

“Brightly,
aggressively
golden”:
Verbal Agency in
Budge Wilson’s
The Leaving.

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ABSTRACT

Budge Wilson’s writing appears to be unique among modern indigenous Maritime fiction in focussing on female characters engaged in verbal articulation. Janice Kulyk Keefer shows how Wilson’s exploration of her characters’ engagement with language offers readers a transformative vision.

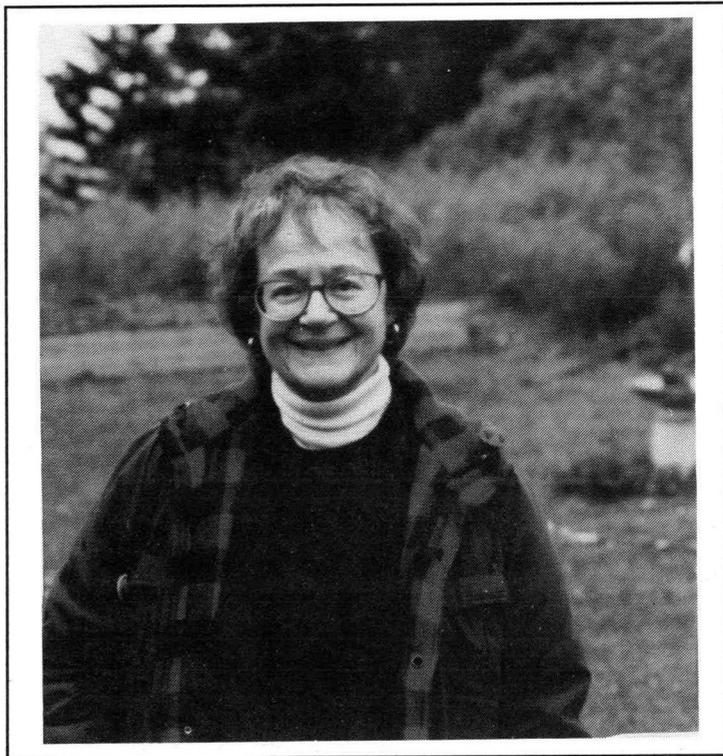
RÉSUMÉ

L’écriture de Budge Wilson est exceptionnelle dans la fiction moderne issue des Maritimes en ce qu’elle s’intéresse principalement à l’évocation de personnages féminins engagés dans l’activité d’une expression verbale articulée. Janice Kulyk Keefer montre comment l’auteure parvient, par cette approche particulière, à susciter chez les lecteurs et lectrices une vision transformée et transformante du monde.

I n Under Eastern Eyes¹ I argue that, by and large, the dominant literary tradition of the Maritimes has inscribed women as “naturally” silent or as actively hostile to the written word. Yet Hélène Cixous’ urging that women speak their bodies, articulating their endless and open desire in a discourse which will explode traditional psycho-sexual hierarchies and binaries, is surely as important for Maritime women as for their consœurs in other regions of the country. Where are the fictions in which the female body and silence -- indissolubly wedded in, for example, Hugh MacLennan’s, Ernest Buckler’s and Alistair MacLeod’s fiction -- undergo a liberating divorce? And why is it that, as far as I am aware, in almost no fiction by an indigenous Maritime writer,

since Montgomery’s Anne and Emily, have women been portrayed as even wanting to write?

That ‘almost,’ however, leads to the subject of this paper. It was with keen interest as well as pleasure that I discovered Budge Wilson’s collection of Maritime-centred short stories, The Leaving. Reading them I found myself excited not just by the calibre but also by the very nature of this fiction which engages with the question of women, agency and words. Most of the narrators of Wilson’s stories are women who possess an extraordinary love of or facility with language; as importantly, many of the characters who so movingly come into voice in these stories are women as inarticulate or ungrammatical as Buckler’s Letty in The Cruellest Month, or as sexually and so-



Budge Wilson. Photo by Elizabeth Eve.

cially repressed, at least initially, as 'The Master's Wife' in Andrew MacPhail's memoir of that name. The Leaving is an important work not just because it so successfully bridges whatever gap may be said to exist between writing for young adults, and for those of us adults in the older-and-aging category, and not merely because it provides us with an indigenous, contemporary Maritime example of woman-centred *kunstler-cum-bildungs* fiction. It is a crucial text because it explores the psychological, social and physical prerequisites for writing, and because it sets up and explores significant speech acts in ways that will resonate for any Maritime woman, whether she works on the farm or in the fishplant, in an office or in a high school or university classroom.

