NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN SINCLAIR ROSS'S **AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE**

Paul Denham

The significance of Sinclair Ross's first novel, *As For Me and My House* (1941), to the study of Canadian literature in English has frequently been observed. Sandra Djwa, for instance, says, "I fully agree with those critics who suggest that *As For Me and My House* is in the mainstream of the English Canadian novel . . . in nature, ethos and hero, Ross had captured all of these qualities which we attempt to invoke when we want to talk about Canadian writing."[1] For John Moss, the novel is "a haunting orchestration of so many of the themes and image and behavioral patterns that are prevalent in our fiction as to seem uncannily prescient of the Canadian experience."[2] Both Margaret Atwood and D. G. Jones, who approach the study of Canadian literature through patterns of themes and images, likewise find the novel central to many of their concerns. In fact, as Morton Ross has recently remarked, the novel's reputation has risen remarkably since 1957, when Roy Daniells wrote an Introduction to the New Canadian Library reprint.[3] Daniells saw it as important, but flawed in its dependence on repetitive detail.[4] Recent critics have praised it more highly; from Donald Stephens' cautious evaluation as "perhaps the best Canadian novel,"[5] we move to Wilfred Cude's

[1]Sandra Djwa, "No Other Way: Sinclair Ross's Stories and Novels," *Canadian Literature,* No. 47 (Winter 1971), 63. This essay, like those by Stephens and New quoted below, may also be found in *Writers of the Prairies,* ed. Donald G. Stephens (Vancouver: U.B.C. Press, 1973).

[2]John Moss, *Patterns of Isolation in English Canadian Fiction* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), p. 149.

[3]Morton Ross, "The Canonization of *As For Me and My House:* a Case Study," in *Figures in a Ground: Canadian Essays on Modern Literature Collected in Honor of Sheila Watson,* ed. Diane Bessai and David Jackel (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978), pp. 189-205.

[4]Roy Daniells, "Introduction" to Sinclair Ross, *As For Me and My House* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1957), pp. v-x.

[5]Donald Stephens, "Wind, Sun and Dust," *Canadian Literature,* No. 23 (Winter 1965), 17. Subsequent references are given in the text.

daring appraisal as "a Canadian work so finely structured that it invites comparison with fiction in the first rank of English literature."[6] As Morton Ross points out, this rise in reputation has been accompanied by a series of attacks on Mrs. Bentley, both as a character and as an unreliable narrator.

There are some very good reasons why the novel has come to be so important to the Canadian tradition. It is a study of the failed artistic imagination, and of an eroding puritanism; it is also, as D. G. Jones perceives, a good example of Frye's concept of the garrison mentality, in its exploration of the peculiarities of the Canadian experience of nature and its relation to civilization.[7] It is, then, a powerfully mythical novel in which many of the characteristic themes and attitudes of Canadian literature are sharply focused. Also, the patterns of imagery through which much of the novel's meaning is conveyed are densely and carefully worked, as David Stouck has noted.[8] If we approach the novel as a poem, through its imagery, or as a model for the Canadian identity, we are likely to find it a very important work indeed. And as a proto-feminist study of what happens to a woman who surrenders her identity to a man's creativity, it strikes a particularly responsive chord at the present time.

Yet *As For Me and My House* remains a profoundly puzzling book. The puzzlement that it provokes has sometimes been taken as a source of its power; W. H. New, for example, suggests that the confusing effect of the end of the novel is the result of careful control by Ross, who desires throughout an effect of ambivalence. He acknowledges, however, that "in presenting and exploring a single point of view, *As For Me and My House* runs the danger of seeming shallow, of allowing no aesthetic distance from which we can respond to the narrator as well as participate in her verbal reactions to the world."[9] The source of the ambiguity, then, is identified as the narrative technique. Stephens, who praises the novel highly, nevertheless acknowledges that Mrs. Bentley "does not reveal

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[6]Wilfred Cude, "Beyond Mrs. Bentley: a study of *As For Me and My House*," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 8 (February 1973), 18. Subsequent references are given in the text.

[7]D. G. Jones, *Butterfly on Rock: a Study of Themes and Images in Canadian Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), pp. 38-42.

[8]David Stouck, "The Mirror and the Lamp in Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*," *Mosaic*, 7 (Winter 1974), 141-150.

[9]W. H. New, "Sinclair Ross's Ambivalent World," *Canadian Literature*, No. 40 (Spring 1969), 31.

enough to the reader for him to deduce anything other than what she wishes him to deduce" (Stephens, p. 21). There is more than a suggestion in New and Stephens that the difficulties which the novel presents to the reader are effects not of an unusually subtle and complex narrative technique, but of an imperfectly handled one. The suggestion is worth pursuing. If we examine this technique carefully, it appears that Ross does not have his materials entirely under control. Related to the problem of Mrs. Bentley as narrator is the question of the realism of the novel; if we read the novel as a realistic, regional rendering of a particular time and place, the selection of details often contributes to a negative view of Mrs. Bentley's character. If we read it as a symbolic account — closer to *The Double Hook* than to *Fruits of the Earth* — Mrs. Bentley appears in a somewhat different light. Ross's mixing of these two modes causes further difficulties in assessing the novel's achievement.

