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By Faye Hammill



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The Seventh Eccles Centre for American
Studies Plenary Lecture given at the
British Association for Canadian Studies
Annual Conference, 2012

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Wilderness / Sophistication

Dandelion itself – *dent de lion*. Tulip, *tülbend*, turban. ... The roots of words, like the roots of plants and flowers, going deep into the old earth of their beginnings.

Audrey Thomas, 'Prospero on the Island ' (231)

Recently I have been focusing my research on the history of a single word – 'sophistication'. I have explored its intricate and changing meanings in the contexts of British, American and French writing and culture. For a long time, it did not occur to me to consider the resonances of 'sophistication' in Canada. I have begun to wonder whether the dominance of wilderness mythology in Canadian culture might be the reason for this blind spot on my part. This paper offers a preliminary exploration of the sets of ideas and images which cohere around these two notions of wilderness and sophistication. It considers the ways in which they are constructed as opposites in Canadian writing, and suggests that, within the literary structures of pastoral, they may interpenetrate.

The dynamic between wilderness and sophistication might be traced through a vast range of Canadian literary texts, but I will restrict myself to one region and period, focusing on three mid-twentieth-century novellas set in British Columbia. They were all reprinted in a 1987 anthology of Canadian novellas edited by Douglas Daymond and Leslie Monkman, entitled *On Middle Ground*. This book is an interesting artefact of literary history. The authors represented in it – Clark Blaise, Keith Fraser, Mavis Gallant, Malcolm Lowry, John Metcalf, Audrey Thomas, and Ethel Wilson – are some of the finest post-war Canadian fiction writers, yet they have fallen out of fashion with readers and critics alike. Indeed, the title of the anthology seems inadvertently to position them in an awkward in-between place. 'Middle ground' is a phrase with multiple resonances. In terms of form, it refers to an intermediate fictional genre, often occupying an uncertain position in the literary canon. In terms of period or generation, these mid-century writers do not quite belong with either the modernists or the postmodernists. In a national context, 'middle ground' recalls Robert Kroetsch's view of Canadian writing as 'the literature of dangerous middles',¹ a suggestive description which was later picked up by Stephen Slemon in his account of 'colonialism's middle

¹ Daymond and Monkman mention Kroetsch's phrase in their Introduction (2). It is from 'Beyond Nationalism: A Prologue', published in *Mosaic* 14.2 (1981), and reprinted in *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (p.71). The phrase has been variously interpreted in relation to Canada's geography, history, and political status: see Creelman; Kirtz; Tiefensee 77-78.

ground' (110) – that is, the ambivalent location of the white settler who is both colonizer and colonized. Finally, in connection with pastoral, the title of the anthology evokes Leo Marx's notion of the 'middle landscape', which underpins his discussion of American pastoral in terms of mediation between art and nature, the savage and the civilised, the rural and the urban. It is this last interpretation of 'middle ground' which is most pertinent to my subject.

From among the seven novellas in the anthology, I have chosen Thomas's 'Prospero on the Island' (1972), Lowry's 'The Forest Path to the Spring' (1961) and Wilson's 'Tuesday and Wednesday' (1952) for close focus. In all three, the opposition between 'wilderness' and 'sophistication', and the middle ground between them, may be explored both at the level of theme and in terms of narrative perspective. Towards the end, I will turn briefly to non-fiction writing in order to consider some direct uses of the two words in Canadian texts from the middle decades of the twentieth century. Rather than tracing a chronological development across this period, I am offering a kind of conceptual map. It is partly framed using critical books from the same decades. This is because I am looking at 'wilderness' and 'sophistication' as keywords in the Raymond Williams sense; the critical texts I cite provide further instances of the way the words were used, and the concepts understood, during the mid-century era. Also, these books – through their surveys of larger regional or national canons – indicate the potential of my localised study to open out towards a broader understanding of the interrelation of 'wilderness' and 'sophistication' in modern Canadian culture.

The place to begin, as Audrey Thomas suggests, is with the roots of words, because this takes us deep into the language and, metaphorically, deep into the land.² 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 *Oxford English*

² In 'Basmati Rice: An Essay on Words', Thomas explores her fascination with etymology, figures of speech and (mis)translations. On her wordplay, see Ricou, 'Word Work.'

Dictionary gives its older meanings as 'adulterated; not pure or genuine' (1607-1897); and 'altered from, deprived of, primitive simplicity or naturalness' (1603-1963).³ I have argued elsewhere that 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. In addition, the rise of the middle class, with its insistent appropriation of aristocratic markers of distinction, made sophistication increasingly desirable as a social strategy.⁴ To the Victorians, sophisticated social performance became important precisely because of their excessive investment in truth-telling,⁵ while in the early twentieth century, the word began to take on some of its current meanings, defined by the OED as 'worldly wisdom or experience, subtlety, discrimination' (from 1850), and 'technical refinement' (from 1959). Although these became the dominant meanings, the earlier ones are not quite obsolete, and traces of them remain in modern usage.

