetty Dorval with mystery.

In the opening scene, a large dog does, in fact, descend from the train, and the children immediately pick up rumours that “travelled along the platform” about the dog’s owner, a Mrs. Dorval, who has come to live in Lytton (2). The children follow the woman in charge of the dog, but when Ernestine addresses her as “Mrs. Dorval,” she receives the cold reply, “I am not Mrs. Dorval” (5). She turns out to be Mrs. Dorval’s companion, or servant, a Mrs. Broom. Sometime later, Frankie, out riding, encounters an unknown woman who strikes her as distinctive, even exotic: “you wouldn’t see anyone like her in all our part of that western country. . . . She rode on one of those small English saddles — which other people didn’t — and . . . no-one near us wore that kind of riding clothes” (15). Frankie’s earlier feeling of being “experienced” evaporates as the woman’s stylishness gives her an unpleasant sense of her own lack of sophistication:

I thought, “Now if Mrs. Dorval is snubby like Mrs. Broom this is going to be terrible, because I’ve had no experience and I don’t

know what to do.” . . . I would rather have had a grown-up with me, who would have known what to say and whether to go on or to drop behind or what. . . .

So it came that Mrs. Dorval, if it were she, reached the road first, and I had the opportunity of seeing how young she looked, and pretty, too, . . . and how neatly she handled the beautiful mare. She turned in her saddle and waited, looking at me. She must have seen a small figure of the country in a shabby buckskin jacket, riding a pony which could have done with a bit of grooming. (16)

The childish idiom of Frankie’s direct thought seeps into the surrounding prose (“grown-up,” “or what”), but in the second paragraph, as she attempts to adopt Mrs. Dorval’s point of view, there is a shift in tone, to the rather more adult phraseology of “if it were she.” The shift becomes more marked as the adult Frankie — who is the narrator — muses on Hetty’s appearance:

Through the years in the various times and places in which I came to know Mrs. Dorval, I never failed to have the same faint shock of delight as I saw her profile in repose, as it nearly always was. I can only describe it by saying that it was very pure. . . . I came to think that what gave her profile this touching purity was just the soft curve of her high cheek-bone, and the faint hollow below it. Also the innocence of her slightly tilted nose, which afterwards I called in my mind a flirt’s nose, and the slight droop of her mouth whose upper lip was perhaps a little over-full. (18)

The sophistication of this passage, in narrative terms, consists in the overlaying of the young Frankie’s vision of Mrs. Dorval as “pure” with her later view of her as a temptress. Yet though the doubled perspective reveals the passage of time, the earlier vision cannot be eliminated from Frankie’s adult perspective. She still perceives aspects of innocence in Hetty, even after becoming convinced she is corrupt and heartless. Throughout the narrative, Frankie vacillates between attraction and recoil, and her view of herself is endlessly modified in relation to her opinion of Hetty.

Some critics have concluded from this that Hetty is an evil part of Frankie that must be rejected. A short account of the disagreement over *Hetty Dorval* will indicate the different ways in which it can be read, depending on whether sophistication is seen as desirable (and compatible with innocence) or as dangerous (and precluding innocence). In the

most recent of the handful of books on Wilson, Verena Klein points out that nearly all critical accounts have focused on “the simplicity of the novel’s plot and on its straightforward style,” interpreting it as an allegory of good and evil in which Frankie is an innocent victim and Hetty a femme fatale or even a psychopath (89). The essays cited by Klein all date back to the 1970s and early 1980s, but the same reading is affirmed by reviewers of the 2005 Persephone Press edition of *Hetty Dorval*. Charlotte Moore, for example, describes Hetty as “a Jamesian character, tainted by the corruption of the Old World, aloof yet predatory” and with a “terrible past” (38), who is eventually “defeated” by Frankie (39). David Stouck, in his authoritative 2003 biography of Wilson, writes more moderately of Hetty, but still presents her as dangerous, describing the “forbidden, romantic picture of sophistication and freedom” which she represents for the young Frankie, who makes a “transition from innocence to experience under the sullyng influence of Hetty” (131). One exception to this pattern is Beverley Mitchell, whose two essays on *Hetty Dorval* (1976, 1982) meticulously demonstrate that there is no textual evidence for Hetty’s depravity, that everything said against her is based on hearsay, and that the truth of her past is never revealed. Mitchell also argues that there *is* textual evidence for Hetty’s suffering, loneliness, and inability to cope with adult life. This reading is supported by Barbara Wild, who describes Hetty as a “refreshing presence” (38), and by Klein, who argues that it is Frankie’s mother who is the really artful, manipulative character. According to Klein, Mrs. Burnaby, afraid of losing control over her daughter’s life, undermines her confidence in her own judgement by portraying the attractive Hetty as a deceiving, monstrous woman (151).

