

# Paul: The Answer to the Riddle of *As For Me and My House*

Barbara Mitchell

“Why is a raven like a writing-desk?” Paul Kirby asks Mrs. Bentley near the end of *As For Me and My House*. She, the literalist, replies, “A nonsense riddle in *Alice in Wonderland*. . . . There isn’t an answer,” and, correcting Paul, who has just noticed a flock of birds, adds “those are crows, not ravens.” Paul, however, takes up the challenge of the riddle and creates an answer: “Once the raven, too, had a croak in his name,’ he said cryptically, ‘and there was a time when all pens scratched.’”<sup>1</sup> The riddle is a part of the diary entry of April 2 which records a momentous meeting between Paul and Mrs. Bentley as they walk up the railway track to the ravine. Much that occurs does so in silence or is riddle-like, yet answers are found that day. Mrs. Bentley is given the opportunity to escape from her marriage and accept Paul’s love. She refuses; but Paul’s offer of love, his asking and answering of the riddle, and his acceptance of her decision to return to Philip serve as models of conduct and of creative vision for Mrs. Bentley to follow. Just as Paul leads the Bentleys to accept each other and the riddle of life, so is he the answer to the riddle of this novel. Like the Bentleys, readers must break through the puritanical and futile predisposition to assign guilt; “there’s no *guilty* or *not guilty*” (134) but simply Paul’s “kind of avowal” (159).

Significantly it is Paul who asks the riddle and who also provides the creative answer. In light of the usual critical dismissal of Paul, this suggests a need to re-assess his role in the novel. Paul’s perspective, implicit in his word study, is highly creative and communicative; it is not “pedant[ic]” (Chambers), “arid” (New), “meaning [become] . . . meaningless” (Moss), “glib” (Ricou), entangled and unoriginal (Godard), “hypocritic[al]” (Williams), or supercilious (Cude).<sup>2</sup> Few

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<sup>1</sup> Sinclair Ross, *As For Me and My House* (1941. Toronto: McClelland, 1957) 159.

<sup>2</sup> R.D. Chambers, *Sinclair Ross and Ernest Buckler* (Toronto: Copp Clark, 1975) 34; W.H. New, “Sinclair Ross’s Ambivalent World,” *Canadian Literature* 40 (1969): 29; John Moss, “Mrs. Bentley and the Bicameral Mind: A Hermeneutical Encounter with *As For Me and My House*,” *Modern Times* (Toronto: NC, 1982) 89; Laurence Ricou, “The Prairie Internalized: The Fiction of Sinclair Ross in *As For Me and My House*,” *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* (Vancouver: UBC, 1973) 83; Barbara Godard, “El Greco in Canada: Sinclair Ross’s *As For Me and My House*,” *Mosaic* 14.2 (1981): 60; D.

readers see Paul as the well-balanced and effective individual that he is. Lorraine York does present Paul as imaginative, complex, and significant; however, she concludes with a qualified view of him as a man "whose pedantry has troubling causes and whose sexuality is partially hidden by a smoke screen of words," and who is, at the end, "consigned to silence."<sup>3</sup> Rather, I would argue that his pedantry is word-play that he, like Lewis Carroll, has a double identity as scholar/teacher and "fool"/poet. Paul's role as a sort of Shakespearean fool is directly implied through his association with his horse, Harlequin. His sexuality is not hidden but is exhibited through his etymological discussions with Mrs. Bentley—he courts her with words. As for his silence at the end, it is of an entirely different nature from Philip's silence; it is an "avowal" (*House* 159) and is also in direct contrast to Mrs. Bentley's interminable explanations and defenses. Along with Doc in *Sawbones Memorial*, Paul may be the most enlightened and balanced of all Ross's characters.

Paul is like the many curious readers of "A Mad Tea-Party" in *Alice in Wonderland* who have been challenged by the unanswered raven riddle. Unlike Alice and Mrs. Bentley who "give it up,"<sup>4</sup> Paul can imagine an answer. This riddle became famous because originally (in 1865) Carroll provided no answer to it. However, in the 1896 edition, Carroll wrote in the Preface,

Enquiries have been so often addressed to me, as to whether any answer to the Hatter's Riddle can be imagined, that I may as well put on record here what seems to me to be a fairly appropriate answer, viz. 'Because it can produce a few notes, though they are very flat; and it is never put with the wrong end in front!' This, however, is merely an afterthought: the Riddle, as originally invented, had no answer at all.<sup>5</sup>

Quoting this in his book *The Raven and the Writing Desk*, Francis Huxley comments that Carroll's answer is simply a tease—another riddle. The important point is that all curious, imaginative readers try to answer the riddle, and the fact that

Williams, "The Scarlet Rompers," *Canadian Literature* 103 (1984): 164; W. Cude, "'Turn it Upside Down': The Right Perspective on *As For Me and My House*," *English Studies in Canada* 5.4 (1979): 481.