Turning to 'wilderness', the OED's first definition is the most literal: 'wild or uncultivated land' (c.1200-1847). The second specifies an article (as in 'the wilderness'), and is more emotive: 'uninhabited or inhabited only by wild animals' (c.1230-1855). This is supplemented by a phrase from Johnson's dictionary: 'a tract of solitude and savageness', which introduces a human perspective. The OED also gives a figurative or religious meaning: 'a region of wild or desolate character, or in which one wanders or loses one's way' (1340-1868); here, the focus is entirely on the relation of humans to the wilderness. The OED's dating suggests that all these meanings were current only up until the mid-nineteenth century. I find this curious as it seems to me that contemporary usage is still inflected by ideas of solitude, wildness, and disorientation. But there is one meaning in the list which is genuinely archaic: 'a piece of ground in a large garden or park, planted with trees, and laid out in an ornamental or fantastic style, often in the form of a maze or labyrinth' (1644-1885). Already we find sophistication in the midst of wilderness: a hidden definition of the word which seems to be in tension with all the rest, since instead of wildness and uncultivation, it points to the most artificial of landscaping techniques. Yet it retains the notion of wandering and losing one's way. The maze partly replicates the experience of being lost in a forest, but always within the ultimately safe environment of the park or garden.

³ The date ranges indicate the earliest and latest exemplary quotations in the OED online.

⁴ For more detail on this shift, see Hammill, *Sophistication* 23-33; 65-77.

⁵ This is the argument of Kucich's *The Power of Lies*; see especially 3-4.

The basis of the distinction between the wilderness and the garden, as the Canadian critic W.H. New points out in *Land Sliding* (1997), is an attitude to property. For European explorers in the New World, he explains, 'wilderness' was beyond the reach of law, while 'land' could be privately owned: 'Such ownership declared authority; it also expressed a participation in a system of civil order or organization, or a shared notion of "cultivation"'. Hence the (cultivated) garden was civil, but the wilderness was "untractable": unruled, hence unruly' (29).⁶ In the earlier phases of Canadian literary history, the reassuring image of the garden awaiting cultivation was frequently used, and became a mode of defence against a potentially threatening natural environment. This pattern is analysed in detail in one of the major books about western Canadian literature, Dick Harrison's *Unnamed Country* (1977).⁷ Harrison writes that early twentieth-century prairie fiction was characterised by:

a moral simplicity – an innocence which is not necessarily purity but an absence of civilized sophistication. As the wise old doctor in Nellie McClung's *Purple Springs* says, 'this big West is new and crude and distinct – only the primary colours are used in the picture, there are no half-tones, no shadows ... no background'. ... This is essentially the moral perspective which underlies the fiction of Stead and Stringer too, and in the work of Connor and McClung particularly it is accompanied by the sort of naïve social conscience which provides the complex human problems of the West with superficially logical solutions like prohibition, industry, thrift, and simple piety. It is also the moral perspective of the most sentimental romance, which was quite predictably the genre in which these writers worked. ... The old doctor's contention that there is 'no background' suggests another of the Edenic qualities of the fictional West of this period. It has no past. ... the popular fiction generally gives the impression that nothing happened until the white settlers arrived. This loss of the past can now be seen as a measure of how dangerously out of touch with the land this garden vision of the West was. True, it implied harmony with nature, but in a millennial perfection, not in the sense of man as a continuing part of the great cycle of life on the plains. (79-80)

⁶ See also Hanson's account of the 'landed vocation' in Victorian writing: 'In English literature, Canadian land promised the return to an integrated life; but more importantly, it proffered the fantasy of gentility to Victorians anxious to secure or maintain that status and offered a social identity (landed gentry) that was indelibly "English"' (xxx).

⁷ The other key study of prairie writing from this era is Ricou's *Vertical Man / Horizontal World* (1973). Some of the conclusions of these thematic studies are broadly relevant to 'western Canadian writing', a category usually taken to include BC as well as the prairies.

I would like to pick up two things here. First, the qualities celebrated in these settler fictions – prohibition, industry, thrift and piety – are particularly incompatible with sophistication. The personal attributes, and social ideologies, which favoured survival in a frontier environment are the opposite of those which would enable characters to thrive in European novels of manners – such as polished manners, wit, an unshockable attitude, a refusal of effortfulness, and an ability to negotiate complicated social landscapes.⁸ These things would be of little use on a remote settlement, and indeed, many Canadian novels suggest that sophistication inspires distrust in pioneer communities. The second point to note is that Harrison reverses the notion of sophistication as a corruption or ‘adulteration’ of innocence, instead presenting innocence as a failure of sophistication. His analysis works by lining up innocence, simplicity (or oversimplification) and sentiment against sophistication and complexity.⁹ Harrison’s readings suggest that ‘civilized sophistication’ is absent not only from the fictional worlds represented in these popular novels, but also from the narratives themselves, which are formally conventional and ideologically simplistic.