Sophistication, as Jessica Burstein has noted, is an entirely relational quality, which operates by continually “defining itself against its immediate past, or immediate context” (234). If sophistication, as embodied by Hetty, is not deceit (sophistry) but difference, and a form of difference that arises from a direct, unrestricted, and thus *innocent* response to life, then Hetty might be read as superior to the conventional Burnabys. For instance, Hetty quite “naturally” expresses the exact feeling of exhilaration that Frankie herself always feels when watching the wild geese pass overhead, but Frankie knows she and her parents “would never *never* have said that to each other” (20-21).

Before meeting Hetty, Frankie is already fascinated with foreignness (“my ridiculous pride was that my mother had been at the Sorbonne” [10]). She is therefore easily allured by the unfamiliar stylishness and culture evident in Mrs. Dorval’s clothes, the food she serves, the French novels on her bookshelf, her lavishness, even her vocabulary. Hetty’s house, Frankie recalls,

was a revelation to me then, in comfort and in colour; so was the little grand piano, and so were the queerly-painted bookshelves. . . . Mrs. Dorval began to ask me about my buckskin jacket, so I told her, and I said, “They make them in white too, and gauntlets for riding, but they’re very expensive.”

“Mouse, do you hear that?” called Mrs. Dorval to the kitchen. “You must order a white buckskin jacket and gloves for me at once. They would be too divine.” I had not heard people say “too divine” before. We didn’t talk like that.

When tea came in there was tea and toast and jam in a bowl and fruit cake, not icing cake like we always had. Mrs. Dorval prodded the jam with a spoon. “Something out of a tin,” she said with a little disgust. . . . I decided that Mrs. Dorval must be used to very exalted jam, and admired her all the more even for this. (21-22)

But this very sophistication (experience, worldliness, taste), which differentiates her from those around her, causes Hetty to be distrusted, exactly as Ellen is distrusted in Edith Wharton’s *The Age of Innocence* (1920), another novel that problematizes notions of innocence and sophistication. In the context of the small, insular Lytton community, Hetty’s behaviour is very unconventional. Nothing is known of her supposed husband, she does not receive callers or attend church, and she goes riding alone. Her new neighbours pick up rumours and are quick to decide that she is “a woman of no reputation” (42). Believing this, Frankie’s parents are deeply shocked to find that their daughter has been associating with Mrs. Dorval. Frankie pleads for her new friend: “Maybe it’s all lies that you’ve heard. She’s so sweet and she rides well and she reads books, French books too, and sings lovely songs, and plays the piano, and we don’t do things like smoke and drink and play cards for money at her house. Just she sings, and we have tea — and she *loved* the wild geese!’ I added as a proof of Hetty’s innocence” (42).

Eventually, though, Frankie comes to share, at least partly, her parents’ view of Hetty as a vicious character. In fact, the more experience of



life Frankie gains, the narrower and more conventional her judgements become. She becomes more “shockable,” a notion that is elaborated in Wilson’s autobiographical essay “Reflections in a Pool” (1964) where she discusses her Victorian forebears:

in the three older generations of my maternal family which I can remember, the capacity for being shocked was highly developed and regarded. . . . The objects of shock were confined to the very small conformities and circumference of the life of those generations, and included the incorrect uses of spoons, the right occasions for boots, delay of christenings, small religious discrepancies. . . . My Father’s family and pre-families, on the other hand, seemed unable to be shocked. The spoons and boots did not matter, nor the delay of christenings, not even the fact that my Father and his brothers were taught in school by an unprincipled young Frenchman whose name was Paul Verlaine. . . . I also remember that my Father’s two half-sisters, whom I loved so much for their unshockability and funniness and cleverness and musicalness, lived and worked in London. (29-30, 33)

To be shocked implies a timid acceptance of conventional moral standards and an excessive respect for propriety and appearances. The sophisticate, therefore, is rarely shockable,<sup>9</sup> and Wilson’s aunts are clearly figures of sophistication. Their open-mindedness combines with other key elements — cleverness, wit, and a cosmopolitan cultural awareness. These things align the aunts with the character of Hetty whom, as Barbara Wild has astutely noted, Wilson must have in some measure loved (38).