<sup>3</sup> Lorraine York, "Its Better Nature Lost," *Canadian Literature* 103 (1984): 170, 167.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland: Authoritative Texts of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, Through the Looking-Glass, The Hunting of the Snark*, ed. Donald J. Gray (New York: Norton, 1971) 56.

<sup>5</sup> Cited by Francis Huxley, *The Raven and the Writing Desk* (London: Thames, 1976) 21.

both Alice and Mrs. Bentley resist the attempt to "fool" with language is a comment, perhaps, on their literal-mindedness.<sup>6</sup>

"A riddle demanding to be heard but not answered cannot be permitted" (*Raven* 22), writes Huxley. He notes that Carroll's riddle has evoked numerous answers over the years, such as "Because they both should be made to shut up" and "Because Poe wrote on both" (22). All riddles need to be answered (the other famous riddle of the Sphinx had to be answered upon threat of death), but, writes Huxley, "what kind of answer is the problem" (9). According to Huxley, the answer is one that obeys the rules of Nonsense. Nonsense is not without sense, and Huxley defines it this way:

Nonsense, then, is a logical game played with feeling by at least two people, in a spirit of self-contradiction, in such a way that one thing leads on to the other to the constant surprise and mutual enthusiasm of both parties." (10)

One could never suggest that Ross writes Carrollian comic Nonsense, but some of the attitudes towards communication presented in this definition are applicable to Ross's vision of a positive relationship between two people based on "mutually enthusiastic" communication. There is, says Huxley, a "wry seriousness" (8) in Nonsense, an apt description of Paul's word-play; Nonsense has its own laws of logic, so it is ordered disorder, and it is self-contradictory in that the words can contain several dissimilar meanings. Huxley says Nonsense allows us to think to the limits of thought and even beyond "the reasonable limit" (10) because it is possible to think what cannot be thought. This he describes as the "principle of convertibility" (10), the idea that one can convert the limits set by a word or thought into another meaning. What seems important in all this is the sense of delight in dialogue, the allowable disorder, the conversion of the ordinary into something new and adventuresome, and the stretching of the imagination. Thus Nonsense is a most open and ambiguous language.

Paul represents and propounds these principles, not only in the asking and answering of this riddle, but also through his philological musings on words and their mutability. While Paul's preference is for the natural and original meaning of words and, by extension, of human values, he shows his knowledge of the laws of change or convertibility. His answer to the riddle shows

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<sup>6</sup> In my opinion, Alice is, in many instances, a literalist, arguing pragmatically, resisting Nonsense, and saying she has no story to tell.

his ability to convert one thing into another (raven and desk) thus taking meaning beyond the usual limits. With his answer he demonstrates his double role as comic punster and scholarly moralizer. His answer is just as witty and creative as any of the answers cited by Huxley, including Carroll's own. As well as exhibiting Paul's talents in engaging in Carrollian Nonsense, his answer serves to comment on the Bentleys' rasping language—Philip's croaking grumblings and Mrs. Bentley's scratchings in her diary. As in *Hamlet* the "croaking raven doth bellow for revenge" (III ii 264-65), so in *As For Me and My House* the Bentleys retaliate against the town and each other.<sup>7</sup> But Paul pointedly says, "Once . . . there was a time" (159), thus showing the potential for change in the Bentleys. With Paul's guidance, Mrs. Bentley—like Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*—moves from a conventional, pragmatic perspective to a more open, unordered vision. In the end she goes beyond the limits of Horizon to the imaginative possibilities of an unlimited horizon.

As well as initiating subtle personality change in the Bentleys, particularly Mrs. Bentley, through his word lessons, Paul introduces them to the elements that cause major transformation in their lives—Partridge Hill, Steve, and the ranch. Most importantly he initiates the intense confrontation at the end between Philip and Mrs. Bentley over the paternity of the baby. Although Paul is obviously in love with Mrs. Bentley, it is easy to overlook the fact that he admires Philip's work, discusses it, and is empathetic about Philip's entrapment in the ministry. One could argue that, by restoring Mrs. Bentley's capacity for love and creativity, he rejuvenates, not destroys, the marriage. Neither does he appear defeated at the end, accepting quietly Mrs. Bentley's choice to stay with her husband, concurring in the naming of the child, and helping them pack to leave. While we may wonder if life would have been different for Mrs. Bentley with Paul, if "the currents might have taken and fulfilled [her]" (160), there is no reason to assume that he will be unfulfilled—or that remaining single is unfulfilling.