In the novellas I am going to examine, which date from a somewhat later era, innocence and sophistication remain opposed to one another. Yet they are no longer mutually exclusive, but interdependent, and constitutive of a complex pastoral discourse which is not found in the novels discussed by Harrison. Indeed, Harrison notes: ‘The Garden Myth in Canadian fiction is characterized by an abundance of what might be called “pastoral” imagery and by a more or less explicit moral assumption that nature is regenerative and man and his artificial creations are trivial or corrupt’ (75). His inverted commas acknowledge that the popular novels he discusses are not ‘true’ pastoral texts, because although they represent an idealised rural space, the pastoral sense of loss is largely absent. The literary mode of pastoral has been extensively discussed by critics over many decades; among the most influential definitions are those of William Empson in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935) and Raymond Williams in *The Country and the City* (1973). In 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

⁸ For a detailed definition of sophistication as it is generally elaborated in literary texts, see the introduction to Litvak’s *Strange Gourmets*.

⁹ Compare Marx’s ‘distinction between two kinds of pastoralism – one that is popular and sentimental, the other imaginative and complex’ (5).

good")' (19). That is, in order to appreciate rural simplicity or untutored sensibility, readers must be aware that they themselves have lost – or never possessed – these qualities. For Williams: 'The eventual structure of feeling is not based only on an idea of the happier past. It is based also on that other and associated idea of innocence: the rural innocence of the pastoral. ... The key to its analysis is the contrast of the country with the city and the court: here nature, there worldliness' (46). Pastoral texts, then, map out innocence and sophistication in space, associating one with the natural environment and the other with the city.¹⁰ Often, the interaction between them is played out in an intermediate site which is part-wild and part-cultivated – such as a garden, urban park, island or agricultural landscape – the 'middle ground'.

In a modern context, pastoral writing sometimes invokes the tourist gaze: for instance, the perspective of a city-dweller setting out on an adventure in a wild environment, but always retaining the possibility of retreat. In turn, this raises questions about the authenticity of a wilderness experience which does not involve actual risk.¹¹ Audrey Thomas's 'Prospero on the Island',¹² is intensely preoccupied with authenticity and imitation. Since artifice is at the core of all sophisticated practices, it can be argued that the story thematises sophistication as well as embodying it in its narrative form. It is set on one of the outer islands in the Georgia Strait, British Columbia, and is about a young couple with a baby who move there and live in a cabin. The main character, Miranda, is terrified by city life and comes to the island seeking refuge, yet she is constantly aware of the divergence between her fantasy of remote wilderness living and the actual modernity which surrounds her:

¹⁰ New observes: 'Recurrently, "City" represents (across a range of perspectives) a mix of wealth, power, noise, violence, sleaze, crowding, corruption, potential anonymity, multicultural proximities, aesthetic ferment, the loss of old values, the acquisition of new values, and sophistication' (*Land Sliding* 156). 'City' has an entry in Williams' *Keywords* and in the collaborative 2005 volume *New Keywords* (although 'sophistication' and 'wilderness' appear in neither). The 2005 entry on 'city' comments on the 'philosophical edge' to the notion of the city, legible in the terms used to describe the qualities needed for living in close proximity to strangers: "'Civility" (from *civis*) is obviously one, along with "civilization". More ambiguous is "urbanity" (from *L urbs*), with its double-edged nod to the collective nature of city life and the style of the city slicker' (Donald 34).

¹¹ Urry, in *The Tourist Gaze*, explains: 'the gaze in any historical period is constructed in relation to its opposite, to non-tourist forms of social experience and consciousness' (1-2). See also his comments on authenticity (9-11) and on the "romantic" form of the tourist gaze, in which the emphasis is upon solitude [and] privacy' (45).

¹² Thomas's work has generated a reasonably substantial body of criticism, mostly published in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Just two articles (Colville; Bowering) have been devoted to her pair of novellas, published as *Munchmeyer; and Prospero on the Island* (1971).

There is nothing to fear; no bears out there in the forest, no poison berries (that I know of, anyway), no kerosene lamps to tip over. I even have a *street light* just below the path. Marie Antoinette playing at milkmaid at the palace of Versailles. ... Fred even rigged up an ingenious system of plastic pipes which lead from the hot-water heater in the kitchen outside and around the back of the cabin, in and connected to the hot-water tap in the bathtub. No hip baths in front of the fire for me! A façade of simplicity: a small white cabin set up on the bluff, a simple stockade fence, smoke coming from a chimney. The figures of a woman and a small child and a mongrel dog come towards you down the path. The woman carries a dented saucepan. They are going to pick wild berries, the last of the summer, and will have them, after a salmon, for their supper. 'Look', you say, stopping at the store for a bag of chips, a soft drink, directions to the marina. 'See them. Aren't they sweet?' And sigh and taste the city's dust still clinging to the inside of your mouth. 'It must be nice.' 'The simple life.' Words to that effect. (247)

There is a comparison, of course, with pioneer experience – or at least, with our received image of it.¹³ The dangers listed at the start of this passage suggest the many hazards in a narrative such as Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852), and whilst Miranda is grateful not to face these, she is also conscious of experiencing only a simulated rusticity. The improbable street light is a sign of the invasion of the urban into the supposedly wild place, and signals Miranda's sense of herself as equally incongruous. She fears she is simply a spectator, a tourist from the city, and in positioning herself this way, she becomes aligned with the reader, looking on rather than fully participating in the simple, slow-paced, low-tech life of the island.

