

"AS IF I REALLY MATTERED": THE NARRATOR OF SINCLAIR ROSS'S *AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE*

Anne Compton

An examination of the critical history of Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* reveals that Mrs. Bentley receives less attention than her husband, Philip, in character or narration studies of the work, and almost all studies, no matter what their angle on the work, deal, because they must, with the prickly question of narration. It may seem odd to say that Philip receives more critical attention when narration—and thus the narrator, Mrs. Bentley—has been the most critically engaging issue. The greater attention to Philip is a function of the recent discoveries, in the 70's and 80's, of Mrs. Bentley's limitations as narrator: how she fails Philip, in what way and to what extent, becomes the argument for her limitedness both as narrator and character. Consequently, Philip, who he really is or what he might become away from her or what "Philip needs" (Dubanski 94) comes into sharp focus. Paradoxically, then, the focus of the narrator is really a focus on Philip, the narrated. Wilfred Cude's argument that we are invited "to go beyond the narrator's view" (4) is ultimately an argument for Philip's integrity and an examination of Mrs. Bentley's attempts to "twist, bend, or break" it (9). What is wrong with the narrator explains what is wrong with the marriage and their lives.

Some critics clearly identify one character or the other as central. W.H. New, like Roy Daniells, finds Mrs. Bentley to be "the central character-narrator" (New 26); Dick Harrison identifies Philip as "the artist about whom we are most concerned" (149) and Robert Chambers similarly finds Philip to be "the major subject" (27), but a count of these straightforward declarations does not give an accurate impression of critical focus because

most investigations of the narrator ultimately become accounts of Philip, or as Sandra Djwa says in her "Response" to Robert Kroetsch's "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction: An Erotics of Space": "In the case of *As For Me and My House* we have Sinclair Ross writing about a woman who in her diary is writing about a man. The focus, therefore, is on the man, Philip, but it is on Philip in relation to his perceiver, Mrs. Bentley" (87).

Although the initial critical response to the novel in the forties did not deal with the complex question of narration, by 1957 Roy Daniells, in his NCL introduction to *As For Me and My House*, had positioned Mrs. Bentley in a way ("She is pure gold and wholly credible") that invited challenge. The critical direction since then has been an increasingly tough interrogation of her reliability as narrator, none more thoroughgoing than Cude's demand—is her account to stand "without question" and "without qualification?" (3). He establishes her fallibility by showing her lack of insight in regard to Philip and Paul. We hear a good deal in recent criticism about her limitations: aesthetic (Godard); judgement (Moss, *Patterns of Isolation*); insight (Cude); and language (Seim). Interrogation of the narrator has slipped into character demolition. "Time and time again she is fallible, contradictory" (Moss, *Patterns of Isolation* 154). This "wrongheadedness" "rises out of her character . . ." (154), and "Recent critics have commented on Mrs. Bentley's deceitful character" (Seim 105). She is a "dilettante" (Dubanski 92); her music is mediocre (92) and "insipid" (94) in contrast to Philip's "real commitment to art" (92). Far from "gold," as Daniells sees her, Cude finds that "everything she touches turns to garbage" (11). Philip's "golden glow" is contaminated by her "garbage." Interestingly, commendation of Philip—what he is striving for (Dubanski), his integrity (Cude)—is supported by Mrs. Bentley's words. How could it be otherwise; we have no other report.

Mrs. Bentley is, observes Barbara Godard, a "biased filtering eye" (69), and the reader must guard against the "interpretative authority" (62) of the "imperial narrator" (Kertzer 116), distinguishing Mrs. Bentley's point of view from the author's, in appreciation of Ross's "multilevelled irony" (Godard 65). The "ironic dimension" is provided, says Dubanski, by Philip's "journal" (94); the "anti-journal" ("the sub-text of the novel" [Blodsett 202]) of sketches and paintings "contradicts her point of view"

(Dubanski 89). We must, urges Dick Harrison, “judge by the action and the imagery rather than by what Ross’s narrator tells us . . .” (152). Hard task that since it is she who provides the imagery and the account of the action. There is no being free of Mrs. Bentley, as John Moss in his revisionary reading of the novel points out: “All that we receive as readers is the product of Mrs. Bentley’s mind” (“Mrs. Bentley and the Bicameral Mind” 82) so that “to consider Mrs. Bentley unreliable is an evasion” (83). She is, as Kroetsch says of women, “the figure who contains the space, who speaks the silence” (“The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction” 49). The appropriate question, therefore, is not “What does she miss?” or “Who does she manipulate?” but “Who does she become in speaking?” Her diary may be an inadequate report of place and people, but it is a propulsive self-report, producing the self which it reports upon.

It is my intention to rehabilitate Mrs. Bentley, first along feminist lines, but finding those inadequate, I shall have recourse to broader terms. Like Tristram Shandy, I would like to set off “at a little distance” (432) from my task, acknowledging and attempting to explain in the first place the foibles in Mrs. Bentley’s character. Therefore, I shall begin again.

1.

Almost everyone discusses *As for Me and My House* focusing on Philip Bentley, the failed minister, the potential artist, but this is Mrs. Bentley’s journal; she is the maker of the story. She is both the subject-speaker and the object that her words seek. Written by Sinclair Ross, *As for Me and My House* is the autobiographical journal of Mrs. Philip Bentley, a predictably passive, whiny, weary-voiced, thirty-four-year-old parson’s wife, who with her husband arrives on a rainy April day at Horizon, his fourth charge. “She is content,” writes Edward McCourt, “to submerge her personality in that of her husband so completely as to become something less than human” (102). If McCourt is right, what we have here, lamentably, is another chapter in the chronicles of the powerless, those who live not at the center but on the horizon of power, a view which confers validity on Judith Fetterley’s claim: “Not only does powerlessness characterize woman’s experience of reading, it also describes the content of what is read” (xiii).