In his roles as scholar/teacher and fool/poet, Paul inspires in Mrs. Bentley and in Philip a new attitude of both intellectual and emotional responsiveness. As well, Paul combines the stereotypical masculine characteristics of physical and mental strength with the stereotypical female attributes of intuitive and emotional awareness. Unlike most male characters in Ross's work, Paul expresses his emotions, whether about Mrs. Bentley's

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<sup>7</sup> Ross may have been deliberately evoking *Hamlet* with its themes of revenge, adultery, and concealment of one's true nature.

music, Philip's paintings, the townspeople, or even his own confusion about where he truly belongs—in town or country. Near the end of her diary, Mrs. Bentley recognizes Paul's dual nature: "Paul had been silent with me often before, thoughtful, masculine, self-sufficient silences, but this time it was just a helpless, numb one of awareness, like a woman's. . ." (158). Paul's atypical emotionalism awakens in Mrs. Bentley a recognition of a need to reassess her conventional definition of male and female, and to question her (and Philip's) separation of the intellect and the emotions.

Intellectually and emotionally Paul widens Mrs. Bentley's horizons, forcing her to step outside the conventional boundaries. Two key scenes with Paul and Mrs. Bentley, July 11 on the ranch and April 2 at the ravine, focus on her breakthrough as she is "stripped of [herself]" (100). These scenes will serve as a useful frame for a discussion of Paul's words which, in a minute way, accomplish the same task of taking her out of herself to see more clearly her relationship with others and with her world. The first key scene, on the ranch, takes Mrs. Bentley back in time, then forward, just as Paul attempts to take her back to word origins, back to true meaning, and back to a "better nature." This scene shows where Mrs. Bentley must begin; the other key scene at the ravine portrays the new Mrs. Bentley.

Out riding in the hills surrounding the ranch, Paul "tries to stretch the span of [her] mind" (100) so that she might understand "*Eternity*" [my italics]; that is, past and future, not simply the literal present. In this scene he assumes both his roles, solemn teacher and poetic inspirer:

Like a solemn young professor in geology he went still further back, millions and more millions of years, all the ages of the earth set up for me to wonder at in orderly perspective. . . . And then like a virtuoso he sped forward: mountains to hills this time—hills to the stretch of sandy flat along the river—strange other fossils in it that were men and women once like us. Eternity, though, was too big for me, and even while we sat there, looking at the hills, I slipped away from them to think of us. I went back to the first pulpit, the first Main Street; then still farther back, to his first Main Street. . . . I went forward, too, the next pulpit and the next, the next Main Street and the next. . . . I saw the last church, the last town.

(100)

As he will do again later with the riddle he will ask in the scene at the ravine, Paul pushes her to consider a new perspective,

pushes her beyond the limits of "this workaday reality of ours" (101) back into what was and forward into what could be. She says, the day after this visionary experience, "It seems that tonight for the first time in my life I'm really mature" (103). What she has seen here on the ranch is the futility of carrying on to that last church in the same way as they have been; she sees that, through her desire for "comfort and routine," she has denied Philip (and herself) "the opportunity to live" (103) fully by reaching out for dreams and adventures. For this she has to alter her perspective to admit disorder, uncertainty, and change. Having seen the futility of continuing Horizon-minded, she and Philip have now to break through the boundary and glimpse eternity to find the way out of that "vicious circle" (67).

Paul's first task, as the second diary entry tells us, is to take them to Partridge Hill, to "*pagan*" (19) country. Paul is always taking Mrs. Bentley beyond the conventional limits—out of Horizon, out of herself, out of her accustomed interpretations of words, events, and people. At Partridge Hill on this first Sunday, there is not the traditional service because the congregation has mistaken the date and fails to show up. Paul, rather than Philip, becomes the "minister," conducting a kind of pagan service with them. This pagan rite is ironically juxtaposed to the proceedings of the evening before, when the Bentleys presided over a meal at the Finleys which was

Good to an almost sacrificial degree. A kind of rite, at which we preside as priest and priestess—an offering, not for us, but through us, to the exacting small-town gods Propriety and Parity. (6)

At the Partridge Hill School/Church, around the sacrificial fire that Paul lights, with the wind whispering like "ghosts" (7), Paul introduces his first two words—"offertory" and "*sacrifice*."<sup>8</sup> Here, though, the offering is a true giving of self, not an offering to false gods. Mrs. Bentley plays the offertory hymn, Handel's "Largo," Philip draws, and Paul "preaches" a lesson about the landscape, about words, and about honesty. He confesses that he is not religious, that his response to Mrs. Bentley's music is more aesthetic than Christian: "I wouldn't want to give you a false impression. It's just the music—and the way Mrs. Bentley plays" (8). Out in pagan country the Bentleys can be themselves, caring, unaffected, light-hearted, Philip even showing his wit with caricatures of the three of them on the blackboard. When

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<sup>8</sup> In this section, I have italicized the words that Paul discusses in order to highlight them and distinguish them from other quoted material in this article.

they go back to Horizon, however, the mood changes; they become "stalled in a bad mudhole" (8), obviously suggestive of Philip's and Mrs. Bentley's marital situation—stalled with Mrs. Bentley at the wheel, Philip outside ineffectively pushing. After plodding through the fields to a farmhouse for a team to pull them out, Paul is left looking momentarily "glum" and "weary," a state which prompts him to reveal the derivation of "weary" from "an old Anglo-Saxon word, meaning to walk across wet ground" (9).