The Leaving is an unusually rich text; would that I had time to examine comprehensively its representation of women as speaking/writing subjects, and also its depiction of the importance of significant speech acts. I will restrict myself, however, to two concerns: first, Wilson's provocative use of a largely autobiographical/confessional fictive mode and secondly, her innovative representation -- given the norms of the Maritime literary tradition -- of the very process of writing.

I. I write/the writing "I"

With one exception, the eleven stories of The Leaving are narrated in the first person. It seems probable that some of Wilson's narrators -- Charlotte, of the opening story, "The Metaphor," Edna of the closing work, "The Penpal" -- do go on to become professional writers, yet all of these girls and women who tell their own and others' stories possess the writer's need to articulate and examine ideas, feelings, perceptions. In their storytelling there is a marked tendency towards the confessional and autobiographical. This is most pronounced, of course, in the entries that make up the story, "The Diary," yet Wilson's opening story is just as confessional in effect, with its use of a standard literary figure -- the metaphor -- to reveal the narrator's hidden hostilities and affections towards the two most important women in her life: her mother and her English teacher. Several other stories have confessions at their hearts: the mother's revelation in "My Mother and my Father" of her pent-up hostility towards her long-dead husband; the mother's confiding to her daughter, in the title story, how she has become a feminist, and, in "Mr. Manuel Jenkins," perhaps the most poignant communication of all. Through the language of gesture, a forty-year-old woman with "no

softness in her anywhere" ² unwittingly confesses to her daughter her hopeless desire for the stranger who has so briefly brought a measure of grace and beauty into a home starved for both.

Confession, through diaries, letters, and autobiography, has long been a favoured form of expression among women excluded from the male-dominated preserve of literary publishing. As Rita Felski reminds us, feminist literature often blurs the distinction between autobiography and fiction; feminist confession, she contends, "exemplifies the intersection between the autobiographical imperative to communicate the truth of unique individuality, and the feminist concern with the representative and intersubjective elements of women's experience. In other words, the shift toward a conception of communal identity which has emerged with new social movements such as feminism brings with it a modification of the notion of individualism as it is exemplified in the male bourgeois autobiography." ³

Think for a moment of that Maritime classic of male, autobiographical, though not bourgeois fiction, *The Mountain and the Valley*, with its focus on the Canaan family and the isolated, tormented, would-be writer, David. I would suggest that though *The Leaving* is a series of short stories connected only by its predominant use of first-person, female narrators and its concern with the processes and repercussions of speech and writing acts, the sense of verbal community these stories establish is far greater than that presented by Buckler's novel. And when we consider *The Rebellion of Young David*, we cannot but register the peculiarly masculinist credo inscribed in the self-reflexive, closing story, "Glance in the Mirror." Perceiving his lovely, frivolous though loving wife as an obstacle to literary creation, the tortured male writer concludes:

A writer is always alone. A watcher is always alone. Yet if he has some-

one to be alone with, then his voice is sure and strong with the speaking which only the voices of the lonely can ever know. ⁴

In contrast, *The Leaving* impresses upon us the sense not of problematic isolation à deux, but that of a community of women passionately engaged in the act of rupturing the silence that has been imposed upon them; a community of women speaking to other women, writing for themselves and to others. What Felski suggests of confessional writing is true of Wilson's short fiction: "Writing, seemingly the most isolated of activities, becomes the means to the creation of an ideal intimacy. . . [T]he confession is a cry for love, allowing the author to express powerful emotional feelings to an unknown reader without fear of rejection. The writing self is profoundly dependent upon the reader for validation, specifically the projected community of female readers who will understand, sympathize and identify with the author's emotions and experiences." ⁵ This kind of confession is at the heart of Wilson's story "The Diary," which foregrounds the concepts of authorship and readership which the genre of confession makes possible. By taking the reader through the difficulty of actually getting started and continuing to write about things which, being intimate and painful, can make one feel vulnerable and exposed, as well, eventually, as empowered, it almost comes to serve a how-to-function. Its narrator/author insists, "this is a diary, not a piece of literature" and reminds women who are breaking their silence by writing that what's important is "not to worry about grammar or sentence structure, but just to let it all pour out like a boil releasing its poisons" (L, 21). This latter reference is characteristic of the honesty of Wilson's vision; she reminds us that writing is not always celebration but often the release of pain, of feelings and memories which, if unexpressed, can become noxious, both for oneself and for others.