'Simplicity' (like 'innocence', 'niceness' and 'sentimentality') is a possible opposite term for sophistication. For the self-conscious, literate Miranda, simplicity can only be 'a façade', or a performance. Her mention of Marie-Antoinette is revealing. In the eighteenth century, aristocratic fantasies about the simple life were enacted through very self-aware masquerades, and Marie-Antoinette famously dressed as a shepherdess or dairymaid at her model farm, Le Petit Trianon. Similar motifs informed some of the earliest literary depictions of Canada in English literature. In Frances Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague*, published in 1769, the actual hardship of peasant

¹³ 'Pioneering' is another complex keyword; I do not have space to explore its resonances here, but see Hanson on middle-class conceptualisations of 'landed vocation' in colonial territory; also Thompson on Canadian models of pioneer femininity.

life in New France is erased, as the story focuses on the privileged English ruling class, and their enjoyment of Canada's picturesqueness. Emily Montague and her lover imagine forming a permanent agricultural settlement among the Acadians, planning to build 'a pretty house in a beautiful rustic style' in which they will live 'like the first pair in Paradise' (223). Their ties to England, however, prove too strong to be broken, and the novel quickly retreats from its own New World wilderness fantasy. All the characters cross back over the Atlantic, having spent only a year at Quebec.¹⁴

Similarly, in Audrey Thomas's novella, Miranda and her husband stay on the island only one year, just long enough for her to face up to her fear of modern urban life, and gather the material for a book. The last entry in Miranda's diary reads: 'I write this on the ferry, gazing backward' (284). This plot derives, of course, from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*,¹⁵ and more broadly from a whole tradition of early modern pastoral writing which strongly influenced North American literature. In his important book *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964), Leo Marx writes of *The Tempest*:

the symbolic action, as in our American fables, has three spatial stages. It begins in a corrupt city, passes through a raw wilderness, and then, finally, leads back towards the city. But ... there is now some hope that what has been learned on the island can be applied to the world. What has been learned, needless to say, is not the lesson of primitivism. So far as the ending lends credibility to the pastoral hope, it endorses the way of Prospero, not that of Gonzalo; the model for political reform is neither Milan nor the island as they existed in the beginning; it is a symbolic middle landscape created by mediation between art and nature. (71)

The 'middle landscape' is a spatial metaphor which can be understood in several different senses. Marx traces it back to the rhetoric of the American Enlightenment, quoting from the Unitarian minister Richard Price: 'the happiest state of man is the middle state between the *savage* and the *refined*, or between the wild and the luxurious state'.¹⁶ In a more literal interpretation, the 'middle landscape' is partly in a natural state and partly developed.¹⁷ In

¹⁴ As Perkins notes, Brooke constructed 'a version of British North America which balances the isolation and hardship described in so many adventure novels and travellers' tales with accounts of sophisticated social pleasures' (433). The dynamic between sophistication and wilderness is crucial to *Emily Montague*; see also Hammill, 'A Daughter' 441-443.

¹⁵ The timescale is compressed: Shakespeare's characters live on the island twelve years.

both of these senses, the idea is directly relevant to Malcolm Lowry's novella 'The Forest Path to the Spring'.

Lowry, an English author, has been adopted into Canadian literature because he lived for a time in British Columbia and set some of his work there, including 'The Forest Path to the Spring', written in 1951 and published in his posthumous collection *Hear Us O Lord From Heaven Thy Dwelling Place* (1961).¹⁸ In the story, the unnamed narrator and his wife go for a honeymoon to Eridanus, a tiny, precarious beach settlement, and they love it so much that, in spite of the primitive living conditions, they decide to stay. The story, like Frances Brooke and Audrey Thomas's texts, is mostly taken up with the narration of a single year's experience, although the narrating point of view is at many years' remove from the main events. The beauty of Eridanus is evoked in passages of a lyrical intensity:

We went out to a morning of wild ducks doing sixty downwind and golden-crowned kinglets feeding in swift jingling multitudinous flight through the leafless bushes, and another day of winter companionship would draw down to an evening of wind, cloud, and seagulls blowing four ways at once, and a black sky above the trembling desolate alders, the heart clothed already in their delicate green jewelry I had never really seen, and the gulls whitely soaring against that darkness, where suddenly now appeared the moon behind clouds, as the wind dropped, transilluminating its own soaring moonshot depths in the water, the moon reflected in the half-moonlit clouds in the water down there, and behind, in the same translunar depths, the reflection of the struts and cross-braces of our

¹⁶ Cited in Marx 105. Price was a friend of Jefferson and Franklin. Compare Marx's comment: 'What is attractive in pastoralism is the felicity represented by an image of a natural landscape, a terrain either unspoiled or, if cultivated, rural. Movement towards such a symbolic landscape also may be understood as movement away from an "artificial" world, ... away from centers of civilization towards their opposite, nature, away from sophistication towards simplicity, or, to introduce the cardinal metaphor of the literary mode, away from the city toward the country' (9-10).