Paul underscores with this discussion the mental fatigue involved in "spinning one's wheels," as the Bentleys are doing, and the effort required to find a way out. Ross employs other references to travel (car, ship, train, and horse) to underline movement towards a new perspective. The train, with its track breaking through the horizon line, is Mrs. Bentley's means of escape. Paul's release is his horsemanship, which brings out his harlequin nature, a "certain histrionic dash" (40). Riding is a more positive image of movement, not only because the horse suggests the mythic Pegasus, symbol of poetic inspiration, but because, as in Ross's short stories, a true lover of horses balances freedom and dependence.

To understand Paul it is necessary to consider what "horseman" means in Ross's vocabulary. Men in Ross's novels and short stories experience revelations about life and relationships often in the presence of, or riding, a horse. In "The Outlaw,"<sup>9</sup> as one example, Peter, the boy of 13, realizes that mastery of Isabel, the mare, is not proof of his manhood. Just when he feels exhilaration in his control of the horse, she throws him. Ross writes that Isabel, like a "conscientious teacher" (30), moralizes on the ethics of a good relationship:

For in her own way, despite her record, Isabel was something of a moralist. She took a firm stand against pride that wasn't justified. She considered my use of the word "master" insufferably presumptuous. Being able to ride an outlaw was not the same thing at all as being accorded the privilege of riding one, and for the good of my soul it was high time I appreciated the distinction. ("Outlaw" 31)

The mature adult is one who can rein in the "outlaw" without loss of spirit, freedom, or dignity, one who can appreciate an equal partnership. For Ross the most fearful aspect of a relationship is

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<sup>9</sup> Sinclair Ross, "The Outlaw," *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories* (Toronto: McClelland, 1968) 24-34.

that one may lose independence, may become a "parasite" (*House* 151). Under Paul's guidance the Bentleys move toward a successful partnership; they have run "a wide wheel" (164) as Mrs. Bentley writes in her last entry, finally getting their wheels (physical and mental) unstuck from the "bad mudhole" of Horizon. Philip has awakened from his introspective sleep, announced in the first line of the diary, and Paul, through his definition of the name "Philip," "a lover of horses" (162) (which refers to both father and son), has virtually "christened" Philip, thus implying his conversion to a new mode of perception. Mrs. Bentley's awakening comes a few pages earlier, on a walk up the railroad track with Paul. To become a "horseman," metaphorically, is to achieve as near as possible an ideal relationship with another.

Paul refers to a number of words which focus on the nature of this journey to a fulfilling relationship. Paul visits one evening when Philip is away in the country, and Mrs. Bentley and Paul sit quietly thinking of "the mystery of passage" (47) of the journeys of *Odin*, *Ulysses*, and *Faust*, all heroes obsessed with the pursuit of knowledge rather than of love, concerned with becoming masters of themselves and of their worlds, a judgement Paul extends to Philip's endeavours to maintain his library but not his love. However, as with all Paul's comments, this refers as well to Mrs. Bentley, who has earlier that day refused to travel, to join Philip and Steve on a trip to the country, because she thinks Philip wants Steve to himself. Philip may be too self-interested, but Mrs. Bentley is too self-denying. However, Paul the successful hero, the model for the Bentleys, has discovered the balance between self and other: "He's aware of you all the time, but it doesn't worry him, or set him fidgeting" (47). Willing to travel, literally and mentally, Paul does not become self-absorbed like Philip.

In contrast to that "mystery of passage" undertaken by heroes, the Bentleys are stalled; Mrs. Bentley's language expresses their stasis: they have "nail[ed] [their] colours to the mast" (4); they cower "afraid to move" on the perch of the town (5); the house is "screwed down tight upon [them] like a vise" (15), and even "the words they find are stilted, lifeless" (15). Any attempt to move is difficult; Mrs. Bentley makes unkind remarks about Philip's "car" (19) which, in spite of Philip's paint job, looks "battle-scarred." Paul, in contrast, is more complimentary, saying that the original meaning of "car" is "war chariot" (19), thus suggesting that getting into the fray of life is better than Mrs. Bentley's withdrawing into self-conscious embarrassment. On another occasion Philip professes "nausea" (35) so that he does not have to leave his study to meet company. The offended Paul



remarks that Philip's nausea is a false front, for it is an "impossibility on dry land" (35), again a criticism of the unwillingness of the Bentleys to undertake the "mystery of passage."