In *Hetty Dorval*, Frankie, as she becomes more shockable, also becomes less innocent — that is, less instinctive in her responses, and more influenced by notions of propriety and respectability. This way of understanding innocence is one Wilson shared with some of her favourite English authors: as Desmond Pacey observes, “Neither Defoe nor Mrs. Wilson, it is clear, would be easily shocked — it is part, paradoxically, of their ‘innocence.’” Pacey offers an insightful explanation of what the word means in this context: “The innocence of Ethel Wilson’s vision has nothing to do with ignorance or lack of sophistication. It is rather innocence in the sense Blake used it in his “Songs of Innocence,” the antonym of jadedness, ennui, conventionality, and prejudice” (“Innocent Eye” 45, 51). Yet he views Hetty as “evil” and

Frankie as embodying this form of innocence. I would propose, on the contrary, that Frankie's innocence is compromised, while the character of Hetty Dorval is simultaneously aligned with sophistication and with innocence, and therefore demonstrates that these two qualities are not opposites.

### Complexity and simplicity

Wilson's feigned simplicity is the most complicated trick of all.  
— George Bowering (216)

David Stouck writes of the “sophistication and complexity” of Wilson's novels (*Ethel Wilson* 200), and in fact, these two words are sometimes used synonymously. One of the *OED*'s definitions of sophistication is “highly developed or complicated.” Therefore, simplicity might appear to be one of the possible opposite terms for sophistication, but this apparent opposition cannot easily be sustained (indeed it is popularly refuted by the remark attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, “simplicity is the ultimate sophistication”<sup>10</sup>). In critical discourses about Wilson, the word “simplicity” actually occurs quite as often as the word “sophistication.” It is clear, though, that the effect of simplicity in her texts is achieved exactly by means of narrative sophistication, and through intensive labour. Klein describes Wilson's careful word choice and meticulous editing of her manuscripts, observing, “Hence, in spite of their outward appearance of simplicity, all of Wilson's works resemble carefully crafted sculptures” (12). To exemplify Wilson's much-praised economy of style, consider the opening of *The Innocent Traveller*:

Far away at the end of the table sat Father, the kind, handsome and provident man. At this end sat Mother, her crinoline spread abroad. On Mother's right was Mr. Matthew Arnold. On each side of the table the warned children ate their food gravely, all except Topaz on Mother's left. Topaz, who could not be squelched, was perched there on top of two cushions, as innocent as a poached egg. Mother sat gracious, fatigued, heavy behind the majestic crinoline with the last and fatal child. (9)

The diction and syntax here are notably simple and plain, yet the passage produces an effect of strangeness through the unexpected image of the poached egg, the unusual placement of the word “warned,” and

the sudden, precipitate revelation of the impending death. Rarely does the opening paragraph of a novel both introduce and kill a character.

The point of view in this passage simultaneously is and is not that of Topaz herself. "This end" of the table is where Topaz is sitting, and the characters are designated according to their relation to her (Father and Mother). Yet, of course, she could express none of this, being only a tiny child, and she could not know that, as two portentous words reveal, her mother is about to die. The rest of the novel is likewise centred on Topaz, but presents perspectives to which she has no access, and insights that she could not articulate. Her chatter is largely trivial, and though enormously well read, she has a remarkable unawareness of the views and sensitivities of others. As she grows up, Topaz does not mature, remaining childlike even in old age. This, indeed, is her great attraction, and yet in celebrating her unsophistication, the novel simultaneously constructs a sophisticated reading position for its audience. This aligns it, at least in this one respect, with pastoral. In William Empson's terms, the basis of pastoral is "a double attitude of the artist to the worker, of the complex man to the simple one ('I am in one way better, in another not so good')" (19). That is, in order to appreciate rural simplicity, childlike unselfconsciousness, or untutored sensibility, readers must be aware that they themselves have lost — or never possessed — these qualities. The reader's perspective is sometimes aligned with that of Topaz, by means of free indirect style, and at these points she is clearly a pastoral figure, whose instinctive and unsophisticated reactions reveal the absurdity of social convention. Yet readers are as often invited to laugh at her as with her:

The brother and sister began the ascent of the new and amazing Eiffel Tower. How delightful! What a wind! The skirts of Topaz whirled around her head obscuring her view, but she did not mind. John did. "We will descend, Topaz!" he said, tapping his cane sternly on the hand-rail.

"No, no, John!"