In a taped interview with Earle Toppings, Ross has explained the genesis of the novel in these words:

> I was living in a small town, and the United Church minister thought that I might make a better minister than a banker, so he made the suggestion that was made to Philip — would you like to go in the church? And of course I said no, it didn't tempt me at all. But — and this is probably what they mean by a writer's mind — supposing somebody did accept that offer, and then he finds himself trapped.[10]

This implies that, at least in its initial conception, the story was supposed to be about Philip, the frustrated artist who is trapped inside the wrong profession, an uncomprehending and narrow society, and, perhaps, a bad marriage. A novelist's intentions, however, are not necessarily borne out by the novel he produces, and one of the most noteworthy things about recent critical response to the book is the frequency with which Mrs. Bentley has been identified as its main character.[11] In selecting Mrs. Bentley as his narrative consciousness, Ross has, intentionally or not, directed much of the reader's attention to her. The reader may find her sympathetic

[10]*Canadian Writers on Tape: Richler/Ross*, interviewed by Earle Toppings (Toronto: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, 1971).

[11]Significant exceptions to this statement are David Stouck's article, quoted above, and Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow," in Woodcock, ed., *A Choice of Critics: Selections from Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 53-76.

or repellent, or a mixture of the two. But the nature of the Bentley's marriage, in which Philip continually shuts his wife out, while she laments her inability to "possess"[12] him, means that, while we see Mrs. Bentley from the inside, as it were, we see Philip only from the outside.

Now it is true, as Wayne Booth warns in *The Rhetoric of Fiction,* that the process of getting "inside" a fictional character normally invites a certain amount of sympathy for that character even if he or she is not otherwise very admirable.[13] And if the narrator is unreliable, because stupid, confused, or morally corrupt in his judgements, we have the problem of penetrating the narrator's faulty vision in order to discern the truth. Yet if the narrator is unreliable, how do we know that anything he tells us is the truth? The process may lead to more confusion for the reader than was originally intended. This is what appears to have happened in *As For Me and My House.* There is, ultimately, no way of knowing what to make of Mrs. Bentley, and therefore no way of knowing what to make of her narrative.

The novel is told as if it were her diary; the entries are not usually made daily, but every few days. Each entry is dated in the evening, which suggests that she is writing them in the quiet hours just before retiring. There are frequent mentions of lamps and lamplight; oddly, however, there is never any mention of pens, paper, or of time spent writing (which must be extensive, since some of the entries are several pages long). All this labour seems to occupy neither time nor space. In most epistolary novels and diaristic accounts we are made so conscious of immediate experience that we are aware of things actually being written down; here we are not. Furthermore, the diary form means that a lot of necessary information is conveyed in a rather awkward manner. Is Mrs. Bentley really likely to write a summary of Philip's past life in her diary entry for the day they go for a walk in a spring snowstorm and watch a train pass? Not after twelve years of marriage, surely; in causing her to do it, Ross is straining at the limits of the convention. It is also odd that, although the diary covers about thirteen months, the events of the first six of those months occupy well over three-quarters of the

[12]Sinclair Ross, *As For Me and My House,* ed. with an introduction by Roy Daniells (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1957), pp. 64, 65, 75, 110. Subsequent references to this edition will be given in the text.

[13]Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 282,322.

space. Admittedly those six months are eventful ones, affording a lot to write about, while the final seven months consist mainly of peering out of the window at the snow and waiting for Judith's baby. But if there is less to write about, there is more time to write, and since Mrs. Bentley's accounts contain as much reflection as narrative, it seems strange that her reflectiveness should wither in the winter. Furthermore, if this really is supposed to be a written account, then Mrs. Bentley, the musician, also has talents as a writer, for the power of the descriptive passages cannot be denied. But this aspect of her artistry is never faced in the novel. The convention of the diary is thus handled somewhat awkwardly. Were it not for the dates at the head of each entry, it might be more satisfactory to think of the novel as an interrupted interior monologue.