Paul, of course, attempts to make them aware of their social and personal false love. Paul's central thesis on the corruption of values, particularly love, is contained in his lesson recorded in Mrs. Bentley's diary entry of June 7 which is, uncharacteristically, devoted only to Paul's words. He comments that "while words socially come up in the world, most of them morally go down" (76). Words like *garden*, *yard*, *court* and *paling* refer now to pretentious enclosures rather than to the simple or natural spaces they originally named. Instead of natural protection, these words now stress territorial power and possession: "paling" refers to being "in actual possession of the palace that once it guarded as a humble palisade" (76). These comments reflect on Mrs. Bentley's thoughts the previous evening which concern possession and enclosure: "I must keep on reaching out, trying to possess [Philip]. . . . I've whittled myself hollow that I might enclose and hold him, and when he shakes me off I'm just a shell" (75).

As a corollary to words as social climbers, some words become socially unacceptable. "Good respectable" (70) words like *car* (19), *belly* (70) and *sweat* (91) are considered vulgar by the townspeople; Paul, however, has not kowtowed to the town's values as Mrs. Bentley has. As she announces in her first diary entry, certain things, like a woman using "pliers and hammer. . . . simply [aren't] done" (3). Hypocritically, she plays by the social rules of the town to her own moral degradation. Just five days before Paul's discussion of words as social climbers, she sacrifices honesty for social position. When she and Philip are brought before the church board for not disciplining Steve, she interrupts Philip's explanation, afraid that he will further anger the Board and endanger their position in the town and perhaps even their livelihood. Not only does she deny Philip a voice, but she accedes to the town's prejudices and injustice. She recognizes later that evening when writing in her diary that, by playing it safe, she has lost them the opportunity to find their "way back to life" (73).

Although she believes at the time that she is doing the best for Philip, protecting and serving him, she does not perceive the situation "as it really [is]" (73), a mistake she is often to make in her assessment of Philip. Perhaps most harmful to their relationship is her fear of what the town might think of Philip's somewhat unorthodox characteristics: his painting, his pipe smoking, and his inability or disinclination to undertake the

"manly" activities of repairing or gardening. To protect him, she encourages secretiveness, and this very protection becomes a barricade in their relationship. As Philip remarks, "You're afraid, aren't you, of what the town thinks?" (71). He, on the other hand, draws "deep satisfaction from a sudden consciousness of not being afraid" (72). Her social hypocrisy contaminates the marriage. As she climbs up, she loses touch with a moral vision. Paul's task, as with his etymological preoccupations, is to locate for Mrs. Bentley her original meaning of value, to uncover true feeling beneath her "*company*" (35) manners—another word Paul defines.

On the personal level as well, she deceives herself, often trying to do what she thinks is the "right thing" but sacrificing honesty in the process. Like Alice at the Mad Tea-Party who is admonished by the March Hare, "you should say what you mean" (*Alice* 55), Mrs. Bentley is often confused about what she means to say. For example, when Philip suggests that she accompany him and Steve to the country, she refuses to answer honestly because she believes she has understood "the situation as it really [is]." She cannot say what she means: "I think I started to answer him, to tell him that I could hurry and be ready, that the visit I planned could wait. . ." (63). But she holds back, only to break down sobbing when they have driven away. On another occasion she refuses to go with Steve and Philip, and she writes, "At least that's maybe why I said I had a headache. When I think about it now I'm not so sure" (45). Ironically, in cultivating her family, her "garden," she stifles all growth with her possessiveness and her overly sensitive tending.

"*Retaliate*" (76), the next word Paul defines in the June 7 entry, is again applicable to the Bentleys' conduct immediately before and after. In the entry the night before she describes Philip's and Steve's retaliatory scorn for the humiliation they both suffered at the hands of small town philistines. As Paul reminds her, "*retaliate*" used to mean "simply . . . to give again as much as had been given—but memories being short for benefits and long for grievances, its sense was gradually perverted. . ." (76). Paul's word lesson becomes the standard by which we judge Philip's bitter relationship with the town, his relationship with his mother (whom he blamed for his own sense of shame), and now his parenting of Steve, whom he is morally corrupting by "doing his utmost to make Steve scorn and reject the town" (75). In all these responses Philip carries grievances to a bitter, revengeful end. Mrs. Bentley's way is retaliation as well, remembering the criticisms and unkindnesses rather than the "benefits" of community life. Indeed Paul reprimands her for making a sarcastic retort to Mrs. Finley: "I'm sorry you did it.

You must never let yourself become a *fly-flap*" (133). Like the rasping of a raven and the scratching of a pen, it is alienating and morally degrading to strike out with vengeance. By the end she has learned this lesson, for she admits that little Main Street towns have "sometimes a rather nice way" (164).

