

Freedom on the Frontier: Sharon Butala's Novel *Wild Rose* as Existential Autofiction

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How to cite this paper: Harrison, D. (2023). Freedom on the Frontier: Sharon Butala's Novel *Wild Rose* as Existential Autofiction. *Advances in Literary Study*, 11, 55-75. <https://doi.org/10.4236/als.2023.112005>

Received: December 24, 2022

Accepted: April 8, 2023

Published: April 11, 2023

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Abstract

In *Wild Rose* (2015), the seventh novel by Canadian prairie author Sharon Butala, the protagonist—young wife and aspiring homesteader Sophie Hippolyte—expresses profound anguish, rejection of upbringing and religion, and headstrong desire to remake herself on the prairie frontier of southwestern Saskatchewan in the mid-1880s. The novel marks a turn in Butala's fiction toward atheistic existential philosophy, a progression from a questioning to a rejection of organized religion and an emphasis on complete freedom. This turn was prompted by her suffering and questioning as Butala dealt with the rather sudden death of her husband, the loss of her way of life on, and intimate connection with, the prairie landscape, and the need to remake herself. Indeed, *Wild Rose* can be considered “existential autofiction” in which Butala fictionalizes her experience of loss and her rejection of religion (specifically Catholicism) via Sophie, one of her most resilient characters, who seeks freedom on the frontier.

Keywords

Atheism, Autofiction, Existentialism, Prairie Frontier, Saskatchewan, Sharon Butala

1. Introduction: A Double Loss

In the spring of 1976, Canadian prairie author Sharon Butala married Peter Butala (her second husband) and soon moved from the small city of Saskatoon to his cattle ranch and hay farm in the rolling grassland of southwestern Saskatchewan. Thus began for her a new lifestyle in the country and a new career as a prolific and respected author who championed the preservation of fragile and at-risk ecosystems such as the native prairie that she soon came to love. In the book for which she is best known, the number one national bestseller *The Per-*

fection of the Morning: An Apprenticeship in Nature, Butala (1994) connected with many Canadians—both rural and urban—with her message that they, like all people, are a part of, not apart from, nature and must preserve and protect it as their very and only home. But her cherished life in her prairie home began to end thirty-one years later, in the summer of 2007, when Peter died not long after being diagnosed with esophageal cancer. Because she could not manage the ranching and haying on her own, after selling the hay farm¹ and disposing of all the tools and machines and equipment, Butala moved in the fall of 2008 (when she was sixty-eight) to the large city of Calgary, Alberta, to be closer to her son and his family. She deeply mourned the loss not only of her husband but also of her lifestyle, what she termed “the total sea change in my way of life” (Butala, 2010a: p. 148), telling Geoff Hancock at the end of July 2010, three years after Peter died, that it felt like being dismembered: “I’ve cut off all my limbs. The home, the farmland, the ranchland, the community. Then I moved into a strange place” (Butala, 2010b: p. 80). She recounts this difficult transition in *Where I Live Now: A Journey through Love and Loss to Healing and Hope* (Butala, 2017), published ten years after the death of Peter.²

Both before and after these events, Butala (2015: p. 397) worked on her seventh novel, *Wild Rose*, “during the most tumultuous and possibly most difficult time of my life,” as she admits in her acknowledgements. In the novel, as filtered through the protagonist, young wife and aspiring homesteader Sophie Hippolyte, there is profound anguish, rejection of upbringing and religion, and headstrong desire to remake oneself, and I argue in this article that *Wild Rose* marks a turn in Butala’s fiction—a progression from questioning to rejection of organized religion and an emphasis on complete freedom—toward atheistic existential philosophy. I do not claim that Butala is a card-carrying existentialist, yet a close reading of *Wild Rose* reveals several philosophical elements that I would deem existential whether or not she has any particular affinity for or understanding of this branch of philosophy. Perhaps it is simply a matter of putting the right person (headstrong, resourceful, seeking freedom, discarding religion) in the right landscape (frontier prairie, place of freedom and rebirth) at the right moment (needing to step off the threshold) that leads to an existentialist interpretation. Yet I argue further that this turn was prompted by her suffering and questioning as Butala dealt with her profound losses and the need to remake herself, and indeed I call *Wild Rose* “existential autofiction” in which she fictionalizes her experiences of loss and her rejection of religion (specifically Catholicism) via Sophie as she seeks freedom on the frontier.

2. Autofiction and *Wild Rose*

Not complete reality, not total fabrication, autofiction is a hybrid genre, the fic-

¹ In 1995, their vast ranch (nearly 5300 hectares) west of Claydon (some distance from the hay farm) became the Old Man on His Back Prairie and Heritage Conservation Area managed by the Nature Conservancy of Canada (see [Nature Conservancy of Canada, n.d.](#)).

² To Butala (2017: p. 37), Calgary was an “alien kingdom,” and as evident throughout her work she has never had a fond view of cities (see [Harrison, 2016](#)).

tionalization of autobiography. It is a genre that suits Butala well; as Verna Reid (2008: p. 35) mentions, “in her autobiographically based fiction, she investigates the domestic world of rural women,” a world that she came to know well. Autofiction not only reflects but also transcends the writer’s life, moving from raw life to refined fiction. There is thus some degree of correspondence between the life of the writer and the lives of the protagonist and other characters. Autofiction is especially beneficial for an author like Butala who is processing a difficult or traumatic incident or undergoing bereavement after the sudden loss of a loved one. Writing autofiction aids resilience and restoration by giving the author liminal or artistic space in which to reframe what has occurred, deciding what to include and what to exclude, determining what to embellish, perhaps even imagining an alternative outcome.

The names of the protagonists comprise a small but interesting aspect of the autofiction of *Wild Rose*. Surely it was no accident that Butala chose the name Pierre—the French equivalent of Peter—for the young, dashing, and impulsive husband of Sophie. Pierre/Peter stems from the Greek name Petros, meaning “rock” or “stone” and thus suggesting the quality of durability. But the last name of Pierre, Hippolyte, undercuts that quality since, in the Greek, it means “freer of horses,” thus alluding to horses stampeding away from their confinement. (As we will see, that turns out to be an apt last name for Pierre.) The name Sophie—in terms of its initial letter and double syllable—sounds somewhat like the name Sharon and is the French form of the Greek name Sophia, meaning “wisdom,” and that is an apt name for Butala’s character since, arguably, she gains much wisdom about herself throughout her ordeal. (Curiously the name Sharon in Hebrew means “[fertile] plain,” prescient for Butala considering her move to and life in just such a plain.)³