. . . "Thank God," thought John, "that my sister is not physically attractive to men, or my position would be worse still; she is disgracefully natural." And Topaz thought — when she thought about it at all — "Really, how easily shocked John is! He does look silly with that martyred expression on! Oh dear, dear, John, I've put on odd boots, I do declare!" (61)

Topaz, then, is a comic pastoral figure, whose responses to life emphasize the damaging effects of conventional ways of seeing. “Still in her light-hearted minority at forty-five” (67), she takes a simple pleasure in existence which is unavailable to her straitlaced, dutiful relations.

Topaz’s quality of childlikeness connects her to three of Wilson’s other main characters: Maggie Lloyd (*Swamp Angel*), Hetty Dorval, and Lilly Waller (“Lilly’s Story”). These four women have markedly different personalities, but all at times exhibit the innocence of extreme youth. “How like a child she is,” thinks Lilly’s employer, on first meeting her (*Equations* 169), while Hetty becomes “docile as a child” when Frankie orders her about (114). Maggie, lying in bed and taking up her treasured yellow bowl, “ran her thumb round its smooth glaze like a drowsy child feeling its toy” (35). The characterization of these women as childlike places the reader in a position of greater sophistication. But although we may see further and understand more than they can, we are also directed to admire them for possessing that crucial quality, simplicity. Hetty and Maggie, though associated with good taste and worldly wisdom, are also connected with responsiveness to the natural world and with direct ways of communicating. To cite just a few examples, Hetty sends “a letter written in a large and simple hand,” which reads only, “Dear Frankie, Thank you — Hetty Connot” (68), while Maggie, on a drive up the valley of the Thomson River, finds that “all the delights of this country spoke afresh” to her (205). On reaching British Columbia, where she has come to live, Topaz “began to run about, and dance for joy, exclaiming, all through the open country” (108). Lilly is inattentive to nature, and she tells lies, but all her actions have one straightforward motivation — to do her best for her daughter — and she, too, has an attractive directness: “Mr. Sprockett was touched. ‘You’re a very very fine woman, Mrs. Hughes, if you don’t mind me saying so.’ ‘Oh no,’ said Lilly simply, without argument” (*Equations* 247).

Those of Wilson’s characters who do not possess simplicity can never command our sympathy; their stories affect the reader differently. Alice Munro says of “Tuesday and Wednesday,”

Mort and Myrtle and Mrs. Emblem and Eddie and Victoria May Tritt and Pork and Old Wolfenden and some others swim around and around in the confines of two days. I do not care about any of them the way I care about what happens to Lilly. . . . The satisfaction the reader feels is austere — no cozy identification here, no

plums or marriage proposals. This is another kind of fiction. It's not one person's fate that moves us here but the pattern — all the lives that move at random and are then swiftly caught up in the absurd heroic moment. (260)

One aspect of Wilson's "austerity" is the detached stance of her narrators, which actually enables an appreciation of her style. The West Coast poet Anne Marriott, in her afterword to *Love and Salt Water*, observes that the novel's "slightness of plot" actually "offers a special joy." She explains, "Not, perhaps, deeply involved with the story, the reader is left free to revel in Wilson's elegant writing style, her exact choice of words, her economy, clarity — luminosity, even" (177). To exemplify, here is a passage from *Love and Salt Water* in which Ellen Cuppy goes to visit her friend Isa:

Ever since I first ran to the telephone or opened the door, I have loved him, she thought lyrically, driving along the valley. This was not true; but the radiance of the fact that she loved George and was not afraid any more to marry him, spread around and forward and backward, illuminating areas of her life which had nothing whatever to do with the matter; and this is one of the perquisites of love.

Early in the afternoon she reached the road that overlooks Skaha Lake and drove down through Penticton and toward Naramata between the peach trees above the Okanagan Lake. She made a turn to the left and into the orchard that belonged to Isa's husband Charles.

The peach-growing sun blazed down upon the opposite blue hills and the too-dazzling water of the lake and the peach orchards, and on Isa and Ellen moving into the shade under the trees and saying it was much too hot but how lovely to be here. Birds must have swooned or slept, for there was no birdsong in the air. Drove of children — Isa's children and others — ran regardless between the trees, wearing nothing much, came running and asking and disappearing down towards the lake. Splashes and cries of children came all the time from the lake edge. Charles was somewhere in the orchards, doing very well although he had only one hand. His hand was blown off in the war, but neither he nor Isa nor the children seemed to look upon this as anything out of the way, or a disability. (130)