¹⁷ Gustaffson, in his ecocritical essay on Lowry's 'Forest Path', uses 'middle landscape' in this second sense (28). Whilst I haven't explicitly framed this essay in contemporary ecocritical terms, several of the critics I cite are seen as precursors of this mode of reading, and are included in Coupe's pioneering *Green Studies Reader* (2000).

¹⁸ Lowry's *Under the Volcano* (1947), set in Mexico, has received far more critical discussion than any of Thomas's or Wilson's books. Lowry's Canadian writing has received much less attention. About ten essays concentrate wholly or partly on 'Forest Path'; I do not cite the most recent one as it is apparently plagiarised from Gustaffson.

simple-minded pier, safe for another day, disposed subaqueously in some ancient complex harmony of architectural beauty, an inverse moonlight geometry, beyond our conscious knowledge. (39)

This single sentence is a verbal structure of remarkable intricacy: it refers to complex harmony and it also embodies it. The passage does not present the point of view of a simple country dweller, but rather that of a person of subtle intellect who has recently learned to pay attention to wildlife, moonrises, and even the accidental beauty of manmade structures. Indeed, one aspect of the narrator's sophisticated response to the natural environment is his ability to incorporate even industrial objects into the frame of the picturesque: he uses the phrase 'architectural beauty' again when referring to the oil refinery (59), and comments on how the smoke from the factories enhances the loveliness of the sunrise.¹⁹ This might be another version of Leo Marx's 'middle landscape' – between the wilderness and the urban, and also between art and nature, because the narrator's full realisation of the beauty of the place seems to be achieved partly through writing about it.

As Henrik Gustaffson observes: 'With the landscape in its partly damaged and ever threatened state, and the constantly shifting influences of civilization on both environment and people, it is evident that "Forest Path" presents a pastoral more by trustful perception than ready substance' (37). On the basis of his reading of Lowry, Gustaffson suggests that 'simplicity must increasingly be seen as a deliberate contrast to modern, compound experience, not as a self-sufficient or merely given trait', and concludes that modern pastoral will therefore always involve conflict (37). Clearly, then, the perspective of the sophisticate is evident in the continual counterpointing of the simple and the complex, and equally, in the self-conscious juxtaposition of wilderness with the urban. When Lowry's narrator returns briefly to the city to get some books, he feels that 'the city ... in a few hours, had begun to render our existence an almost impossible fable' (38). The city and the beach settlement are necessarily defined against one another, yet the experience of each renders the other unreal. In a longer extract (which, again, consists of just one sentence), the city dweller's vision of Eridanus is presented by embedding the reader in the scene:

If you can imagine yourself taking a pleasure steamer down the inlet from the city some afternoon, ... on the port side beneath the white peaks and the huge forestation of the mountain slopes would be tide-flats, a gravel

¹⁹ See Gustaffson (36) on the narrator's endowment of industrial structures with beauty.

pit, the Indian reserve, a barge company, and then the point where the wild roses were blowing and the mergansers nested, with the lighthouse itself; it was here, once around the point with the lighthouse dropping astern, that you would be cutting across our bay with our little cabins under the trees on the beach where we lived at Eridanus, and that was our path going along the bank; but you would be able to see what we could not, right around the next point at Four Bells, into Eridanus Port – or, if this happens to be today, what was Eridanus Port and is now a real estate subsection; perhaps you would still see people waving at you before that though, and the man with the megaphone who points out the sights would say contemptuously, 'Squatters; the government's been trying to get them off for years', and that would be ourselves, my wife and me, waving to you gaily; and then you would have passed our bay and be sailing directly northwards into the snow-covered mountain peaks, past numerous enchanting uninhabited islands of tall pines, down gradually into the narrowing gorge and to the uttermost end of that marvellous region of wilderness known to the Indians as Paradise. (7–8)

As in the Audrey Thomas passage, the reader is addressed as 'you', and positioned as a spectator or tourist. Like Thomas's Miranda, Lowry's narrator is anxious about the authenticity of his rural experience: although he lives in a tiny, isolated settlement, he does not have access to the really remote wilderness area, designated as 'Paradise'. This is described as 'uninhabited', yet it is also suggested to be the terrain of Indians – implying that the narrator views the Indians almost as a separate species, with no ownership of the land and yet with a more authentic or intimate relationship to it. Yet, he and his wife are themselves perceived as a separate kind of people, 'squatters', by the passing day-trippers.