That move to the native prairie of southwestern Saskatchewan to begin life anew—when Butala was thirty-six, an aspiring academic, and newly (re)married—is a more important element of the autofiction of *Wild Rose*. In *The Perfection of the Morning*, she documents her difficult transition from city woman to country woman, a process that took her a number of years to complete and involved much “psychic struggle” (Butala, 1994: p. 76) and “mental anguish” (p. 83). As she words it, “I found myself in another country where I didn’t speak the language or know the customs, where I was an outsider, an intruder, an alien, where I was alone” (p. 76). But eventually she felt “at home in the terrain” (p. 99), bonded deeply with it, as evident in so much of both her fiction and non-fiction, and found her “authentic self” (Butala, 2010b: p. 74). That landscape has remained with(in) her: “I may have left it,” Butala (2010c: p. 151) claims, “but it has not left me.” In *Wild Rose*, Butala (2015) recreates herself as the much younger, French-speaking, and newly wed Sophie who, nine decades earlier (counting back from 1976), flees a village in Quebec, along with its oppressive Catholicism and her unloving and repressive grandmother (and Butala

³ I have consulted behindthename.com for the meanings of these names.

(2010b: p. 75) knows “the sadness of feeling unloved as a child”⁴), and heads to the grassland frontier to start over. Sophie ends up on the very land to which Sharon moved.

The key feature of the autofiction of the novel, however, is a parallel moment of crisis: for Sharon, the death of Peter near the end of her time in the grassland; for Sophie, the flight of Pierre near the start of her time on the prairie. The rather sudden death of Peter forced Sharon to deal with her situation and remake herself once more, “seeing my fate as sealed by his very death and...by my being a woman in a man’s world” (Butala, 2017: p. 16). Pierre flees like a stampeding horse, likewise forcing Sophie to confront her predicament and reinvent herself again. Just as Sharon became twice (for she also felt the shock of “having my first husband [Wilfred Hoy] dump me” (Butala, 2010b: p. 75)), so too Sophie becomes a “manless” “woman in a man’s world,” an even more precarious situation on the nearly lawless frontier for a young mother, yet she absorbs its great freedom and rejects the seal of fate. She will not let her position determine whom she wants to be, what she wants to do, where she wants to live, what she will believe. In this regard, there is much Sharon in Sophie; as Butala (2010b: p. 81) admitted to Hancock, though she misses Peter “terribly,” “I love the freedom of not having a husband,” for “I like to be able to make my own choices, go where I want to go, set my own limits.... Now I get to choose what I want.”

One can find an autofictional antecedent to *Wild Rose* in *Upstream: “Le pays d’en haut”* (Butala, 1991), a novel in which Butala explores her mixed linguistic, religious, and cultural heritage, for her father was French Canadian and Catholic and her mother Scottish Irish and Protestant (though likely if nominally “Catholic” for the sake of the marriage). In *Upstream*, Chloe Sutherland (whose paternal family name is Le Blanc, the same as Butala’s) has the same hybrid upbringing, about which she is ambivalent. At times, Chloe longs to reconnect with her French Catholic heritage, but she is no longer able to speak French, and she is no longer a practising Catholic. In her younger days, she was “proud” of her Catholicism (p. 70) even though her relatives on her mother’s side thought it “a bizarre and improper thing to be” (p. 71) and even though “Confession had always terrified her” (p. 127). Now “a grown and skeptical woman” (p. 127) living in Saskatoon, she does not pray or go to Mass, for she is “uncomfortable in the religion of her people, yet unable to accept any other” (p. 194). Religious symbols such as the crucifix are still “familiar” to her (p. 70), and on a trip back to her French-speaking hometown of St. Laurent (near Batoche) she does attend Mass to humour her father (though she does not take communion), and later as he is in a coma from severe head trauma Chloe is comforted by the presence and prayer of a priest and even prays herself briefly. With the sudden passing of her

⁴ For Butala, her mother was “absent emotionally” (Reid, 2008: p. 76), and she also mentioned to Reid that “she had not felt loved as a child” (p. 76), so perhaps the grandmother-granddaughter relationship in *Wild Rose* is modelled on the mother-daughter relationship that Butala experienced. As she notes in *The Perfection of the Morning*, her mother was also “strict and rather formidable” (Butala, 1994: p. 29), and their relationship was “never very satisfactory” (p. 81).

father, and the certain breakdown of her marriage, though, her conflicted relationship with religion likely will not improve. There is even the hint near the end of the novel that Chloe, like her friend Alex, “won’t be going in[to] any more churches” (p. 244). Like Chloe, Butala outgrew the Catholic religion of her youth. As Reid (2008: p. 211, 280) notes, Butala “abandoned religious belief in her teens” and “has not been a church attendee as an adult.” She rejected “Christian orthodoxy” partly because she rejected “patriarchal authority” (p. 201) and the notion of an omnipotent God; instead, she accepted a numinous connection with nature, “whose rhythms are in harmony with those of her female self” (p. 200).

Sophie and Pierre in *Wild Rose* seem to be modelled loosely on the minor characters Celestine and Pierre (again the name Peter) in *Upstream*, the great-aunt and great-uncle of Chloe, about whom she reads in her grandmother’s diary. At the turn of the twentieth century in Quebec, young Celestine and Pierre quickly marry, sell most of their possessions, leave their families behind, and head west by train to homestead near St. Laurent (see Butala, 1991: pp. 181-182). Sophie and Pierre do likewise, though Butala has them heading west roughly fifteen years earlier and not to *le pays d’en haut* but to the bald prairie. Indeed, she could not have sent them to the St. Laurent region since it contains a transplanted French-speaking and Catholic community, the very patriarchal and intransigent society from which Sophie longs to escape.

3. An Existential Perspective

My close reading of *Wild Rose* occurs within the context of existential philosophy because it applies so well to the novel, at least as I read it. Scholarly articles to date on Butala’s work have focused on her notion of nature as presented in *The Perfection of the Morning* (see Calder, 2002; Kamboureli, 2001; Lousley, 2001); on her environmental advocacy for native prairie ecosystems (see Harrison, 2009; Kerber, 2003); and on the numerous and contested binaries in her work, such as nature/culture or country/city (see Adam, 1998; Harrison, 2016). Perspectives on Butala’s work have been deconstructive, environmental, feminist, and postcolonial, but they have not been existential, likely because her work prior to *Wild Rose* would not support such a reading. To date, I have not located any scholarly articles on *Wild Rose* itself.