Love and war, potentially the most substantial and serious of literary subjects, are touched on here, yet the tone remains light. Ellen's roman-

tic illusions are mocked, but, simultaneously, the sincerity and depth of her present feelings are revealed. Similarly, the narrator refers most casually to Charles's maiming: the unexpected clause, "although he had only one hand," produces an almost comic effect, and the wartime event seems distant, almost unbelievable in the context of the idyllic sunshiny scene. Yet it actually prefigures something very immediate: the accident that Ellen will shortly be involved in. This will leave her, too, damaged for life, and fearful that her disfigurement will cost her the affection of her lover. The loving relationship evoked at the start of this passage, then, is fragile; the violence described cannot be kept at a distance, and thus this apparently simple, lighthearted passage becomes portentous in the context of the rest of the novel. The combination of the mundane (the account of Ellen's route, the banal conversation about the heat) and the extraordinary (falling in love, losing a hand) is characteristic of Wilson, and her detached style here is extremely effective in emphasizing the sudden way in which horror or joy can intrude into ordinary domestic existence.

In a 1953 letter, Wilson identifies detachment as a quality of the writers she most admires, among them Defoe, Trollope, Forster, and Compton-Burnett. She comments on "the limpid style of most of them, the lack of pretentiousness, the fact that these people have something to say, with skill, with good heart, often with deep feeling yet with some cynicism, their detachment as well as their involvement, gives one inexpressible pleasure" (Letter to Pacey 184). This, of course, could equally well serve as a description of her own work. She often reconciles opposites. Cynicism and good heart, for instance, co-exist in her writing, and similarly, "sophistication" co-exists with its apparent opposites — "innocence" and "simplicity." She evokes the direct responses and childlike pleasure of her characters, in clear and accessible language, yet her apparently simple narratives conceal depths of meaning and multiple ironies.

### Elegance

Ethel Wilson produces fiction as elegantly fashioned as any that is written elsewhere.

— Robertson Davies

One of the words most frequently used to evoke the polished surface of Wilson's work is "elegance." Davies's choice of it is echoed by Anne Marriott (quoted above); by K. Jane Watt, who notes that Wilson

“rewrote diligently to achieve a simplicity and elegance of style” (1216); and by Verena Klein, who refers to “the elegantly crafted surface of Wilson’s works” (80). Alice Munro describes the “elegant playfulness” of the novellas, commenting that at the end of “Lilly’s Story,” we find “a delightful resolution, everything worked out with elegance and economy” (260). As these comments reveal, elegance is not natural or spontaneous: it is achieved with effort. Elegance is also antithetical to excess or extravagance.

What is the relationship between elegance and sophistication? In his 1935 essay “A Brief History of Sophistication,” the American critic Dixon Wecter presents sophistication as the new name for an ideal that had been referred to as *ton* in the eighteenth century, “elegance” during the Regency, and “culture” by the Victorians (qtd. in Yagoda 57).<sup>11</sup> In 1964, the French style expert Genevieve Antoine Dariaux published *A Guide to Elegance*, in which she sometimes uses sophistication as a synonym for elegance, constructing both through a nostalgic class-based discourse of breeding, culture, and leisure. I would suggest, though, that while elegance is closely related to sophistication, it is actually a narrower notion. Both terms resonate with concepts of performance, artifice, taste, and discrimination, but whilst elegance is purely about manners and appearance, sophistication also has moral and political implications. The underlying dynamic of both, though, requires distinction from context. Both words are often used with longing, to point to an “elsewhere” — as Davies terms it — a historically or geographically distant place of more polished style or more advanced culture.

Davies’s remark on Wilson’s “elegantly fashioned” fiction occurs in an essay in the American magazine *Holiday*, which ran a special issue on Canada in 1935. Davies went on to say that the nuanced subtlety of Wilson’s prose “sets her apart from most of her contemporaries, who are not primarily stylists. Indeed, a lack of strong feeling for language is one of the principal weaknesses of Canadian prose writers” (qtd. in Stouck xvii).<sup>12</sup> Reading Wilson in an international rather than a Canadian context, Davies positions her as a cosmopolitan writer. At this time, the notion of cosmopolitanism was becoming contentious in Canadian literary criticism, primarily as a result of A.J.M. Smith’s polemical use of the word. He wrote in his rejected preface to the 1936 *New Provinces* anthology, “Poetry today is written for the most part by people whose emotional and intellectual heritage is not a national one;