From a Native perspective, of course, all white settlers might be considered 'squatters'. Race is deeply relevant to representations of wilderness and sophistication, but I have not focused on it here, since the texts I am looking at make only these kinds of glancing references. In future work, there would be many possible ways of approaching this subject. The dynamic between the savage and the civilised which structures early Canadian exploration narratives would be a good place to start, and this theme could be carried right through to the entanglement of Native issues with conservationism in modern policy debate. The changing treatment of Native peoples in the contemporary period

can, in some ways, be related to new perceptions of their cultures as complex and sophisticated, yet the white fascination with Native lifestyles remains inseparable from wilderness fantasies.²⁰

Near the beginning of the narrative, Lowry's narrator observes: 'Since we were in a bay *within* the inlet, the city ... was invisible to us, *behind* us on the path, was our feeling' (7), a comment which inverts the idea of the city as a site of progress. In the account of the steamer journey quoted above, the proleptic reference to the real estate subsection presents a more direct image of regression, while the phrase 'if this happens to be today' introduces chronological layering to the extract, drawing attention to the pace of development at Eridanus. Ideals of progress are further interrogated when the narrator describes his own effort to face up to a painful past:

In a manner I changed [the past] by changing myself and having changed it found it necessary to pass beyond the pride I felt in my accomplishment, and to accept myself as a fool again. ... Nothing is more humbling than the wreckage of a burned house, the fragments of consumed work. But it is necessary not to take pride in such masterly pieces of damnation either, especially when they have become so nearly universal. If we had progressed, I thought, it was as if to a region where such words as spring, water, houses, trees, vines, laurels, mountains, wolves, bay, roses, beach, islands, forest, tides and deer and snow and fire, had realized their true being, or had their source: and as these words on a page once stood merely to what they symbolized, so did the reality we knew now stand to something else beyond that symbolized or reflected: it was as if we were clothed in the kind of reality which before we saw only at a distance. (62–63)

Like Audrey Thomas in her line about the roots of words, Lowry reflects on the materiality of words, embedding them in a particular landscape. Yet for Lowry's narrator, the 'source' of the words he lists is not to be found in old dictionaries, but in physical referents – he tries to reunite words and things, aspiring towards an unmediated experience of a landscape he has previously encountered only through text. As Robert Kroetsch writes in his essay on the *Hear Us O Lord* collection: 'We live at a time when poetry – Canadian poetry at least – is full of the etymologies of words, as if an earlier version of a word

²⁰ From another angle, questions of authenticity and imposture might be explored in relation to John Richardson's *Wacousta* (1832) or the literary career of Grey Owl. See also Calder on authenticity and regional literature.

had a privileged status against all the problematics of meaning in our fumbling century. Lowry returns us from that false innocence to the circuit or situation of communication itself' (*Treachery* 164).²¹ The narrators in both Thomas's and Lowry's novellas struggle, in different ways, to prioritise the immediate experience of place over the language used to describe it, yet both are ultimately caught up in the experience of writing. The passage I have just quoted from 'The Forest Path' also suggests that the condition of humbleness ought to preclude pride, yet, as the narrator implies, as soon as you are aware of yourself as humble or innocent, you are so no longer. Self-consciousness, in these texts, immediately brings a kind of sophistication, and one which is necessarily understood as impurity or adulteration.

Lowry and Thomas present the complex protagonist striving for simplicity, but unable to escape self-consciousness. Another BC writer, Ethel Wilson, does the opposite – that is, she represents simple characters from the perspective of a detached yet sympathetic narrator.²² For this, pastoral structures of feeling are again required, but they are differently balanced. In her novella 'Tuesday and Wednesday', Wilson's delicate modulation from admiration to irony is nicely exemplified in this description:

Mrs Emblem locked her door, and breathed a deep sigh of comfort. Well she might. A pleasant glow of sentiment was shed by a light rosily shaded and suffused. Mrs Emblem advanced into the room and turned on two lamps also rosily and cosily shaded. These lights so pinkly suffused revealed the neatness and cleanness of Mrs Emblem's room. It was a room with a small ell. The ell was divided from the main part of the room by long rose-coloured curtains which at once suggested a delicious though precarious privacy, an unravished something. How pleasant it was for Mrs Emblem to go to bed behind those curtains, ... some chocolates near at hand, a pink or blue dressing jacket loosely upon her white shoulders ... No one has seen Mrs Emblem lying luxuriously there; but I see her now, and she looks so nice, she makes me feel good. (95)

²¹ Kroetsch's last phrase comes from Jonathan Culler's *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981).

²² Wilson's most sustained exploration of an attractively simple protagonist is in *The Innocent Traveller* (1949). See Hammill, 'Ethel Wilson'. Criticism on Wilson focuses principally on *Swamp Angel*; most studies date from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. See the comprehensive bibliography in Stouck (2003); very little has appeared since 2003. There are no essays on 'Tuesday and Wednesday', but see Stouck's discussion (114-160).