At the start of the novel, Sophie stands on the doorstep of her settler’s shack, certainly a liminal space, clearly a moment in her present that implicates her past and complicates her future. It is a moment of anguish, reflection, uncertainty, possibility. Somewhere beyond that threshold is Pierre, who has been gone for a couple of days, ostensibly to the frontier village of Bone Pile—named after the nearby “mountain” of “bleached and broken” bison bones gathered from the prairie (Butala, 1994: p. 56)—ten miles away to get a part for his binder fixed. Is he drunk? Is he hurt? Is he dead? In their fourth summer on their homestead, has he had enough of frontier farming and abandoned his young wife and their

young son, Charles, the harvest of their sixty-acre wheat crop only half done? Sophie nearly collapses in the doorway as she suddenly understands that “*Pierre wasn't coming back. Pierre had left them*” (p. 12). Worse, because he has taken “the team and wagon and not his beloved saddle horse,” she reasons that “He has taken a woman with him,” likely south across the recently established and poorly guarded border into the United States (p. 13). Worse yet, a man—one Walter Champion, a land speculator—soon rides up in a buggy to inform Sophie that he is the new owner of the homestead—lock, stock, and barrel. She is now both abandoned and destitute. As the novel unfolds, Sophie is put to the test, severely, and is able to pass it, perfectly, by coming to accept responsibility for her choices and actions and their results: that is, her new situation. She becomes an authentic existential heroine—one of Butala’s strongest characters—by confronting and transcending this predicament, not succumbing to or escaping from it; Sophie has not only the freedom but also the courage to step off the threshold and into her future.

A basic existential tenet is our freedom to make choices, to take actions, at least insofar as our particular situations and abilities allow. In many ways, a ninety-year-old person is more constrained in making choices and taking actions than a twenty-year-old person, yet a nonagenarian might choose to go sky diving, or bungee jumping, or whitewater rafting, whether the outcome is thrilling or fatal. For Mathieu Delarue, the teacher of philosophy in *The Age of Reason*, the first volume of Jean-Paul Sartre’s trilogy *Roads to Freedom*, the main goal in life is “to retain my freedom” (Sartre, 1985: p. 107): that is, his personal agency to “do what he liked” (p. 242). Mathieu believes that he is “free in every way” (p. 242), “free and alone, without assistance and without excuse, ...condemned for ever to be free” (p. 243). His pupil Boris shares that view: for him, freedom means that he should “do what he wants to do, to think whatever he likes, to be accountable to no one but himself, to challenge every idea and every person” (p. 138).

Ultimately, though, we are responsible for the consequences of our choices and actions (as Sophie learns), whether good or bad. Jacques, the brother of Mathieu, reminds him that freedom entails “frankly confronting situations” into which one has “deliberately entered...and accepting all one’s responsibilities” (Sartre, 1985: p. 107). Simply put, in the existential worldview, “There is no escape from freedom or responsibility” (Solomon & McDermid, 2011: p. 349). Or, as Thomas Flynn (2006: Preface) says, “We are born biological beings but we must become existential individuals by accepting responsibility for our actions.” Or, as the Anarchist puts it in *Clockwork Angels: The Novel*, “If we’re free to do whatever we want, we are responsible to no one but ourselves” (Anderson, 2012: p. 137).

This is especially so if we side with Friedrich Nietzsche, the putative architect of atheistic existential philosophy (the acknowledged designer of the theistic counterpart is Søren Kierkegaard). In the mid-1880s (just when Sophie and

Pierre are taking up their homestead), Nietzsche (2018: p. 134) was announcing the death of God in Europe—“God is dead! God remains dead!”—at the hands of “the most murderous of all murderers”: that is, atheists who had been swayed by modern science. For Nietzsche, “The greatest event of recent times—...that the belief in the Christian God has become untenable—has already begun to cast its first shadows over Europe” (p. 225). What he meant was that “the idea of God is an idea whose time has come and gone—or at any rate...is on its way out” (Schacht, 2012: p. 117). Theists would protest, of course, and Nietzsche (2018: p. 121) allowed that, “given the ways of men [and presumably women]” (i.e., the need for some people to believe in God), “perhaps for millennia to come there will be caves in which His shadow will be shown.” For Nietzschean followers though, with God dead, there are not ten or any other number of commandments handed down from on high for us to follow. Values and morals are human constructs and change with time. Living is choosing: what is right and what is wrong, how to enhance our lives, how to better the lives of others too, how to prevent the nihilism that can arise in a world devoid of absolutes. Existing is *becoming*, always stepping off the open threshold, for we can never *be* for long given the flux of life, the march of time, both birth and death, both gain and loss, and for Nietzsche it is vital that we embrace or affirm these elements of existence. We have to live life such as it is.

For Sartre, our profound freedom⁵ implies that “existence precedes essence,” a well-known phrase that he used to indicate that we are not predestined to become what we are at any given moment. First we exist; then we become. To believe in fate is to accept that we cannot be other than what we have become or will become. But selfhood is temporary, always changing, in a world bound by time (as for Nietzsche), and “...I *am* not the self which I will be,” one reason being simply the time lag between my self now and my self then (Sartre, 1992: p. 68). For Sartre, quoting and translating G.W.F. Hegel, “Essence is what has been” (p. 72); for the Anarchist, “*I am what my life has made me*” (Anderson, 2012: p. 104). It is what Sophie was before stepping onto the threshold, which is not what she will be after stepping off of the threshold. Her essence, her selfhood, changes as her circumstances change based upon the choices that she makes and the actions that she takes. As Mathieu understands, “every day ha[s] a fresh future” (Sartre, 1985: p. 207). According to Butala (2010b: p. 81), the “battle,” then, is “to make ourselves real in a universe where we used to be someone and are not that person anymore.”

Moreover, “we are challenged to own up to our self-defining choices [and actions]” (Flynn, 2006: p. 64). Just as we are autonomous beings, so too we are responsible beings. “Own it,” we might say nowadays, admit that our choices and actions have defined us and will do so in the future. To do so is to live authentically, with integrity, in “good faith,” as Sartre would have it, a central virtue in

⁵ For Nietzsche, it is less the case that one has free will or not and more the case that one has strong will or not to struggle, to experiment, to surmount hurdles, and doing so gives one a “sense of freedom” (Hatab, 2012: p. 145). Sophie has that “strong will.”

existential philosophy. Any effort to flee from “the anguish of our freedom” (Flynn, 2006: p. 72) and thus our responsibility for our decisions is an instance of “bad faith,” the opposite term used by Sartre, which we might more commonly understand as self-deception, “living a lie” (Flynn, 2006: p. 64), inauthenticity. “The devil made me do it,” “That’s just human nature,” and “I’m destined to be this way” are feeble excuses scorned in existential thinking. Bad faith is not simply a matter of being ignorant or mistaken; it is purposeful deception. As Sartre (1992: p. 87) puts it, a person in bad faith is a liar who “actually is in complete possession of the truth which he [or she] is hiding,” not only from himself or herself but also from others. As Reid (2008: p. 211) notes, Butala is aware of “the danger of self-deception,” and she strove to tell the truth about herself and to think and live for herself, not for her mother or husband while they were alive.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, women—likely even more so in Sophie’s era—have been especially susceptible to bad faith given their status as “the second sex” in society (less so nowadays of course). They can succumb to bad faith by “attempting to escape the risk and anguish of freedom by assigning absolute value to the existence of another” (Arp, 2012: p. 258), typically a man or God (also, apparently, a man), allowing that other to define their identities. In *Wild Rose* (Butala, 2015), “lovesick” Sophie (p. 42), full of “girlish nonsense” in her late teens (p. 393), approaches the precipice of bad faith because she is completely invested in Pierre until his abrupt disappearance pulls her back from the brink to face her shocking situation. She does so directly.