Although it is unfair to criticize a writer for what he has excluded from his story, or not attempted, some of the things that are missing from Mrs. Bentley's account — things that we might reasonably expect to find there — are worthy of note in an effort to evaluate her narration. Although we assume that the novel is set in Saskatchewan, Ross, like his contemporaries Morley Callaghan and Irene Baird, carefully avoids locating his work in an identifiable Canadian context; perhaps this is why, as Dick Harrison notes, the novel ignores Saskatchewan's vigorous public life — the co-ops, the CCF, the Wheat Pool — altogether.[14] In certain respects it deserves the praise it has received for its virtues as a regionalist work — its evocation of the drought, poverty, and hopelessness of the 1930's on the prairies — yet in other respects it is conspicuously lacking in a sense of the complex texture of everyday life. Ross notes that the Bentleys do not have a radio (pp. 132-133), but readers may wonder why they never, unlike most rural people in the thirties, get invited to listen to anyone else's radio either. Nor do they seem to receive any letters from Mrs. Bentley's relatives (we assume Philip has no living kin), or from friends in their former towns. Horizon's isolation, which is insisted on throughout the book, is almost total, but it is also highly artificial, more like that of a ship at sea before Marconi than that of a town on the prairies. This is one point at which the novel departs from regional accuracy and moves toward symbolism.

The drought seems to have lasted for eleven years, since the death of their baby (p. 44), a violation of the historical facts which

[14]Dick Harrison, *Unnamed Country: the Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1977), p. 181.

also has obvious symbolic implications. In that entire time, Mrs. Bentley has tried only once before to grow a garden, the summer after the baby died. In realistic terms this is remarkably slovenly housewifery; only in symbolic terms does it make sense, the single withered garden paralleling the single dead child. What, then, do we make of her long-delayed and ill-fated attempt to grow another garden? In the context of her other abortive attempts during the same summer to do something creative — to adopt Steve, to keep Minnie and El Greco, to redeem her husband's futile waste of his talent — its symbolic importance is clear. It seems to indicate a renewed sense of purpose on her part — a sense of purpose which is repeatedly frustrated before it finally achieves something — a baby, a new occupation, perhaps a new life. But as an element in her career as a small town prairie housewife, the fact that she tries a garden only twice in twelve years strikes one as evidence of improvidence if not of sloth.

Slovenly housewifery is also apparent elsewhere, but its symbolic implications are not always so clear. Mrs. Bentley describes several of her meals for us, and they always seem hastily assembled. Apart from "serenely making curtains over for the double windows in the living room" (p. 3), she is not seen to sew. We notice that Judith makes herself a dress (p. 108); Mrs. Bentley, though lamenting her dowdy clothes, does not. Her housework is minimal. In spite of their economic deprivation, it never occurs to her to look for saskatoons or chokecherries during her railway walks, or to deplore their absence from the drought-stricken land. She spends most of her time, it appears, writing her diary (if that is indeed what she is doing), walking the tracks, and feeling "sorry for Philip, sorrier for myself" (p. 76). Small wonder she gained a reputation in Crow Coulee as "a shiftless housewife" (p. 39). And although she complains about the cultural thinness of Horizon, it does not occur to her that she might do something to alleviate it by offering music lessons to the children of the district. Wilfred Cude has characterized her as mean-spirited and manipulative (Cude, pp. 3-18); it is tempting to add that she is also domestically and socially irresponsible.

And yet, of course, it is clearly unfair to do so, unless we assume, as many readers do, that Ross is primarily interested in Mrs. Bentley rather than in Philip. The reader can easily overlook these omissions, and the fact that Ross seldom draws our attention to them suggests that he has overlooked them too. It is not necessarily a

weakness for an ostensibly regional novel to abandon regional veracity and move toward symbolism, as this one seems to do at various points. But it may be a weakness that Ross allows Mrs. Bentley to take over the novel without, apparently, considering how incompetent and irresponsible these omissions from her diary make her appear.

Perhaps these are trivial matters; there are, however, more serious difficulties in evaluating the nature of the narrative. One of these in that, because of the interior monologue/diary form of the novel, we get Mrs. Bentley's comments on events as they occur, but we never get a mature Mrs. Bentley's account of her own past self, or of Philip. We might contrast this with novels like *Great Expectations* or *The Stone Angel,* where double perspectives are provided; both Hagar and Pip, older and ultimately wiser, can suggest the limitations of their younger and more foolish selves. But in *As For Me and My House* no such helpful perspecive is available; it is therefore difficult to chart a changing, developing, maturing Mrs. Bentley. Paradoxically, what we get is Mrs. Bentley's lucid and articulate awareness of her own blundering obtuseness in the present. When Philip goes off for the afternoon with Steve, leaving her behind, she says, "For the first time now I realize that there have been no companions for him in these little towns, that he's had the poor choice of the barber shop or me. I've just gone on taking for granted that he's stayed at home because he wanted to, because I really mattered in his life, because he couldn't get along without me" (p. 64). This seems a rather belated recognition of the obvious, and suggests her limited perceptions. During the holiday at the ranch, when she sees how damaging she has been to Philip, and reaches a new sense of resolve, she says, "It seems that tonight for the first time in my life I'm really mature. . . . I see things clearly" (p. 103). We believe her, for she does not spare herself. But later, contemplating Philip's adultery, she asks, "Am I the one who's never grown up, who can't see life for illusions?" (p. 125). Again, plotting his recapture, she thinks, "I'm the kind that never learns, never burns out" (p. 143). A recognition that one "never learns" may be at least the beginning of wisdom. But we are never sure whether it is or not. There is, simply, no way of telling whether lucidity or obtuseness is the keynote of her character.