The Leaving introduces us to a group of women who resist the repression of their desires, their gifts, their legitimate demands, whether this repression happens at the hands of fathers or mothers, teachers or husbands or even children. By joining their stories through the use of a first person narrator through whose agency confessions are made, the reader gains the sense of Wilson's characters not as isolated individuals, but rather as members of a closely-knit community sharing knowledge and experience. To adapt Felski's words about the confessional mode and apply them to the fictive confessions gathered in The Leaving, we can easily see how reading Wilson's text can be "a liberating step for [Maritime] women, which uncovers the political dimensions of personal experience, confronts the contradictions of existing gender roles, and inspires an important sense of female identification and solidarity."⁶ For Wilson's stories reveal not simply the most profoundly intimate occurrences of a woman's 'true' life, but also workable possibilities for the transformation of day to day living.

Finally, the very style and structure of Wilson's stories recall another characteristic of the species of feminist autobiography Felski denotes as "Confession": "they share an ... emphasis upon the referential and denotative dimension of textual communication rather than its formal specificity."⁷ Sometimes the author-reader bond is manifested in the mother-daughter relationship explored by the texts as well as in the connection established by the first-person narrator's intimacy with the reader. As for the referential and denotative dimensions of Wilson's fictive confessions, they are deliberately Maritime; what some of the stories may lack in formal complexity or experimentation they make up for in local specificity and in their unmistakable agenda: to show how woman can liberate, empower and, as importantly, "pleasure" themselves through the reading and writing of texts, and through the act of significant speech addressed by one agent to another.

II. The Process of Writing

This brings us to what I have called the prerequisites for and process of writing as specified by The Leaving. It is in this aspect of her text that Budge Wilson is perhaps most subversive of the "norms" that have been constructed to curtail and direct female agency and experience. What one writer has called "Creative Loafing" -- the importance of drinking things in, observing, responding, acting for oneself and not always upon or for others -- Wilson refers to as "being" rather than "doing". What she introduces her readers to is that writer's *sine qua non* -- the primacy of imaginative mess over order, flow over containment -- something which women raised on a punishing work ethic may find difficult to accommodate, never mind embrace. In "The Metaphor," Wilson insists as well upon women's right to flamboyance, and defends those who, whether putting on make-up or putting down words on paper, exhibit "an excess of zeal and a minimum of control" (L, 1).

Wilson's emphasis on exuberance is especially significant, given the ages of her heroines -- young girls coming into the physical manifestation of their femininity with the development of their breasts and the start of their periods; women who may already have borne children and who, in any case, are well into menopause. By connecting fluidity and openness of thought, feeling and, most importantly, expression, with the most important biological markers of femininity, Wilson seems to be showing how language is an integral part of women's lives and bodies. She also underscores the regrettable fact that few women ever speak for themselves and to their daughters of their most intimate and important experiences. In various stories Wilson shows us the difficulties and obstructions placed in the way of free and frank speech for women who have been socialized into roles which curb the flow of language within them, or who have been silenced by brute economics -- if you don't spend every moment of your life working as a beast of bur-

den and nagging your husband and children to work just as hard, the whole lot of you will go under. The pages of *The Leaving* are filled with mothers who regiment their lives and houses, and curb their emotions and relationships, in contrast to the 'free spirits' [unmarried women, young girls and in one case a young man and nascent poet described as being "three parts woman and one part child" (L, 140)], who abandon themselves to the pleasures and possibilities of language.