The existential notion that we “exist in-situation”—in the contexts of our particular circumstances—applies to Sophie, as to all of us, and “this situation is fundamentally ambiguous and unstable” (Flynn, 2006: p. 65, 99), hence the idea of becoming more than the concept of being. Two terms are important here, both from Sartre: “facticity,” basically “the givens [or facts] of our situation” (Flynn, 2006: pp. 65-66), which include—among other aspects—race, gender, well-being, education, nationality, and religiosity; “transcendence,” basically “the takens of our situation, namely how we face up to this facticity” (Flynn, 2006: p. 66), what we intend to do—if anything at all—about our lives. Transcendence implies reaching beyond or looking ahead, past what now is (the actual) to what might be (the possible). So it is bad faith to deny the reality of facticity (I am not this way/self) or the possibility of transcendence (I will not change at all). We are what we have become, but we can become other than what we are. Until we die, we are always between past and future, in process, an ongoing story or unfinished puzzle, always standing on the doorstep but able to step off it. This is the rudimentary ambiguity of our lives. We exist in the three tenses of past, present, and future, “always emergent within a dynamic of life forces” (Hatab, 2012: p. 144). The good news for the existential protagonist of *Wild Rose* is that, “Whatever our situation, it always includes the possibility of moving beyond it” (Flynn, 2006: p. 67). Like any situated human, Sophie just has to figure out how to do that.

4. Facticity in *Wild Rose*

So—if God has perished or nearly so, and Pierre has vanished and surely so—is not Sophie now free to choose her way forward? But just how did she get to that point of standing on the doorstep waiting for Pierre? In other words, we need to delineate her facticity in order to comprehend her transcendence, to perceive the choices and actions open to her at that point, in late August 1887, when she is just twenty-four years old, suddenly a single mother without any means, mostly a francophone (ex-)Catholic in mostly an anglophone Protestant area,⁶ married to Pierre for life until he dies or the Catholic Church annuls their marriage, and deeply estranged from her faraway family. Any woman without the hardiness of the “wild rose” would surely falter in such adverse conditions and succumb to bad faith of one sort or another. Sophie does not.

In *Wild Rose* (Butala, 2015), newlyweds Sophie and Pierre leave their homes in rural Quebec (near Sherbrooke) in the spring of 1884 to head west by train to the District of Assiniboia in the North-West Territories (or what would become the southernmost portion of Saskatchewan in 1905). As they are about to depart, a young priest terms their undertaking a “foolish venture” in “*la région sauvage*,” and he claims that they are forsaking their fatherland and must not forget their people, their church, their language (p. 23). His impromptu homily has no effect on Sophie, for she is determined to flee the pertinacious Catholicism of her village and the rigid control of her grandparents, with whom she has lived since her parents died when she was young. She is intent on creating “a new life in a new place” (p. 380).

Growing up, Sophie has “to answer to God every single day” (p. 17), and for her there is “[a]ltogether too much church” (p. 213). She attends a convent school in which she hates the nuns and “the stupid girls” (p. 86) who have the “pious demeanour” that she does not (p. 89). It is “a joy” to her when she is “at last finished with the convent,” “that gloomy building,” for it has formed some of the strongest links in “the chains” of her life in Quebec (p. 182). Assuredly Sophie will not become a nun, for “the last thing” that she wants is “a life of piety and service” (p. 187). Simply put, she is not “nun material” (p. 186).

Sophie also finds the house of her grandparents, Alphonse and Henriette Charron (upright people, business owners, respected citizens), similarly prison-like. She is “sentenced” on Sunday afternoons to her bedroom (p. 191), “where she is supposed to read religious books or tracts” (p. 76), and the “gloomy” dining room in which she has rule-bound meals is no better (p. 78). Although growing up she has some fondness for her grandfather, she has none for her grandmother, actually her step-grandmother, “that black-gowned shadow” (p. 87) for whom she has only contempt. Her grandmother clearly wishes that Sophie lived elsewhere, but her grandfather allows her to stay until she is mar-

⁶ Catholicism, Sophie believes, “whether renounced or not,” is something that the British Protestants can “smell” on her and the few other Catholics in the region (Butala, 2015: p. 323). Her *différence* is palpable.

ried. Once she becomes eighteen, she is of “marriageable” age, and she fears that her grandparents will force her to marry as “a good way to get rid of her” (p. 187). Her grandfather proposes three suitable young men, other than Pierre of course, but Sophie rejects each one and marries Pierre to escape from that stifling environment (her grandfather has died by this point).⁷

Pierre might feel a pang of guilt as they depart for the west, “But Sophie did not wave again, nor did she look back” (p. 24). That is a rule of living for Butala (2010b: p. 80): “[D]on’t look back.... Don’t dwell on the past.” Headstrong as always, Sophie has made her choice and turns her face west. Her recalcitrance is existential, and Sophie can be seen as a “free spirit” who neither feels herself to be nor wants herself to be part of “the herd” (both terms that Nietzsche uses) in rural Quebec and longs to flee from it, to set herself above or “apart from ‘the mass’ of all-too-human humanity” (Schacht, 2012: p. 130). As she admits in *Wild Rose*, her life is “privileged” (Butala, 2015: p. 186), her bourgeois grandparents employing both “a cook and a housekeeper, her only duties to attend school and church” (p. 213). But that life is not for her. Indeed, “the existentialist tradition...was uniformly critical of bourgeois society with its penchant for conformity and material comfort, its pursuit of security and aversion to risk, and its unimaginative conservatism” (Flynn, 2006: pp. 81-82). For Nietzsche, in a world in which God has been laid to rest, in which naturalistic becoming—“the negative and unstable conditions of existence”—triumphs over spiritualistic being—“the governance or exclusion of...[those] conditions” (Hatab, 2012: p. 138)—those with a strong mind and a creative character are preferred, for they are willing to undertake bold initiatives and forsake the conformist protection of the herd. That is precisely what Sophie does in *Wild Rose* (Butala, 2015), and after more than three years on the prairie—despite the severe climate in both winter and summer, the “plagues” and “swarms” of pesky insects, and the risky and lonely life of homesteading—she confirms that “it was a life of their own,” which “they could never have had in the comfortable, God-loving village from which they had come” (p. 11), “what she was escaping” (p. 44). With Pierre gone, she might be alone on the doorstep, but she is far from the oppression of the herd and well on her way to becoming a Nietzschean heroine.