We are invited to admire Mrs Emblem for her straightforward pleasure in material comfort and her almost childlike delight in pretty things. Yet in celebrating Mrs Emblem's unsophistication, the text simultaneously constructs a sophisticated reading position for its readers. The qualities attaching to her, 'niceness' and 'sentimentality', combine to designate an unreflective, emotionally-based respectability which is the opposite of sophistication. Readers are not really encouraged to empathise with this character, but to spy on her and, ultimately, to disdain her vulgar taste. The description of the room continues:

It is furnished with repulsively ornate chairs and a couch upholstered in a material which might be rose-coloured plush, but is not. ... There are no books in Mrs Emblem's sitting room because she does not read books. Books are untidy, and there is no need of them. There is a shiny wooden chest or bench in which there are all-story, fashion or movie magazines put away. It is easy to be funny about the furniture-store romantic appearance of Mrs Emblem's room, and for Myrtle to say that it is pink like a bad house. But it is not a bad house; it is a good house ...

Although she is Mrs Emblem and therefore a happy woman, she sometimes feels a certain vacuity which is not filled by cleaning and polishing her room, shopping ... going to a show, and playing whist or bridge. ... She is hardly aware of the poignant communications of sky, of birds, of ocean, forest, and mountain. ...

You cannot help liking Mrs Emblem. She is so nice; she is perhaps too fat, now, to be beautiful; but she is – to Mr Thorsteinsen, to Maybelle, to Mortimer Johnson and to me – alluring. (95–96)

The sudden shock of the word 'repulsively' unmasks the narrator and also the audience. While explicitly inviting us to take pleasure in the spectacle of Mrs Emblem's plump prettiness, the narrator has also secretly encouraged us to deplore her taste. The complicity between narrator and reader is reinforced by the irony of the sentence in free indirect style ('Books are untidy...'), and finally, the direct address to 'you' interpellates us as knowing and amused, fully aware of the limitations of this character's point of view. But Myrtle, Mrs Emblem's subtly manipulative niece, also deplores her aunt's taste, and thus we are trapped, aligned with Myrtle (who is a rather nasty piece of work) and so unable, after all, to share in Mrs Emblem's niceness. This fits Empson's definition of pastoral: the reader is the complex man, who feels 'I am in one way better, in another not so good'. Mrs Emblem is 'good' in the sense of straightforward kindness, but the reader cannot help feeling superior to her because she is so unresponsive to culture and nature alike.

In her novellas and short fiction, Wilson often focuses on characters who – like Mrs Emblem – do not relate to the natural environment. In contrast, the novel for which she is best known, *Swamp Angel* (1954), draws on a more conventional (though complex) mode of pastoral. Its central character, Maggie, finds solace amongst lakes and forests after a period of suffering. This narrative of retreat, in which a protagonist experiences healing and learns courage, has similarities to 'The Forest Path to the Spring' and 'Prospero on the Island'; in all three stories, the main characters are self-conscious about their wilderness experience and its authenticity. In most of Wilson's fiction, as in that of Lowry and Thomas, it is the educated, cultured people from the city who come to know the rural environment the most intimately. This means that even the most immersive kinds of wilderness texts are inevitably invaded by sophistication, and this precludes the immediacy of response which the protagonists long for.

In a 1958 lecture, Wilson discussed her favourite Canadian authors, among them Sinclair Ross and Robertson Davies:

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. ('Approach' 93–94)

Wilson is speaking of an intellectual conception of sophistication, a stylishness and wit that is not superficial but revelatory. She seems keen to counteract a common perception that sophistication is somehow not Canadian, because it is incompatible with the austere determination and silent suffering induced by a pioneer environment. Whilst this view is rarely articulated directly in fiction, it is made explicit in other kinds of text, such as Wilson's lecture. The other mid-century examples I have found come from political philosophy and literary criticism, though I will turn first to a piece of interwar magazine writing, which anticipates these later texts.

An idea which has circulated for many decades in mainstream Canadian culture is that Canadians should prize their supposed unsophistication as a moral and even a commercial asset, and a crucial way of distinguishing themselves from Americans. This notion was current as early as the 1920s. In January 1927, an article on revenues from tourist traffic appeared in *Maclean's*. It was contributed by J. Herbert Hodgins, an influential journalist and editor who became managing editor of the highly sophisticated *Mayfair*

magazine when it was launched in Toronto later that year. In his *Maclean's* article, he points out that a large proportion of tourist revenue comes from US visitors, and describes encounters with American tourists who enthused about the politeness of Canadians and their courteous treatment of visitors. Hodgins proposes that 'there is something to be gained, economically, from adherence to the old-fashioned virtues' (60), and reinforces his argument by quoting from the writings of Elbert Hubbard, Jr:

'I like the Canadians. They are more natural, serious, unsophisticated, still having much of the pioneer spirit. ... There is less lawlessness in Canada because of an inherent respect for law and its makers. The free and easy American spirit may percolate across the border and spoil our neighbors' dignity in time, but just now they are ahead of us.'