Wilson focuses on those moments during which women enter a new relationship with language, which is no longer the exclusive property of the male sex, but rather a luminous world where anyone, regardless of gender, can feel at home as long as s/he possesses a passion for language, literature and/or meaningful speech. The crucial moment for the awakening of Charlotte, the narrator of "The Metaphor," occurs when Miss Hancock acquaints her class with the transformative power of this figure of speech. Through its overleaping or transgression of the lines drawn to keep people and objects separate, to imprison them in rational and supposedly natural categories, metaphor becomes a site within and through which desire and reason, imagination and reality, collide in liberating ways.

Passion and desire are the key concepts in this story, and they are associated most strongly with a teacher of literature and creative writing, Miss Hancock, "who had the gift of making most of us want to write, to communicate, to make a blank sheet of paper into a beautiful or at least an interesting thing" (L, 2). Physically lush and lavish is Miss Hancock, "plump and unmarried and over-enthusiastic" and it seems no accident that her unmarried state and her capacity for pleasure and exuberance go hand in hand. Here are a few of the words Wilson uses to evoke the presence of this woman who delivers "feasts of succulent literature for [her students'] daily consumption" (L, 12) and who, in place of Charlotte's dull, efficient, emo-

tionally anaesthetized mother, performs the task of birthing Charlotte into the bliss of language: "Amazing," "profusion," "brightly, aggressively golden," "passionate caring," "astonishing," "impassioned."

If one wanted a character uniting Cixous' ideas of writing the body and the female libidinal economy with Kristeva's connection of desire and language within the realm of the semiotic, in which socially constructed notions of order, coherence and meaning are disrupted, Wilson's Miss Hancock would do nicely. Yet the important thing about Miss Hancock as Wilson constructs her is that desire and the disruption of norms and conventions are not solely associated with some pre-linguistic state of blissful identification with the maternal body, but rather with the deepest exploration and fullest enjoyment of the overwhelmingly socialized language of literature, that which some theorists would locate within the symbolic order of phallus-cum-transcendental signified. Not alienation and repression but 'homecoming' and release transpire through Charlotte's initiation into and deployment of metaphors by which she survives the trauma of Miss Hancock's suicide and reconfirms her vocation as a writer.

Let's return for a moment to the connection Wilson makes between language and sexuality. When the perfumed, bedizened, ample-bodied Miss Hancock talks to her class of what metaphor can do and provide, she uses charged, active language: "Such *fun!* ... A whole new world of composition is about to open for you in one glorious *whoosh* ... The metaphor is yours to *use*, to *enjoy*, to *relish*" (L, 3). And when she counsels her students on how to begin writing metaphorically, she urges them, "Don't think too hard. Let your writing, your words emerge from you like a mysterious and elegant blossom. Let it all out ... without restraint, without inhibition, with *verve*" (L, 3).

And Charlotte does. Her favorite site for "creative loafing" and her 'place of her own' is the bathtub. For Charlotte, baths have little to do with the punish-

ing standards of hygiene to which her mother is devoted, and everything to do with play, sensuousness, abandon:

In the bath I always did a lot of things besides wash I poked my toes through the bubbles and waved their hot pinkness to and fro among the static white waves. I hopefully examined my breasts for signs of sudden growth ... I quoted poetry out loud with excessive feeling and dramatic emphasis, waving my soapy arms about and pressing my eloquent hand against my flat chest. And from now on I also lay there and made up metaphors, most of them about my mother. (L, 9)

Charlotte's ability to use metaphor without the inhibitions caused by having to be a restrained, refined and dutiful daughter, and with the verve that comes from thinking for herself and expressing what she most deeply feels, is her truest expression of love and gratitude to her teacher. Miss Hancock's death is directly linked to the deliberate killing off, by her students, of their own passionate commitment to language and feeling. Charlotte makes up for her failure to openly support Miss Hancock's extravagant love of writing by defying her mother's injunction that she not grieve openly and uncontrollably over her teacher's death, and by producing an obituary in the form of an extended metaphor:

Miss Hancock was a birthday cake ... adorned with a profusion of white roses and lime-green leaves, which drooped and dribbled at the edges ... The frosting was of an intense peppermint flavour, too sweet, too strong.