On seeing the prairie landscape for the first time, “a space so vast,” Sophie becomes “dizzy” (p. 30). She has left behind the vertical world of her upbringing—a world of restrictions or “enclosures” such as forests and fences, convents and churches, bedrooms and classrooms, even whalebone corsets, which she decides she will no longer wear—and entered the horizontal world of her remaking, “the endless meadow,” her term for the prairie (p. 30). They arrive in Swift Current in May to register for their quarter-section homestead some distance

⁷ Sophie is allowed to marry Pierre because the local priest believes that she is pregnant, perhaps a notion concocted by her grandmother to hoodwink him and thereby get rid of her; whereas Sophie never thought of becoming pregnant as a way to ensure her marriage to Pierre, she is convinced that her grandmother is “setting a trap” (Butala, 2015: p. 375), into which Sophie is only too happy to fall. Not until the end of the novel does she learn that Pierre felt “forced into marrying” her because of this deception and the priest’s anger (p. 387).

southwest of that nascent village. Sophie has never seen “such a skyline” against which there is not “a single tree” or “a church spire” (p. 33).

The new landscape suggests immense freedom, which she embraces instantly. It is really “the promise of freedom” (p. 22) that Sophie seeks by heading west, both freedom from her difficult past and freedom to recreate herself, and in her first summer on the prairie she is “fearless” and has that “first taste of freedom” (p. 10, 11). The newly opened frontier is a place where people can start over (a trope in much prairie fiction). She can remake herself on the boundless prairie, which like other frontiers follows “a few basic principles” and offers “[t]he sense of untrammelled freedom and a wild independence” (Grey Owl, 1999: p. 17, 19).⁸ In *Wild Rose* (Butala, 2015), when Sophie and Pierre first arrive at their homestead, “the entire area [is] nearly empty of other people” (p. 8), including its original Indigenous inhabitants, who are “mostly settled” on reserves by that time (p. 230), and its Métis bison hunters. This is just the way that Sophie wants it (and even better that there are few French Canadians around, though ironically their neighbour happens to be the Beausoleil family); there are still some grizzlies, cougars, and wolves but few people. Butala realizes that “prairie historians” will “object that in the early 1880s there were virtually no settlers [though some ranchers] in the area in question,” and her “only answer” in *Wild Rose* is that it is “a novel” ([p. 397]). According to Barry Potyondi (1995), the census of 1891 for the sub-district of Swift Current showed only 320 people in an area of 15,904 square miles, a density of “about one person per fifty square miles” (p. 64), and that “density” would have been even less in 1884. Thus, to grant Sophie the great freedom that she desires (and could not have in a more settled region), Butala places the young couple about a quarter century earlier than the historical settlers in the infamous Palliser Triangle.

This part of the west got its name from Captain John Palliser, who led the British North American Exploring Expedition from 1857 to 1860 from the Red River Colony west to and through the Rocky Mountains. He considered what would become southwestern Saskatchewan and southeastern Alberta (below the so-called fertile belt) too arid and sandy for successful cultivation of crops, “unfitted in all probability for agriculture” (Owram, 1992: p. 67; see also p. 109, 153). And the “lack of water and timber would make settlement difficult,” Irene Spry (1995: p. 295) notes, “if not impossible.” The Palliser Triangle was no garden, no Eden, suited more to cattle grazing than to frontier farming. Yet boosters and expansionists downplayed the concerns of Palliser and others in order to attract settlers to the region, and “Farmers began to arrive in 1908,” Potyondi

⁸ We might think here too of the forest frontier of the Puritan settlement at Boston 250 years earlier as depicted in *The Scarlet Letter*, in which another strong female character, Hester Prynne, seeks to remake herself and her secret lover, the guilt-ridden and unhealthy minister Arthur Dimmesdale. She urges him to go farther “into the wilderness,” which “will show no vestige of the white man’s tread,” for “There thou art free!” (Hawthorne, 1992: p. 193). In “the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region” (p. 197), they will be beyond the religious repression of the settlement and can remake themselves as they see fit. Alas, Dimmesdale dies before their plan can be realized.

(1995: p. 6) indicates: “The most marginal croplands of southwestern Saskatchewan, situated in and around today’s Grasslands National Park, were among the last to be settled in the West and among the first to be forsaken.” Pierre mirrors the pattern in that sense. Perhaps in *Wild Rose* Butala (2015) also wanted to place Sophie and Pierre in that empty place at that early time in order to heighten the romantic and dangerous nature of their venture, and she mentions “[a]ll that trouble” of the Riel Resistance a year after they arrive and the possibility that Pierre might leave and fight on the side of the Métis, even though they are far from the conflict (p. 38, 230). It turns out that other trouble is closer to home and lures Pierre away.

After he has fled, the bachelor Harry Adamson suggests when he meets Sophie at night on the prairie near Bone Pile and wants to have sex with her that “People come West so they can get a new start. Out here people don’t keep on living by the same old rules” (p. 224).⁹ He wants her to ditch the rules with which she grew up, for she is now—though still married to a man who has left her until he dies or their marriage is somehow annulled—in a place without church or priest. She is now on the prairie. As Nietzsche says, “The ideas of the herd should rule in the herd—but not reach out beyond it” (qtd. Hatab, 2012: p. 145). In *Wild Rose* (Butala, 2015), Sophie soon succumbs and justifies her rendezvous: “[W]hen I left that life behind, didn’t I also leave behind the rules in which I was raised?” (p. 224). They are “such unbearable rules” (p. 226), and Sophie gladly discards them.

