

It is easy enough to spot Wilson's reliance on Donne or Eliot but her philosophic sources go beyond such writers. For instance, in none of my classes could I, nor any of the students, trace the source of Maggie's inherent calm, her surety, her equanimity. We all sensed that it came from Wilson's profound acceptance of deeply-held mystical beliefs. Native Canadian? Christian? We did not know, but time and time again we questioned the origins of Wilson's philosophy.

Imagine my delight when I read this book by Dr. Bhelände and had opened to me the possibilities that her research has uncovered: that by approaching Wilson's work from the great Indian philosophical tradition one may indeed gain the insight that was elusive before. As Bhelände says, "an Indian perspective promises to shed light on certain mystifying aspects of Wilson's work" and this new criticism does just that—especially shedding light on the appeal in all of Wilson's work to comprehend and approach the other as an intrinsic part of the self. Western thought is often zealous in its proclamation of individuality, careful to honour and name differences, but in all of Wilson's stories the "grace of recognition" occurs and is celebrated. Ethel Wilson's writing never abandons the real for the mystical, instead it creates interstices in which transformation between the two occur. Dr. Bhelände is able to demonstrate how Indian philosophic traditions help us to understand this aspect of Wilson's writing. The plurality that is always obvious in Wilson's work makes it appealing across cultural and disciplinary divisions—and this must have been enticing to a scholar such as Dr. Bhelände.

*Self Beyond Self* is an original—even audacious—critique. It dares to search out influences and connections that are subtextual and yet having established these it makes clear a concept (for instance Wilson's use of the avatar) in passages that defy textual interpretation in any other way. Perhaps what most impresses in this

book is the refusal by the author to make undue claims of direct and indisputable connections between the Indian philosophic tradition and Canadian fiction. Instead Bhelände demonstrates how passages could have been influenced by Eastern thought and draws parallels that open the fiction in a new way. There is much careful textual analysis that a reader will find illuminating as Bhelände analyzes the changes that Wilson has made to the text as she readies it for publication. And by comparing various drafts of the text Bhelände is often able to demonstrate the ways in which Wilson's knowledge of the *Bhagavad Gita* has influenced and guided the writing—introducing new philosophic perspectives that the altered text reveals.

Dr. Bhelände has been exhaustive in her research and provides for us a wealth of resource material that Wilson students will find seductive. She also includes evidence of her scholarly integrity as she publishes the advice of current writers, friends of Wilson's, who may—may not—be able to corroborate the direct influence of the Indian texts on the novels.

I must admit when I read the title of the book I was concerned that my ignorance of philosophic research (and especially of the great Indian sacred texts) would make this a tough read. But it is not necessary to be a philosopher (or an Indianist) in order to read this book. It is completely accessible, in fact it invites the reader and is hard to put down.

This is a critique that emphasizes the richness of cross-cultural studies and allows students a new approach to Wilson's work. (As Dorothy Livesay reminded us, Wilson is one of the most neglected and least understood of Canadian women writers.)

This new research not only leads us into a new awareness of Wilson by demonstrating the subtle connections in the fiction to the sacred text *Bhagavad Gita*, it also provides us with a close textual reading of many of Wilson's titles; it is an analysis that has not been available previously. Bhelände's research, alongside the re-

publication of the Wilson canon by McClelland and Stewart, will allow a unique critical access to the complete work of Ethel Wilson—something that has been long overdue.

## COLETTE, M'ENTENDS-TU?

nathalie stephens. Montreal: Éditions Trois, 1997

by John Stout

Nathalie Stephens's *Colette, m'entends-tu?* is a brilliant new work by a young writer who has already published a poetic text in French, *Hivernale* (1995), and one in English, *This Imagined Permanence* (1996). Stephens's muse and mentor in her new book is the French writer Colette, whose *Le pur et l'impur* (1932) marked the emergence of lesbian literature in twentieth-century France. *Colette, m'entends-tu?* opens with a quote from *Le pur et l'impur* in which the opacity and unintelligibility of language are acknowledged, but set aside in favour of an appreciation of its beauty. The beauty of Colette's words leads Stephens's narrator to "les sites imaginaires retranches, hors d'atteinte, au sein d'un épais cristal." The "imaginary site" that is repeatedly named in Stephens's text in order to give the book a symbolic centre is "le jardin de mes rêves" ("the garden of my dreams"): "Dans le jardin de mes rêves, je t'ai convoitée, lieu d'interdits et de refus," the narrator states at the outset of her journey, linking the garden to desire and transgression.

Desire and transgression orient the narrator's imaginings. In *Colette, m'entends-tu?* Stephens creates a space for lesbian identity and lesbian desire; it is a space that does not (yet) exist. Like the lesbian textual utopias of Monique Wittig and Nicole Brossard, Stephens's idealized lesbian "garden" is brought into existence in, and as, an *écriture au féminin*. A boldly experimental work, *Colette, m'entends-tu?* pushes beyond the boundaries of conventional narrative.