The last four words in Paul's lesson on the loss of her "better nature" (76) are words of love—*Cupid, Eros, Venus, and Aphrodite*—whose meanings have become corrupted, as has the love between Philip and Mrs. Bentley. As Cupid has become cupidity, Mrs. Bentley's love has turned to possessiveness. While erotic and aphrodisiac may describe Judith's appeal to Philip, what is noticeable is the absence of any sexual attraction between Philip and Mrs. Bentley. The Bentleys have replaced the original mythic gods, goddesses, and heroes with false gods of social convention. Eros and Aphrodite as god and goddess of fertility and love represent "the irresistible attraction between two people. . . as felt for each other by Paris and Helen."<sup>10</sup> It takes the spark of jealousy, through Judith and Paul, to rekindle the fire of sexual love in the Bentleys.

Although most of the words discussed thus far are delivered seriously and with moral intent (although not without flair and eloquence as with the lesson on "*Eternity*"), Paul is simply not the dry scholar many see him as; he is capable of a witty sort of humour, he is not sexless, and he is certainly not boring and aloof. For example, his continued use of "belly" and "sweat" in spite of town opposition, his reference to Philip as a "*fool*" or "*windbag*" (128), his definition of "*ease*" (104)—which is from the Dutch "*eziel*," meaning "little ass"—and his play upon "*Fuchs*" (54) show bravado, a sense of irony, and bawdiness. Although Paul is far from being a "sexless" or an unimpassioned scholar, he does not aggressively pursue Mrs. Bentley. In fact, Paul the moralist plays a losing game, for as he teaches her about love and awakens her sexuality, ironically she comes to appreciate Philip more.

Two associations—with horses and with the bull-calf, Priapus the First—indicate more overtly Paul's sexual nature. It is difficult to overlook the sexual gesture Paul makes when he rides round to show Harlequin to Mrs. Bentley; as she compliments the horse (and by extension, Paul) Paul "push[s] his big sombrero back complacently" and "cock[s] a dextrous leg around the saddle horn" (40). If readers miss this, Paul tells us later, when Mrs. Bentley goes off with the cowboy to look at his horse, that

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<sup>10</sup> This and other mythological references are taken from Michael Stapelton, *The Illuminated Dictionary of Greek and Roman Mythology* (New York: Peter Bedrick, 1986).

such an invitation is a proposition: "After a long, celibate week on the range just what did I think brought the cowboys to town on Saturday night? It was especially bad being asked to go and see a horse" (98). The second association is even more blatantly sexual. At the ranch Mrs. Bentley is given Annie's room with its pictures of pure-bred bulls and stallions (95) where she "stretch[es] out in bed for a second sleep beneath [her] guardian Hereford" (99) whose son, Priapus the First, belongs to Paul and is in service on the ranch. The bull is named after Priapus, the son of Aphrodite and Dionysus, and is a god of fertility and guardian of gardens (where Paul tells Mrs. Bentley about the gods and goddesses of love). Hera caused him to be born "with a penis of great size, and his name, Priapus, became an adjective to describe the rampant male." Thus, although Paul is not "rampant," he is certainly not sexless, courting Mrs. Bentley on horseback (40), in the garden (76), on the ranch on a horseback ride to the hills (100), and in the springtime by the surging water at the ravine (158-59).

Mrs. Bentley enjoys, indeed seeks out, Paul's company but seems to regard him as a friend rather than a lover. However, it is easy enough for Paul (as it is for Philip) to misinterpret her attentions and, on at least one occasion, she does flirt rather obviously. When Paul decks himself out in a new suit and fedora, she, like a lover, flatters him and presents him with a flower, "one of [her] precious fuchsias," to which he remarks that *fuchsia* was called after a botanist with a name something the same. . . ." (54), the name being Fuchs—all together making this scene a rather overt sexual game they are both playing.

On the ranch, separated from the social pretensions of Horizon, the Bentleys are taken back to their "better nature[s]," their true selves. Morally, aesthetically, and sexually they are rejuvenated. The landscape itself takes them back to a mythic or primeval time, "a forbidden country" (95). Here Paul again refers to myths to teach Mrs. Bentley. Two of his words *Gorgon* (92), to describe the hills around the ranch, and *grasshopper* (97), to describe the town nearby, refer to famous love stories. One of the Gorgons, Medusa, fell in love with Poseidon and was punished for this by being turned into a monster with serpent hair and eyes that could turn men to stone. From their union, however, came Pegasus, the winged horse. Grasshopper is a reference to Eos's seduction of Tithonus who, because he was granted immortality without agelessness, is turned into a grasshopper as an act of mercy.