In this new landscape of freedom, it does not take her long to abandon her religion. In her first night on the open landscape, in fact, as Sophie marvels at the number and brightness of stars, which she never seemed to notice back in rural Quebec (cf. “the blackest of nights, not a star shining” [p. 81]), she has a powerful numinous connection with the natural world. It is signature Butala. Such an expansive and “glittering dome,” Sophie muses, could not “hold so puny a thing as a heaven, would [not] tolerate a silly human paradise” (p. 42). And “In that instant she disbelieved.... Beside this wonder, she felt the church, its teachings, its power, slipping away from her grasp.... So this, *this*, she thought, is *the West*” (p. 42). For her, it is de-deified nature, proper nature, purged of the “shadows of God” that have “darken[ed] our understanding” of the natural world for centuries (Nietzsche, 2018: p. 122). Her instant apostasy frightens her, as it should, for her life up to that point has been governed by God and his churches with their priests and his convents with their nuns. Sophie could attempt to flee from her newfound freedom, for who now will guide her? The shadow lurks briefly in *Wild Rose* (Butala, 2015), but she quickly recalls “who she was, where she was” (p. 42). In this endless landscape, in her “new, free life” (p. 238), she will guide herself.

The shadow appears again in Bone Pile during her first sleepless night there after Pierre has left Sophie. In “near-despair,” she tries to recite the Lord’s

⁹ Campion later goes further: “It is the West,” he enlightens Sophie. “No rules apply” (Butala, 2015: p. 356).

Prayer, but “The words dried in her mouth,” and she cannot finish it (p. 155). In fact, “for some years now,” she has “merely gone through the motions” (p. 155), a spiritual automaton, no longer a true believer in God or the church after that first night on the prairie and especially after Pierre flees.¹⁰ “[W]here had all that talk about faithfulness, about sacrifice, about prayer, gotten her?” Sophie wonders (p. 286), and at first she blames God—or at least his ghost—for her devastating predicament: “[S]uddenly, one day, God struck out and in one crushing blow erased all those happy years...” (p. 291). She does not know what she has done to deserve such misfortune. But that is existence, full of change, loss, pain, death.

Sophie takes comfort in the absence of a church in Bone Pile and does not think that “she could walk through the door of a church again now that she had some idea of the freedom without one or without a priest keeping a watchful eye on her every move” (p. 163). Indeed, “Out here it seemed that people got along fairly well without churches and priests to rant, painting terrifying pictures of eternal hellfire, screaming of damnation” (p. 271; see also p. 300).

Although there is no church in the meagre village (nor a tree or a school), there does seem to be a Methodist minister—a Mr. Oswald, a “misguided upstart” from the Catholic perspective (p. 273)—who holds services occasionally in the parlour of the house of the local lawyer and his wife until the tiny congregation has enough money to build a church (p. 284). Recognizing Sophie as a lapsed Catholic, Oswald gives her a copy of the Bible, which in her former life she knew only through the mediation of priests and nuns; given the woeful lack of books in Bone Pile, she actually reads it, and aloud to Charles, “with a horrified semi-reverence and with the deepest interest” (pp. 299-300). Oswald also invites her to attend the Methodist services; her internal response is “*Never, in a million years*” (p. 299). Conversion to Protestantism is not an option. For her, as for most Catholics, she thinks, it is “Catholicism or nothing,” and “It shocked her to realize she was leaning toward nothing” (p. 300). Although Sophie feels “strongly” “the lack of religious training or even church going” in Bone Pile, after having grown up in a community imbued with both, she makes “no move to change” (p. 300). She will find her way alone under the prairie sky.

Sophie does not fall prey to the nihilism that can result in a world post-God, with whose death can come the loss of truth, the demise of meaning, the vanishing of coherence, especially for someone like her raised in a culture so invested in religious tradition. Nietzsche had much to say about this problem and how best to overcome it, how to find “a way beyond nihilism” (Macquarrie, 1986: p. 32), for to succumb to it could be life destroying. “[E]ither we collapse into nihilism,” Nietzsche argued, “or we rethink the world in naturalistic terms” (Hatab, 2012: p. 140). If the divine basis of meaning was crumbling, if long-held

¹⁰The shadow lurks from time to time throughout the novel, as when Sophie, subconsciously, prays or crosses herself (Butala, 2015: p. 174, 301), in the latter instance “shak[ing] her fingers as if she had burned them,” or when she worries about not being able to confess her “mortal sin” with Adamson, “childhood teachings rearing up to overwhelm her” (p. 271).

Christian values were failing, then the only alternative was to seek the “enhancement” of “this life in this world” (Schacht, 2012: p. 119). What else to do if one does not believe in another life in another world? It is indeed such an improvement of her life in the here and now—that is, the transcendence of her facticity—that Sophie seeks by moving west in the first place.

That improvement does not come easily for Sophie and Pierre in *Wild Rose* (Butala, 2015), and their first year on the homestead is “so hard” (p. 148) as they live in a tent until they have their shack built and struggle with all of the daily chores and crop planting—“the always endless, often cruel work of the homestead” (p. 181). In summer, Sophie has an extremely difficult time planting a garden in the hard-packed and weed-filled soil. Even more difficult is winter, and a severe blizzard causes her to wonder “for the first time” if she has made a serious—potentially “life-threatening”—mistake in coercing Pierre to come west with her (p. 144). Here there is no one, and no God, around to help them; they are on their own. In the words of Albert Camus (1985: p. 117) in his classic existential novel *The Outsider*, “the benign indifference of the world” is suddenly real to them, though in *Wild Rose* it is not so “benign.” “Now she knew that she and Pierre were...nothing out here...in thrall to the...implacable force that nature was showing itself to be” (Butala, 2015: p. 144). They survive the blizzard, of course, and in the summer the heat and bugs and other torments, and though the work is hard and their money—more than one thousand dollars brought from the east (p. 151)—has run out Sophie claims that “For her to come West had been an escape, and all the hardship—still—[is] worth it” (p. 148).

5. Transcendence in *Wild Rose*

But then Pierre disappears, the moment of crisis, and once more Sophie must find a way to improve her situation. More than three years after her first night on the prairie, she steps off the threshold to greet Champion to see what her future holds. Presumably he brings news of Pierre. He does. It is not the news that she wants to hear. Just as Champion is shocked to hear that Sophie is Pierre’s wife, so too she is shocked to hear that he is the new owner of the homestead, “Even the contents of your house,” he tells her (Butala, 2015: p. 49). He assumed that the young woman in the wagon with Pierre in Bone Pile when they signed the papers for the sale was his wife, for Pierre told him that “farming was not for him,” that “he was leaving with his wife,” and that “he wanted to sell fast” (p. 50). Neither Champion nor the lawyer was the wiser. Because “the dower law” was recently struck down in the North-West Territories, Pierre could sell the homestead without the consent or signature of Sophie, leaving her with nothing (p. 60), even though she too has worked hard to improve it.