it is either cosmopolitan or provincial, and for good or evil, the forces of civilization are rapidly making the latter scarce" (171). In his provocative division of Canadian authors into "cosmopolitan" and "native" groups, Smith consistently sought to privilege modernists over literary nationalists, a position he maintained and developed over several decades. Like many other critics, he mobilized the term "sophistication" in defence of modernism, writing in his 1939 "Canadian Poetry: A Minority Report" that Robert Finch (one of the *New Provinces* poets) represented "a quality that has not previously appeared in Canadian literature, a quality that may be named *dandyism* . . . complex, subtle, and sophisticated" (183). Much later, in a 1961 essay in *Canadian Literature*, Smith reflected that "in the last twenty years a new and incomparably more vital and sophisticated poetry has arisen in Canada" ("Eclectic" 25). It is interesting, therefore, that critics in the period after Smith's polemics were published have continued to apply the labels "cosmopolitan" and "sophisticated" to Wilson, even though they now seem to imply an affiliation with experimental modernism. These usages might point us toward the understanding that, whilst Wilson's work is by no means radically experimental, aspects of her technique do have loose affinities with modernist practice.<sup>13</sup> More importantly for my purposes, she consistently prioritises form and style, and her literary influences and cultural knowledge are eclectic and international.

Davies's admiration for Wilson was fully reciprocated. In a 1958 lecture to the Vancouver Institute series at UBC, she discussed her favourite books, choosing mostly works by British authors but also including novels by Morley Callaghan, Sinclair Ross, and Robertson Davies. Her comments on Davies include the following:

Mr. Davies' wide range of experience, sophistication (not in the glossy magazine sense of the word), learning, and sense of the comic scene combine in each of his books with his acquaintance among people and behaviours. . . . Robertson Davies' urbane and often witty works are far removed from the hard circumstances of *As For Me and My House*, but both are Canadian. (Wilson, "An Approach" 93-94)

The notion of sophistication that Wilson here elaborates would apply equally to her own writing. She is speaking of an intellectual conception of sophistication, not a sensual one, a kind of stylishness and wit that is not superficial but revelatory of depths of insight. She sees Davies's wit



as “a corrector of too much solemnity” (94): a corrector, that is, of the literary mode represented by Ross, who, despite his “natural distinction” (93), seems to Wilson to have faults. (She says of *As For Me and My House*, “Perhaps there is too much tightening of lips and whitening of knuckles and shutting of doors on the part of the irritating humourless young husband” [93].)

Yet, while Wilson rejects the “glossy magazine” kind of sophistication, her biographers have emphasized her soignée appearance. Malcolm Ross, who chaired the biographical panel at the 1981 Ethel Wilson Symposium, commented that in person, Wilson “had an elegance that seemed almost regal . . . and yet a warmth, simplicity and humility that one doesn’t always find in royal personages” (qtd. in McMullen 1; ellipsis in orig.). There is that word “simplicity” again: it occurs so often alongside “elegant” in descriptions of Wilson herself, as well as in accounts of her work. Stouck, though, writes that some people found Wilson’s “wit . . . too sharp for comfort,” adding, “Her elegance and poise, moreover, were intimidating to those who did not understand that they were protective covering” (85). Emphasizing her insecurity, he notes that “part of her armour was her impeccable dress sense; everyone who remembered her would observe that she was one of the most handsomely tailored and elegantly coifed women in Vancouver” (85). Ross and Stouck implicitly construct Wilson’s personal style as a corollary of her writing style. This suggests that sophistication may be used as a strategy of containment, both by the writer, who may conceal deep feeling under a polished surface, and — more problematically — by critics, whose use of the word could imply superficiality and “glossiness.”

The association of sophistication with elegant dress is one of the reasons why the word can potentially be read as trivializing; it also points to the connection between sophistication and deception. Wilson often explores the visual signs of sophistication, relating them to imposture. In her short story “The Cigar and the Poor Young Girl,” the eighteen-year-old protagonist wears her clothes as a disguise:

[She] was now grownup. The hatpins longer than skewers testified to this, so did her hairpins, her long skirts, a strong pair of curiously-shaped whalebone corsets, and the secret possession of an indited proposal of marriage. Yet she was not grownup. Not at all. She was a miserable imitation of grownupness, and all of this business of hairpins was just a disgrace, for she remained an

innocent ninny. She bumped into new and disturbing conventions from morning to night. She did not know how to cope with these matters, and blushed for all to behold at least five times a day. (11)

The “poor young girl” is imprisoned, not only by the whalebone but by the perplexing “conventions.” Her feelings of awkwardness are intensified when she compares herself to her older, more poised travelling companion, Miranda.