Inside, the cake had two layers -- chocolate and vanilla. The chocolate was rich and soft and very delicious ... The vanilla was subtle and delicate; only those thoroughly familiar with cakes, only those with great sensitivity of taste, could have perceived its true fine flavour . . . Most children would have been delighted with this cake. Most grown-ups would have thrown it away after one brief glance at the frosting. (L, 19)

Wilson is here insisting that extravagance, excess, sensuous pleasure do not lead to the kind of depravity which those with a puritan and punitive attitude to creation expect. With all that drooping and dribbling and oversweetness of icing come subtlety, sensitivity, fineness -- treasures that the mature writer transmutes into "pure gold" (L, 19). For there is more in Wilson's delineation of the prerequisites for writing than self-gratification. The metaphorical expression of Charlotte's love for her teacher communicates a reasoned awareness both of her teacher's shortcomings and strengths, and of her preference for Miss Hancock's passion and subtlety over her mother's rigid obtuseness. Thus Charlotte combines in her metaphor both *jouissance* and judgement, aesthetic perceptions and reasoned conceptions of the value, nature, and function of things and people.

The majority of Wilson's heroines, young girls with oppressively hyperfunctional mothers, or mothers who are ground down into silence and subservience, must construct a strong, stable identity in order to realize their desires and vocations as writers or, at the very least, as women radically different from their mothers. One way of constructing such an identity is through an enabling entry into the language and society of their particular historical moment, an entry which avoids what Felski calls the "highly reductive leap" of

avoids what Felski calls the “highly reductive leap” of moving from “the recognition of an androcentric bias in language use as exemplified in existing hierarchies of meaning to the assertion that social and symbolic discourse is inherently phallogocentric.” This restrictive view, Felski warns us, “serves to reinscribe women in a position of speechlessness outside language, theory, and the symbolic order, denying any potential power and effectivity to female discourse.”⁸

Budge Wilson’s conception of the writing process as expressed not only in “The Metaphor” but in many of the other stories featured in The Leaving is one in which fluidity, openness, diffuseness do not impede the production of structure, analysis and reasoned statement, but give the latter vital energy and meaning. Her dual concern with the pleasurable extravagance of literary expression, of playing with language, and with the necessity for clear, direct communication rather than endless disruption of meaning, allows her to bring together the two dimensions of discourse, the semi-otic and the symbolic, within the texts she creates in this engaging collection.

Perhaps the critical and popular success of The Leaving can be attributed to what Budge Wilson shows us (Maritime women, and women in general) about the interconnected acts of thinking and speaking, read-

ing and writing. Her text contains many stories which foreground the production of urgent speech rather than writing. These stories show us that to become agents rather than receivers of language helps us to retrieve the repressed experiences vital to understanding ourselves as subjects instead of objects, and to survive in a brutalizing environment. They show us that writing and transformative speech acts allow us to atone for our own brutal or at least cowardly and thoughtless acts, and to change the conditions which prompted them. That, no matter how young or old we may be, we must speak out and write in the face of discouragement and disapproval from those -- even our mothers -- who would rather have us keep silence or at least maintain an “even tenor” in our family life (L, 18). Though writing and speaking don’t “solve everything” and may even leave us fragile as a cracked egg, they do make us “ready” (L, 35) to emerge from our shells and come into a new sense of who we are and may be -- both as individuals and as members of the larger community of Maritime women. We have a lot to thank Budge Wilson for. Who knows how many of her readers will come to say of her, as Charlotte does of Miss Hancock: “she was my entry to something I did not yet fully understand but that I knew I wanted” (L, 3).

NOTES

1. Janice Kulyk-Keefner, Under Eastern Eyes: A Critical Reading of Maritime Fiction, (Toronto: U.ofT. Press, 1987).
2. Budge Wilson, The Leaving, (Toronto: Anansi, 1990), 41. All subsequent references are to this edition.
3. Rita Felski, Beyond Feminist Aesthetics, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1989), 93-94.

4. Ernest Buckler, The Rebellion of Young David and Other Stories, (Toronto: McClelland, 1975), 137.
5. Felski, 110.
6. Felski, 86.
7. Felski, 88.
8. Felski, 42.