The same difficulty is illustrated perhaps more clearly in a passage where Mrs. Bentley, still smarting from the way Philip has

excluded her from the afternoon with Steve, plays the piano for Paul and Steve, and excludes Philip: "Afterwards Paul asked me to play, and because it had been such a humiliating afternoon I played brilliantly, vindictively, determined to let Philip see how easily if I wanted to I could take the boy away from him" (p. 47). One may sympathize here with Mrs. Bentley's sense of humiliation, but not, presumably, with her vindictiveness. Yet the meaning of the passage is obscure. If Mrs. Bentley really is being vindictive, as she says, then she earns some considerable measure of the reader's disapprobation. Yet no one who describes herself as vindictive can be truly vindictive; such a person would at least be aware of her own potential for vindictiveness and could guard against it. In this she is morally superior to someone like Mrs. Finley, who *is* vindictive and would never describe herself thus. Yet given the circumstances, and Mrs. Bentley's apprehensions that Steve may come between her and her husband, vindictiveness seems a quite plausible reaction. We can prove anything we like from such a passage; we do not really know whether it makes her admirable or reprehensible. The difficulty is apparently the result of the narrative technique.

Equally baffling is Philip's reaction to his wife's music. He is usually irritated by her practising at home, and she remarks that "It's seldom he listens to music" and, "Philip doesn't care much for music" (pp. 38, 47). On the first occasion, he is noticeably attracted by Judith's singing in church; on the second, she is trying to take Steve away from Philip. It seems odd, then, that she would attempt to win him back by playing the Liszt rhapsody at the church concert, except that it was the piece she played on the night he asked her to marry him (p. 141), and she is trying to duplicate her triumph of that night. If Philip doesn't really care for music, his hostile reaction to her performance, his assumption that she is playing for Paul rather than for him, is easily understood. But then how was she able to reach him with her music in the first place? Why did he, as a student, "put his books away one night and [go] to a concert with a friend"? (p. 18). We infer, though we are not told explicitly, that it was at this concert he first saw her, thus ensuring his own entrapment in a series of small towns. Is this why he dislikes her music — or all music? If so, how does she expect to win him with it? The answers to these questions are not forthcoming unless we are willing to engage in more speculation than a work of art can reasonably expect of us.

The ending of the novel, of course, has provoked much comment: do the adoption of the baby, the triumphant escape from

Horizon to a new life in the city, the blowing down of the false fronts by the wind, signify a new beginning, a relief from hypocrisy and small-town values, a release of stifled creativity? Or is the baby a means to Philip's final entrapment by his possessive wife, the city merely a larger garrison, the second-hand bookstore a symbol of a second-rate life? There may indeed by a fine ambiguity here, as distinguished from confusion, but the event which brings about this ending, the crisis of the whole plot, is the death of Judith in child-birth. And about the unsatisfactory nature of this crisis there can surely be no ambiguity. Judith becomes conveniently pregnant after one lapse from chastity, her sexual encounter with Philip in the woodshed. She bears, conveniently, a son, does not betray his paternity, and then conveniently dies, thereby allowing the Bentleys their long-desired son and removing her complicating presence from the resolution of the novel. Behind her rise the ghosts of a thousand sentimental heroines, the daughters of Clarissa Harlowe, who perish of a single departure from sexual purity. Ross does not, of course, propound a sentimental view of female sexuality, but he does call upon the by now somewhat mouldy conventions of the sentimental tradition to provide a means of neatly resolving the action. Whatever one makes of the ending, it is hard to avoid feeling that it is too easily and quickly accomplished.

This does not mean that *As For Me and My House* is a bad novel. It has very real and substantial virtues — among them some fine landscape description, complex symbolic patterns, and a realization of a particular kind of Canadian experience. In his use of phrases such as "Main Street" and "the middle west" (an otherwise meaningless term in a Canadian context), Ross seems to be inviting comparison with Sinclair Lewis's novels of the American Mid-west. In any such comparison, Ross is surely the better writer. And yet we do the novel, and the study of Canadian literature itself a disservice if we call it a great work. The selection of Mrs. Bentley, an unreliable narrator whose unreliability we cannot verify, creates unresolved problems of perspective in the novel. These problems are compounded by uncertainty as to which details are realistic and which make sense only as symbols. Finally, the death of Judith is an unsatisfactory plot device. Until critics are prepared to face these difficulties, there will be no adequate evaluation of the place of Ross's novel in the development of fiction in Canada.

University of Saskatchewan