Similarly, Frankie Burnaby feels experienced when she is with her peers, but on re-encountering Mrs. Dorval in London, her view of herself suddenly shifts:

I had felt very adult ten minutes before, being a young woman in her nicest clothes who had left school and was just going to Paris, lunching at Scott’s in some style with a very prepossessing man and a suitably dressed and pretty young girl. Ten minutes before I had been almost a woman of the world. The encounter with Hetty had put me back in the Lytton schoolroom. (84-85)

The geography of sophistication traditionally centres on Paris. Frenchness is often used as shorthand for sophistication, and Ethel Wilson reveals the power of this association in both her fictional and her autobiographical narratives. The idea of Paris intimidates self-conscious colonial women in her texts. In a letter recalling her own trip to France with her aunt and uncle in 1904, Wilson describes their visit to a Madame Chenier, in Paris, who pronounced that Ethel was “pretty but had no chic,” and asked why she was not corseted. “I blushed all the time we were in France because I had no corsets,” adds Wilson (Letter to Crawleys 223). Topaz, remember, did not blush in France, in spite of her odd boots, but Topaz is the antithesis of sophistication. “Never again,” protests her brother John, “will I consent to set foot on the continent of Europe in the company of Topaz! I was daily humiliated by her lack of . . . her lack of . . . she is either naive, depraved or insensible” (ellipses in orig).<sup>14</sup> Though John cannot name what Topaz lacks, the reader may easily identify it. Unsophistication is her fault in John’s eyes, but her charm in the reader’s: she refuses all masquerade.

By contrast, in her letter, Wilson recalls herself “in the casino at Monte Carlo where I was admitted owing to my uncle kindly telling a lie and my aunt lending me some hairpins and a long skirt” (223). Here, sophistication in the sense of “worldliness” is implicitly contrasted

with the rustic ignorance of the Canadian girl. The youthful Wilson's attempted appropriation of the signs of sophistication is presented here with humour and indulgence; a similar sympathy for the "poor young girl" is legible in the short story quoted above. But in *Love and Salt Water*, pretended sophistication is treated more contemptuously because it results from snobbery, not insecurity: "'We shall go direct to Perris,' announced Mrs. Bird. 'I'm crazy about Perris. . . . Mr. Bird got our reservations at the Grand Hotel months ago'" (53). Wilson's work, although cosmopolitan in its representation of overseas travel and its references to European literature, does not actually endorse the idea that sophistication is always located in foreign cities. French sophistication, in her texts, is an influential yet potentially damaging myth, and the Canadian sense of inferiority is gently mocked.

The very elegance of Wilson's style, both personal and textual, is actually part of her challenge. Several critics have commented on the way her polished surfaces conceal threatening depths. Verena Klein writes of the agonizing dramas "which are covered by a thin layer of amused irony and the treacherous promise of smooth entertainment" (79-80), while Carole Gerson describes Wilson's fiction as "stylishly ironic." Howells, in her essay on Canadian literature of the 1940s and 1950s, remarks, "There is something subversive about the women prose writers of British Columbia," among them "that ladylike figure Ethel Wilson" (298):

she adopted the post-war feminine persona of the well-off doctor's wife who took up writing as a hobby, though her correspondence reveals a long apprenticeship going back to the early 1930s. . . . This mild duplicity characterizes her fiction, for, like Jane Austen, whom she "read and re-read," the apparent decorum of her elegant narrative style and her domestic concern with women's lives conceal a disturbing awareness of contingency and the irrationality of human behavior. (298)

And we might return also to Bowering's remark on Wilson's "feigned simplicity" (216). Treachery, subversion, duplicity, and feigning all recall the older meanings of the word "sophistication," which the *OED* gives as "falsification" and "disingenuous alteration." Traces of this meaning remain, I think, when Wilson is described as sophisticated, and the complex layers of significance within this one word provide an appropriate analogue for the layered meanings in Wilson's own texts.

## Conclusion

I began this essay with a quotation suggesting that Ethel Wilson's work was somehow "set apart" from that of her compatriots. Her difference from other Canadian authors of her era cannot be fully investigated within the scope of a short essay, but it may be understood in terms of the ongoing emphasis, in that period, on the building of authentic national traditions. I propose that it is sophistication that sets Wilson apart. Sophistication is aligned with artifice rather than authenticity, with irony rather than earnestness, and with cosmopolitan detachment rather than nationalist commitment. In the context of mid-twentieth-century Canadian literature, it was, apparently, an unexpected quality. In a 1983 interview, Munro said that she was "*enormously* excited" when she first came across Wilson's work during the 1950s because "it was important to me that a Canadian writer was using so elegant a style . . . that a point of view so complex and ironic was possible in Canadian literature" (Struthers 18; ellipsis in orig.).