Again it would be easy for Sophie to succumb to bad faith, ask her grandmother or older brothers in Montreal for money to return by train to Quebec, and take up her old ways, but she does not. (It is highly doubtful that any money would be forthcoming from her grandmother.) Sophie will not even tell them

about her predicament and give them the satisfaction of having been right about Pierre all along. “No, appealing to her family would be her last resort before starvation,” she decides (p. 63). That is one strong will. A return to Quebec strikes “no chord of joy” in Sophie, “the opposite, rather, and fear and disgust” (p. 14). Her new home is the beautiful and limitless prairie, in which “now, for the first time in her life, [she is] fully alive, and wide awake” (p. 129). As Sophie begins to fathom her facticity, a dire situation indeed, she resolves to transcend it on her own, and an image of that prairie arises unbidden in her mind, as if to guide her forward.

After gathering a few personal items for herself and her son, Sophie asks Campion to take them to Bone Pile, where she will determine the remaining options open to her. First she sees the lawyer, who informs her that she has no legal recourse in the matter of the sale. That door is closed. Then she sees the Mountie, who instructs her that he cannot pursue Pierre because he has not committed a crime. That door too is closed. Then Campion makes “a proposal” that Sophie return to the homestead and act as his cook and maid, an offer that sickens her, for she knows what the lecher really wants (p. 67). She slams that door shut. To these men on the frontier, Sophie is “a mere woman, and a penniless one at that” (p. 68), but little do they realize her independence, her tenacity, her resourcefulness. It is unlikely that they have encountered a woman of her existential ability.

Running out of options, becoming desperate, Sophie fears that she might have to become “a bought-and-paid-for bride” to some local rancher/farmer (which cannot happen as long as she remains married to Pierre) or, worse, “a *putain*” (prostitute) (p. 153). She goes to the boarding house run by the widow Charlotte Emery, from whom she learns that Pierre indeed ran off with a young French Canadian woman from the village, Marguerite Tremblay, “who was perhaps seventeen” and that her father went in search of them but returned, unable to find them (p. 73). Sophie is mortified, for everyone in such a small community will undoubtedly know her situation, as Mrs. Emery does, and to Sophie “This was worse than the judging eyes, the censure, of the village she’d come from” (p. 73). She will be the subject of gossip, possibly ridicule, but she will hold her head high and make her way. Again, if God has died and Pierre has vanished, Sophie is now free “[t]o re-create herself” (p. 75) on her own terms. Once again she will step not backward but forward, looking ahead to her future and new self, embracing the potential of transcendence, even picturing herself in a new town “where no one knew her or what had happened to her” (p. 74), where she could saunter proudly down the street. “What began now would be her first trials at managing her own life, in her own way” (p. 155). No more God or priest or nun, no more Pierre, certainly no more grandmother. Sophie now welcomes the radical freedom of existence and does not shy away from it. As she later tells Adamson, “I will solve this problem myself” (p. 172).

Sophie gets to work, literally, in the boarding house to earn her keep there. And, to get a little money for herself and her son, she sells some “trinkets” (p.

167): her brooch (“a wedding gift” [p. 168]) and her wedding ring (she has no need for that now), symbols of her former self and former life. Her earrings she keeps. For the other two items, she receives twenty-five dollars. She also asks the local lawyer if he knows anyone who might want to buy her fine china.

Next, to support herself, Sophie ponders starting a small tea house or café, complete with an outhouse for women since “In Bone Pile there weren’t even bushes to hide behind where a woman might relieve herself” (p. 233). Women from the country have to sneak into someone’s private biffy. Sophie gets the chance when Adamson goes back east to Winnipeg to work for the winter and rents his modest house to her, to be paid for in the spring only if she makes money in her venture.

Since Adamson intends to return in the spring to live in his house and work his homestead again, Sophie must decide either to remain in Bone Pile and run her café in another building—which she does for a while in a rented house/shack—or to move on to a bigger community with more opportunity. She does not want to be “trapped” in Bone Pile, and sometimes she has longed to move elsewhere, “anywhere that wasn’t this collection of shabby huts” (p. 326, 323; see also p. 340, 345). The village offers little to Charles, and Sophie does not want to marry Harry—should her marriage to Pierre be annulled—and end up working again on the land “like a slave” and living “in poverty” (p. 363). For these reasons, she decides not to buy Mrs. Emery’s large house, in which she could run her café; Campion will likely purchase the house and turn it into a brothel, and Sophie will feel some guilt should this happen (see pp. 340-341). Yet her desire to leave Bone Pile for good is “growing stronger by the minute” (p. 354).

Once Sophie gets over her shock and fear, her anger with Pierre for his actions, she has time at the boarding house and her makeshift café to reflect on what happened to her, on where she went wrong, on why he left her and their young son. She has matured during her homesteading adventure, knows “a little of herself now” (p. 394), and she comes to accept responsibility for her choices and actions and their results. As long as Sophie blames God or Pierre, claiming that he was the “mistake” (p. 68), she exhibits bad faith, for really she has only herself to blame. For Sartre (1992: p. 89), “the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth.” Likely we all are wont to do this from time to time, for it is not easy to live authentically day by day; rather, we want to “put our best foot forward,” “save face,” and “be seen in the best light possible” (among other such platitudes). But Sophie eventually admits the “displeasing truth” about herself and begins to live authentically, becoming an “existential individual.”

Sophie finally realizes that Pierre did not share her idealistic view of the west. For her, it had romantic overtones (in *Wild Rose* [Butala, 2015], it is often *the West*, italicized and capitalized). It was a place where she was “filled with light and space, no longer her heavy, earthbound Québec self” (p. 33). It was the frontier of freedom, where their life was “their own, where no one made rules for

them, where they made their own decisions, their own choices, and built their own life together, stick by stick, furrow by furrow” (p. 149). Naively she saw homesteading as “merely a game that she could end with a snap of her fingers” (p. 171). In fact, “she never saw how *real* it was. But Pierre did; *he saw the truth of it from the start*” (p. 171). Pierre was far less invested in their radical move than Sophie. For him, the west was simply land, a lot of land, some of which he could have claimed as his own farm had they proved up. When they reached Swift Current and stepped off the train, “the glint she hadn’t ever seen in his eyes at the mention of *the West* was there at last” (p. 33).