Whilst these stereotyped accounts sound faintly ludicrous, they proved remarkably enduring. Forty years later, George Grant wrote in extremely similar terms about the US and Canada in *Lament for a Nation* (1965). He says that settlers in Canada tried to build:

a society with a greater sense of order and restraint than freedom-loving republicanism would allow. It was no better defined than a kind of suspicion that we in Canada could be less lawless and have a greater sense of propriety than the United States. ... English-speaking Canadians have been called a dull, stodgy, and indeed costive lot. In these dynamic days, such qualities are made particularly unattractive to the chic. Yet our stodginess has made us a society of greater simplicity, formality, and perhaps even innocence than the people to the south. (69)

And Grant adds a sarcastic footnote: 'In his recent book *The Scotch* ... Professor J. K. Galbraith has patronized his ancestors from western Ontario in this vein. A great human advance has been made from the Presbyterian farm to the sophistication of Harvard' (69).

He invokes several of the terms I've been discussing, placing 'sophistication' on the dark side, and presenting some of its possible opposites, simplicity and innocence, as virtues. He is referring to an active kind of innocence – not unawareness, but rather what he writes of as a Presbyterian 'ethic of self-restraint', as opposed to the 'ethic of freedom' which characterized American liberalism (69). It is also worth noting that Grant rejects 'chic' along with sophistication. Certainly, in both media and literary texts in the twentieth century, sophistication is often understood in terms of a chic, fashionable lifestyle and

can therefore be seen as trivialising or inauthentic; this, presumably, is why Ethel Wilson distanced herself from 'the glossy magazine sense of the word'.

In Canadian writing, then, an implicit opposition between sophistication and wilderness is used as a structuring principle in a variety of contexts. I have found only one essay in which the terms are set explicitly against one another. A 1968 piece by W. H. New, it again takes up the American tourist's view of Canada, but in a satirical tone:

In the comparatively recent annals of the tourist bureau in Victoria, British Columbia, is the case of the redoubtable American lady who demanded to see the icebergs now that she was in Canada. 'They never come this far south,' she was told, ... 'but they sometimes appear off the coast of Alaska.' 'Impossible,' was the reply; 'Alaska is in the United States.' And that was, ineffably, that.

But life goes on in the Canadian wilderness, and sophistication is beginning to creep in. The huskies are disappearing from our street corners, and the Mounties have exchanged their scarlet tunics for more serviceable brown ones. Soon we may have to stop living in igloos, and then where will the Canadian image be? ('Wellspring' 123)

This passage evokes the words 'wilderness' and 'sophistication' as clichés, responding to the persistent construction of Canada in antimodern terms, as a place of escape from the frenzy of urban life, or as a picturesque, anachronistic respite from commercialised American culture. In fact, the notion that wilderness is located outside culture is untenable, and New's anecdote points us towards that insight. The remainder of his essay discusses the outstanding Canadian writers of the early and mid-twentieth century, and he mentions two of those I have been examining:

Beside Lowry almost anyone pales, but Mrs Wilson, choosing a much more apparently simple (and so deceptive) way with words, still holds her own. The great danger is that readers will dismiss her after skimming, imputing to her work the shallowness of pulp magazines, but that would be unjust. Skimming will not do; to close reading, her works respond beautifully. (130)

'Sophistication' is a term which is often applied by critics to Ethel Wilson's writing, yet her work is not sophisticated in the modernist sense (in the lexicon of modernist criticism, 'technical' or 'formal' sophistication usually implies difficulty). To understand why Wilson is described in this way, it is

necessary to look back at one of the earliest meanings of the word, which I gave at the beginning of this essay: 'altered from, deprived of, primitive simplicity or naturalness'. Indeed, a certain deceptiveness, or feigned simplicity, is present in many modern Canadian texts which explore the subject of wilderness, and this is one reason why a reading practice which centres on sophistication can be so illuminating in relation to Canadian literature. This returns us, finally, to William Empson. In *Some Versions of Pastoral*, he discusses a dialogue from *As You Like It* between Touchstone and Audrey. They are talking of lovers and poets and the Clown puns on 'fain' (longing) and 'feign' (deceit). Empson's comment reveals the inseparability of the two ideas I have been discussing – he says of love-poets: 'For that matter they are wooing the reader even if they are not trying to seduce a mistress; the process at its simplest involves desire and detachment, nature and sophistication; levels mysteriously inter-related which a sane man separates only for a joke' (114).²³

²³ In my current research, I am working in collaboration with Michelle Smith on an AHRC-funded project, 'Magazines, Travel and Middlebrow Culture in Canada, 1925-1960' (www.middlebrowcanada.org). In the version of this paper presented at the BACS conference, I discussed the visual repertoire of sophistication through analysis of magazine covers and illustrations. This material is difficult to reproduce in printed format; also the arguments are the joint property of both researchers. We will continue to reflect on the interactions between wilderness and sophistication in our writing, and I acknowledge Dr Smith's important contribution to my thinking on this topic. I am most grateful for her comments on this paper, and for those of Paul Hjartarson, Isla Duncan, Sarah Galletly, and Laurence Coupe.

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