Paralleling these mythic stories is Laura's affair with a cowboy which has resulted in the disintegration of her marriage

(which, like the Bentleys', was in trouble before the cowboy arrived on the scene). These love affairs all have unhappy endings, playing out the eternal drama and "vicious circle" of love triangles, jealousies, and punishments. They present a mythic backdrop to the "guilty or not guilty" riddle of the novel. Yet, in spite of the unhappy endings of all these love affairs and the implication that excessive or unrestrained passion results in the loss of one's "better nature," there is a celebration of love and a potential rebirth of the imagination (symbolized by the birth of Pegasus from Medusa). Laura may be rather hard and domineering, but "at the same time [there is] a kind of glamour" about her spirit, about her flouting of the stereotypical male/female roles. She encourages activity, socializing, and sexuality; it is she who puts Mrs. Bentley in the room with pictures of "pure-bred bulls," who encourages Mrs. Bentley to go to the dance, and who is the single recipient of a gift from Philip (significantly a painting of her stallion), made expressly for her and presented by Philip (104).

Mrs. Bentley finally concludes, a few nights before they are to leave the ranch, that "tonight for the first time in my life I'm really mature" (103), and she realizes, at least intellectually, that she has, over the years, sacrificed passions for domesticity:

I've comforted myself too, trying to be a good wife, seeing religiously that his socks were always darned, his books in order, his dinner hot. But it was all wrong. Comfort and routine were the last things he needed. . . . He ought to have had the opportunity to live, to be reckless, spendthrift, bawdy, anything but what he is, what I've made him. (103)

Ironically, however, in her first diary entry on their return to Horizon she writes, "We're back to routine" (105). Hypocritically she claims to Paul and the townspeople that she has "renewed enthusiasm" (105). When Paul replies "dryly" or contradictorily that enthusiasm means the "*god within*," it is pointedly clear that both her marriage and her own soul are spiritless. The ranch provided only temporary and outward relief. Paul, however, continually renews his pagan spirit by taking out his horse, Harlequin, sometimes even dressing up in cowboy gear (40). Philip's recourse to escape routine is to be a "fool. . . from a Latin word for windbag" (128) or bellows, that is, to ignite his spirit by turning to Judith. Certainly Philip's affair with Judith is "reckless, spendthrift, bawdy" (103) but, as Mrs. Bentley acknowledges reluctantly, "within he's stirring, quickening, like a bed of half-dead coals that someone is blowing on" (157).

At the ranch, then, Paul led them to glimpse the natural, original core of spirit, of passion in themselves. They are, however, not yet the accomplished "horsemen" that Paul is. Paul, to use Philip's analogy, can "test a picture" (154) by turning it both ways, not just upside down as Philip suggests to Mrs. Bentley. Paul truly sees with both the inner eye of "sentiment" and the outer eye of detachment; he is both mystic and man of action. Although the Bentleys need to accept the challenge of the riddle of life and enter into a world that allows more than routine, that nurtures fantasy and dreams, they also, particularly Philip, must awake to the real world. This is expressed through Mrs. Bentley's (and eventually Philip's) actualization of her dreams, the acquisition of the bookstore, and the adoption of the baby.

As the Bentleys' marriage deteriorates even further, Paul's visits are noticeably less frequent. He offers only six more word discussions; yet he does remain a powerful force in their lives, for Philip suspects him as Mrs. Bentley's lover and Mrs. Bentley misses his talk and comfort. This last section, after their visit to the ranch, takes on the quality of a feverish nightmare, like the one she has as Philip and Judith are together in the lean-to shed (123). Mrs. Bentley is in a Wonderland nightmare with everything distorted "as if [she] were looking . . . through the wrong end of a telescope" (123). Their false fronts are never more obvious than they are in this last section. Mrs. Bentley lies so that Philip will not think she has been with Paul; she pretends to know nothing about his affair with Judith, and she does not divulge to Philip that she knows the truth about the baby until she sees that Paul knows. For both of them, hiding the truth leads to a "heartless, cold response" (155) to Judith, a horrible denial of humanitarian love. It is not until she realizes that Paul "knew what all along I was certain I was keeping secret" (162) that she finds the courage to throw off her false front.

Just before she and Philip confront each other, Paul makes his final two word offerings. When Mrs. Bentley tells Paul that the baby is to be named Philip, he defines the name. As he has not done so previously for the adult Philip, one can assume that the adult Philip has now attained the characteristics implied in his name, "a true lover of horses" (162). To be such a lover in Ross's vocabulary, as discussed previously, suggests an enlarged perception, for a true rider is conscious of both his mastery and his servitude, his self and the other. Thus Philip is ready to become aware of Mrs. Bentley, of a partnership, and is ready to accept the inspiration of Pegasus and throw down his false front as a minister.