But that gleam was soon gone. Butala (2010b: p. 77) has a pragmatic view of the life of the homesteader; as she said to Hancock, “the West is about *work*. It wasn’t thrills and excitement and racing around on horseback shooting things.... [I]t was 99 percent work.” Throughout *Wild Rose* (Butala, 2015) are indications, which Sophie cannot see at first or simply chooses to ignore, that Pierre was unsuited to “the always endless, often cruel work of the homestead” (p. 181) and wanted to return to Quebec. “He hated the hard labour of plowing virgin soil from sunrise to sundown; it troubled him deeply to see what the sun and constant wind were doing to his handsome face, how his hands were thickened and scarred” (p. 12). He was frequently exhausted and “full of barely suppressed anger” that sometimes “explode[d]” (p. 143). By their fourth summer of trying to prove up, “His complaints had been saying this—that he felt he had made a mistake, that he didn’t want the life of the settler-pioneer after all” (p. 230).

In fact, Pierre never wanted that life, never wanted to leave Quebec, and eventually Sophie realizes and acknowledges her part in having pressured him to come west (p. 60). She comes to accept that she coerced him to do so for her sake. When he learned that she was pregnant, he suggested that they return to Quebec, where she could get help with the delivery and they could have the baby “properly baptized” by a priest, but she was adamant: “I will never go back,” she exclaimed. Pierre sighed “loudly” and turned away from Sophie (p. 148). Indignant, she thought “Was he not the man for whom she had given up everything?” (p. 149). But she quickly admitted the falsehood, for really she was the one who wanted to escape from Quebec and come west (p. 181, 379). Back in Quebec, before they left, he even told her “I want to live here. I don’t want to leave everything behind!” (p. 243). So Pierre was the one who gave up “everything” for Sophie and became bitter.

She also blames herself—“that first, early error”—for refusing to go anywhere else than the vacant prairie: “She was the one who rejected going north to Prince Albert or further West and north to the [French] communities near Fort Edmonton” (p. 388). So, every time Pierre was so frustrated that he wanted to walk away from the homestead and return to Quebec, Sophie managed to persuade him to stay and carry on. However, “believing she was holding him there with her, she had convinced him only that she herself would never leave, and never let him leave” (p. 230). Did Pierre have no choice, then, but to ride away? Was he so angry with her that, rather than simply return to Quebec, he ran off to the Unit-

ed States with Marguerite just to spurn Sophie? On the day that he left, in fact, Pierre was so angry that he ignored their son and avoided looking at her (p. 9). He was done with them, the homestead, and the life of hard work. He will return to a landscape with trees and rivers and lakes, to his family and community, to the herd and an easier life.

There is a key passage in *Wild Rose* (p. 238) in which Sophie comes to accept that she is responsible for “her present situation”—“brought it on herself”—partly because of her “stubbornness” and partly because of “her failure to listen” to Pierre and his “outbursts” about the frustrations of homesteading. As she admits, “In her desire to fulfill her homesteader’s dream, in her great love of her new, free life on the Western prairie, she had blinded herself to Pierre’s needs and wishes.” She drove Pierre away. This awareness is surprising and disturbing, yet Sophie feels a sense of “strength,” for to accept that her choices and actions led to this “outcome” is to begin to move beyond it, to stop blaming God and Pierre for what happened, to step off the threshold and greet what awaits her. Life always involves this element of becoming.

Near the end of *Wild Rose*, Pierre suddenly reappears in Bone Pile, much to Sophie’s surprise and anguish, to say goodbye to her and tell her that he and Marguerite, with their newborn daughter, plan to head back east, where he will have his marriage to Sophie annulled, thus freeing him to marry Marguerite. His last words to Sophie are “You wanted the West, didn’t you? Now you *are* the West” (p. 388). That is, she is now free (p. 389), and when he leaves for the last time, with no apparent remorse for what he has done, she can “leave him behind” for good (p. 393). Sophie can even accept that Pierre likely did not love her as much as she loved him, or not at all, that “her dream of love” was just that, and that perhaps she was just “a prize” that he claimed for a while and then discarded (p. 389, 390).

Adding to her sense of freedom is the death of her grandmother, about which Sophie feels “no grief” (p. 392), for there was no love lost between them. She learns of the death from a letter from a bank in Montreal informing her that she has been left nothing from her grandmother’s estate, “hardly a surprise,” most of which has gone to the Catholic Church, “hardly a surprise” (p. 392). But Sophie knows that with money comes freedom (p. 389), and luckily for her, in the same packet, is a windfall, a draft for five hundred dollars from her more generous brother Guillame, some of the money that he inherited from their grandmother. So, with the money that Sophie has managed to save from her café earnings, she has nearly one thousand dollars (p. 392), enough for her to move to a larger community and re-establish herself. And she realizes that “from now on she must depend on no one but herself” (p. 394).

6. Conclusion: On the Threshold

At the end of *Wild Rose* (Butala, 2015), Sophie once again stands on the liminal space of a doorstep, this time of “the shabby rented house she called home” in Bone Pile (p. 394), and ponders her options. This is the perfect existential end-

ing, the moment of being, her facticity behind her, her transcendence before her. Conscious of her freedom, that her choices will lead to actions and results, good or bad, she feels existential anguish. Yet we know that Sophie—“No longer...that reckless, foolish girl she had been when she came West” (p. 304), her quondam self—will step off that threshold and into her next phase of life, whatever that might be, with more self-awareness and better decision making, thinking with less passion and more reason. She will not miss the village in which she has lived for the past year, neither liking it nor fitting in, though she will miss the prairie that she loved during her first summer on it. She has become the “wild rose” of the prairie that blooms in its merciless conditions. Existential protagonist Sophie shows that, in a post-religious or de-deified world, transcendence of facticity is possible without succumbing to bad faith. She learns to live her life authentically. She forestalls the nihilism that could result from her situation by facing it directly and seeking the enhancement of her life, the primary objective from a Nietzschean perspective, aided by freedom on the frontier.

Wild Rose—with its focus on the existential transformation of Sophie—thus marks a turn in Butala’s fiction. In her prior novels and stories, as in her non-fiction, Butala emphasized the beauty of the prairie and its living but fragile nature, along with the importance of our connection to and preservation of it because of the damage caused by overgrazing and greedy farming. And she highlighted binary distinctions such as city life (or person) versus country life (or person) and ranching (or rancher) versus farming (or farmer). Organized religion does not get a high mark in her work, but the abysmal assessment in *Wild Rose* is new, and the shackles of religion are gone. The turn toward atheistic existential philosophy in *Wild Rose*, I hope to have shown here, was prompted by the rather sudden death of Peter, which forced Butala to remake herself as she dealt with her fear, sorrow, and resentment of the teachings of her French Catholic upbringing. I therefore characterize the novel as existential autofiction, a genre that aided her in working, via young Sophie, through “the most tumultuous...time” of her life. Like Sophie, like all of us, Sharon Butala stands on the threshold day by day, free to make choices and take actions and live with their results.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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