The concept of sophistication illuminates Wilson's narratives and, equally, their critical reception. The sophistication of her texts consists in the simultaneous presence of simplicity and complexity — this applies both to narrative style and to characters and theme. I have focused particularly on two of her characters, a figure of extreme sophistication (Hetty) and one of notable unsophistication (Topaz). Yet both possess a quality of innocence, and thus Wilson problematizes conventional categories of purity, simplicity, and worldliness. In Wilson's narratives, the locating of reader, narrator, and characters in relation to one another involves a constant assigning and reassigning of sophistication. Her fiction constructs a sophisticated reading position for its audience, yet it simultaneously requires them to admire innocence and simplicity.

In critical responses to Wilson, there is, as with many women writers, a tendency to conflate personal style and literary style. Instead of simply lamenting this, I have chosen, in my third section, to explore it a little. This is because I think it is generated by Wilson's own strategies of self-presentation — both in her social persona and in her autobiographical writings. The emphasis in her novels on clothes and their relation to the sense of self prompts us to "read" characters visually, and it must have prompted those who knew Ethel Wilson personally (as many of the authors of earlier critical essays did) to "read" the author as text, too. From such reading, we can gain insight into Wilson's use of sophistica-

tion as both a social and a literary strategy, one that combines deception with revelation, and smoothness with resistance.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Kucich lays out this argument in detail in *The Power of Lies*. See especially 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> I have conducted this type of analysis in my book *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History*. The results from corpora are in the introduction; the remaining chapters use close readings of literary texts dating from the eighteenth century to the present in order to explore the changing meaning of "sophistication."

<sup>3</sup> As Joseph Litvak has noted, middle-class readers turn to fiction "to learn the sophisticated art of operating, and of operating on, other people's languages" (14).

<sup>4</sup> This is one among many examples.

<sup>5</sup> See the introduction to Latham, "*Am I a Snob?*"; also Hammill 113-29.

<sup>6</sup> I take a cue here from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's similar analysis of "worldliness" in *The Epistemology of the Closet* (97).

<sup>7</sup> The comprehensive bibliography in Stouck's *Ethel Wilson* (2003) lists numerous essays on Wilson, but nearly all date from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Just two 1990s articles are listed, together with a 1996 monograph on Wilson and Indian philosophical thought. Since 2003, Klein has published her thesis on mothers and daughters in Wilson's work (2006); a critical edition of *Swamp Angel* has been produced; and Wilson's short fiction has been the subject of two essays.

<sup>8</sup> See Collins 63; Keith 105-06; Pacey, *Ethel Wilson* 176-78; Pacey, "The Innocent Eye."

<sup>9</sup> To cite one among many examples of the association of sophistication with "unshockability," Ben Yagoda describes *The New Yorker* as "sophistication in the form of a weekly magazine," explaining that ever since its establishment in 1925, it has been "prone to self-consciousness and irony, scornful of conventional wisdom or morality, resistant to enthusiasm or wholehearted commitment of any kind, and incapable of being shocked" (57). On Wilson and "shockability," see Howard.

<sup>10</sup> Endlessly quoted in self-help manuals and on the internet, but not discoverable in scholarly works on the artist.

<sup>11</sup> The article appeared in the *Southwest Review* (20 April 1935).

<sup>12</sup> Issue 35.4 (April 1964).

<sup>13</sup> Howells comments that Wilson's "novels shift almost imperceptibly into modernist territory of epiphany, symbolism, and mythic patterning" and that she positions her writing "between realism and modernism" (298). Pacey notes her affinities with Woolf and Forster (*Ethel Wilson* 15). Stouck describes *Mrs. Golightly and Other Stories* as "peculiarly modernist in its formal elusiveness and fragmentation" (Afterword 213). Wilson's admiration for

John Donne aligns her with T.S. Eliot and other high modernists, who celebrated Donne's difficult poetry (see Diepeveen 29, 32).

<sup>14</sup> This comes from a chapter deleted from the published version of *The Innocent Traveller*, but reprinted in Stouck's edition of her stories, essays, and letters. See Wilson, "Fountains" 7.

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