Lastly Paul comments on the baby who begins to whimper in the storm; "Did I know . . . that in the early ages of our race it was imitation of just such a little wail as this that had given us some of our noblest words, like father, and patriarch, and paternity" (163). This is Paul's last lesson; he restores paternity to an acceptable position. In other words, Paul leads Mrs. Bentley into acceptance of family love. She is encouraged to grant Philip restored nobility in place of the "failure" (16) she had accorded him at the beginning of her diary.

Thus Paul has set the stage for Philip's and Mrs. Bentley's acceptance of each other before their confrontation. Although bitter, this confrontation is honest, with the false fronts of language having been "blown down" (162). Philip has finally "found words" (163), and she uncovers her pretence, admitting that she had hidden from him both her knowledge of his affair and her desire to have Judith's baby. This time when she runs to the outskirts of town, the wind is at her back, and she writes, "I ran with it as far as the last grain elevator" (163), an expression that suggests the kind of freedom Peter in "The Outlaw" has when riding Isabel. Furthermore, when she returns, she refers to a "talk" they will have tomorrow. Throughout this novel their relationship has been marked by silence on Philip's part and by unkind retorts or hypocritical answers from Mrs. Bentley. In contrast to the ever questioning Paul, Mrs. Bentley comments that she and Philip "never ask each other questions" (73). The reference to "talk" is the agreement to a two-way relationship, to respecting each other's views. Thus, while talk is a means of clarification, it also leads to a more disordered world in which Mrs. Bentley no longer reigns supreme.

The novel ends with a question and an answer which clearly echoes the creative and affective repartee encouraged by Paul when he asks and answers the raven riddle. Philip questions the confusion that might arise from two Philips: "Two of us in the same house you'll get mixed up. Sometimes you won't know which of us is which" (165). As in the raven riddle, two unique things (here father and son) are converted from one to the other and yet will always revert back to themselves. Mrs. Bentley's hope is that father and son will be alike in their "eyes, [expressing] a stillness, a freshness, a vacancy of beginning" (165). Her answer to Philip's question is as cryptic and imaginative as Paul's answer to the riddle. When she replies, "I want it so" (165), she declares a certainty about uncertainty, a wish to "get mixed up" (165). The first activity she had described in her diary over a year ago was organizing her household, or at least getting Philip to organize according to her plan. She had written in her first entry that "It's the disordered house" (5) that de-

pressed her. She had even organized her view of Philip into a "symbol" (4): "Sermon and drawing together, they're a kind of symbol, a summing up. . . . the failure, the compromise, the going-on" (4). This first entry presents a significant contrast to the "mix up" she announces so avowedly that she wants at the end.

All Paul's lessons culminate in the scene in which he asks the riddle as he and Mrs. Bentley walk towards the ravine. He gives no word derivations and is relatively silent except for the riddle. Beneath the silence, however, a great deal is communicated. First, she realizes that Philip has been right that Paul does love her: "All the time I had thought it was only Philip, something he was trying to imagine" (158). As in the "Eternity" scene (July 11), she is drawn out of herself to feel what another feels and to see more intensely and more optimistically a world outside herself. She realizes she has made Paul suffer and expresses a true empathy. While they stand on the railway bridge, their hands side by side, the images of springtime provide an obvious comment on their potential love: the earth is "bursting its way through the snow like a bud through its calyx" (159), and the water bellows and froths under the bridge. Significantly, in these revelatory scenes as in "The Outlaw," the character simultaneously becomes aware of self, of other, and of landscape. As Ross writes in "The Outlaw," at the moment of understanding there is an awareness or "insist[ence] on landscape" (30).

In this riddle scene, Mrs. Bentley is asked, implicitly, to make a choice between Paul and Philip. And without lengthy explanation or confusion or distortion, she simply states: "It's getting late. . . . There's Philip's supper" (159). What occurs here shows a different mode of response: she is quieter, even "silent" (158), she is empathetic, she does not explain and defend herself, and she is honest. Paul replies, "He'll be wondering where you are. We'd better go" (159). His response is an open acceptance of the situation *as it is*: "It was a kind of avowal. It asked nothing of me. It didn't try to explain or defend itself. We came home leaving it there" (159). This is the balance that Mrs. Bentley learns from Paul, the art of "a kind of avowal," an affirmation of life as it really is, without need of explanation or defence, without anger or reproachment. At an earlier point she had written that she wished she could tell Philip that "there's no *guilty* or *not guilty*, but just the two of us" (135); she is now in a position to do that.

What was once her language of bitterness and retaliation, of hypocrisy and pretence—the language of a scratching pen—has been converted to empathy and honesty. Having been



held in by Horizon, in this scene she experiences a breakthrough, where the horizon line becomes a reconciliation of sky and earth, dream and reality, silence and activity: "There was a smooth, flawless silence, poised between the sky and the thawing fields like a glass bubble" (159). With her 'avowal,' "I want it so," she 'answers,' as much as one can, the riddle of her life.

Trent University