Stephens is inspired by a quest to identify and celebrate lesbian ancestors, from Joan of Arc to the "women of the left bank" in literary Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century (Renée Vivien, Natalie Barney, Colette) and to Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West. This lesbian genealogy that she traces links her narrator's quest to a fascinating past as well as to a utopian future.

As a francophone writer living in English Canada, Stephens uses French with great precision and tenderness. Each word of her texts is consciously chosen, carefully placed. Her prose is incantatory and lyrical, yet highly disciplined. Marguerite Andersen, the critic and writer to whom *Colette, m'entends-tu?* is dedicated, has spoken of the "classicism" of Stephens's writing, a "measured" quality that is rare in the work of so young a writer. *Colette, m'entends-tu?* is composed of fifty-one prose poems, each of which fills one dense and beautifully crafted paragraph. Having read it, one feels that Nathalie Stephens will one day be acknowledged as a major francophone poet. Along with her other readers, I look forward to the publication of her next work, *Le dortoir de l'indiscrétion*, later this year.

## THE LIFE OF MARGARET LAURENCE

James King, Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1997.

by *Donex Xiques*

This is a disappointing book. The unusual media coverage attending its publication in the summer of 1997 led the public to expect this new biography of Margaret Laurence to be both rigorous and comprehensive. Unfortunately, it is neither.

This work by James King, a professor at McMaster University, is his first foray into Canadian biography; he has written extensively on the eighteenth-century poet William Cowper and published biographies of other British writers.

James King's *The Life of Margaret Laurence* fortunately does not idealize Laurence, but neither does it seem to capture her. In preparing the book, King had access to new material which had not yet been archived: the journal which Laurence kept during the last six months of her life; drafts for a novel (1982–83); and some letters in private hands. In addition, he located a friend of Margaret's mother (who died when she was four) and offers new information about her. His book also contains a very fine selection of about fifty photographs, many never before published.

Margaret Laurence, with the exceptions noted above, did not leave diaries, early drafts of her fiction, commonplace books, or copies of correspondence before 1962, her thirty-sixth year.

There remains, nevertheless, an enormous amount of archival material. At York University, the chief repository of her papers, there are hundreds of letters (business and personal), as well as typescripts of her fiction, manuscript notes, and other related documents. In addition, McMaster University holds the archives of her Canadian publisher, McClelland and Stewart, and typescripts of many of Laurence's novels acquired by McMaster's university librarian, William Ready. It also now houses much of the new material which James King referred to.

A good deal of the information in *The Life of Margaret Laurence* is based on three books by Laurence: *The Prophet's Camel Bell*, a travel-memoir about Somalia; *A Bird in the House*, short stories which focus on the childhood and youth of Vanessa; and *Dance on the Earth*, Laurence's memoirs. When passages from those memoirs are put side-by-side with King's biography, the indebtedness, even to phrasing, is obvious. But memory is selective and Laurence's account of her life is incomplete. Due to illness, she was unable to finish her memoirs, relying for the first time on a tape recorder, and Joan Johnston's assistance with the manuscript. Published posthumously, *Dance on the Earth*

was completed under the editorship of Margaret's daughter, Jocelyn.

Although *A Bird in the House* is set in a prairie town, a one-to-one correspondence between Vanessa and Margaret is problematic and allows little room to approach the book as imaginative creation. It also overlooks discrepancies between the fiction and the life. It is difficult, moreover, to understand on what basis Mr. King selects dialogue and details from the fictionalized account of Vanessa to apply to young Laurence (then Peggy Wemyss).

Readers unfamiliar with Laurence's life will find much information, particularly about her years in the British Somaliland Protectorate and later in England. But the biography on the whole seems uneven. King's use, at times, of melodramatic phrasing is distracting: "And the Manawaka she later ripped from the flesh of Neepawa is a hothouse of stifled feeling"; or "In Neepawa resided a heart of darkness which the young girl knew intimately"; or (about literary disputes) "In 1969–70, she could, in large measure, take an almost voyeuristic pleasure in seeing other people expose themselves."

This biography would have been enhanced by a more comprehensive treatment of Margaret Laurence's literary work; more discussion such as that offered by Jon Kerzer's analysis of the stories in *A Bird in the House*, where among other points he notes that the arresting image, "horses of the night" is drawn from Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*. It is also disappointing that King presents Margaret's offhanded comment to friend and fellow writer Adele Wiseman, this is "a story about a dwarf," as a description of "Godman's Master," one of Laurence's finest stories.

It is impossible, of course, to cover every facet of a subject's life, but errors or omissions in one area lead to questions about King's assessment of other areas. Here are some points I have noticed: Margaret's first home on Vivian Street was extremely modest, but it was not, as King states, on the "wrong" side of town. If there was