Nonetheless it is Mrs. Bentley who is in charge here, managing their public lives, maintaining the "false front" of pastoral appearance: "It is in large part owing to her skill in dealing with people that her husband has been able to go on living a lie" (Jones 39), the ministerial lie. As Mrs. Bentley tells us it is she who, in order to get Philip out of his doldrums, suggests and arranges the adoption of Steve, the twelve-year-old, motherless Catholic boy who has been deserted by his father. It is she who, when Steve creates a ruckus with the Finley twins, stalls the emotional explosion with the townspeople towards which Philip stumbles.

His voice was shaking out, hardening. I could feel the hot throb of all the years he has curbed and hidden and choked himself—feel it gather, break, the sudden reckless stumble for release—and before it was too late, before he could do what he should have done twelve years ago, I interrupted.

I took my place beside him, and as he groped for words began explaining the situation as it really was.

I was cool and logical enough. (72-73)

But her management of people and emotion is not limited to her own dreary household. Repeatedly she invites Paul Kirby (curbing?) to supper so that his presence will defuse, or obscure, the tension between herself and Philip. Worse still, once aware of Judith West's attraction to Reverend Bentley, Mrs. Bentley invites Judith to supper in order to witness Philip's unresponsiveness (she hopes) to Judith's adoration. Mrs. Bentley is "not above gloating" (109).

But these management skills show only the aggressive side of Mrs. Bentley, and aggression is the expression of the powerless. Of course, these acts appear to be meritorious. Publicly she appears to be the good Christian (adopting the waif), the good wife (more level-headed than her husband), the good manse hostess (entertaining the lonely singles of the charge). It is only in her diary, and this to herself, that she admits the real motives behind these actions. Unintended for other eyes, the diary tells all, that is, all she can admit to herself. Only in the lacunae, the deflections (descriptions of town, landscape and weather [McMullen 63]), and the unnecessary lies (lying to Philip about where she has

been) might we discover the inadmissible, and of these, the lacunae, or gaps between entries, are most interesting.

Nowhere are her management skills more obvious than in her handling of Philip, "the lover of horses," an etymology provided by Paul, the philologist. Philip is frequently identified with horses. He is, Paul observes, a "spavined horse"; he takes Steve, Mrs. Bentley notes, as Pegasus, and frequently Philip paints or draws horses. Indeed, he seems fascinated with horses, the wilder the better. On their summer holiday at Paul's family's ranch, Philip is inclined to choose the wild mustang for his adopted son, Steve, and when after Steve's departure, Philip rides the abandoned three-year-old mare, Minnie, he knows himself to be absurdly ill-seated on the placid beast.

Mrs. Bentley handles Philip according to the arcana of "the woman's way." Mrs. Bird, a neighbour, is high priestess of this knowledge and she instructs Mrs. Bentley: "Always let a man think how fine and tolerant he is to put up with you. That's the formula for marital success" (86). Mrs. Bentley is, however, already an adept and does not need this bird-brained advice: "So today I let him be the man about the house, and sat on a trunk among the litter serenely making curtains over . . ." (3). So within, as well as without, the parsonage Mrs. Bentley erects false fronts—"let a man think . . ." And why must she nurture Philip's sense of manliness? Because in creating the appearance of his being free and dominant, she lessens the likelihood that he will discover and react to the reality: "It's a woman's way, I suppose, to keep on trying to subdue a man, to bind him to her, and it's a man's way to keep on just as determined to be free" (64). Mrs. Bentley's practice of "the woman's way" is necessitated by what she knows of the man's way: "I didn't know how little it can amount to wanting a woman at night, putting up with her in the daytime" (110). Although long-suffering is not the prerogative of woman, when Paul suffers similarly from his hopeless attachment to Mrs. Bentley, she describes it as "a helpless, numb one of awareness, like a woman's . . ." (158). The "woman's way" includes a vigilant lookout for competition; Mrs. Bentley scrutinizes the congregation on her first Sunday in Horizon: "if ever we reach our hundredth Horizon, I'll still sit looking up and down the pews exactly as I did tonight. Frightened a little, primitive, green-eyed" (10). Mrs. Bentley appears to be more jail-keeper

than journal-keeper. A careful reading of Mrs. Bentley's journal reveals, suggests Lorraine McMullen, that "her love for her husband is too possessive, her determination too manipulative, her attitude to the town too hypocritical . . ." (87). She has, says Ken Mitchell, dominated her husband's life, "employing the traditional range of feminine wiles . . ." (36). Wilfred Cude goes further. Cude, describing Mrs. Bentley's "tendency to manipulate other people into carrying out her wishes," suggests that "On occasion, her use of those about her exceeds . . . feminine caprice and verges upon actual cruelty" (8-9).

Does Ross, in spite of his "tremendous insight into a woman's mind" (Stephens 178), present, even reinforce, the traditional Western cultural notion that men are free and women bind? David Stouck appears to think so: "just as at the beginning she (Mrs. Bentley) holds the power to confer or deny Philip manhood—'today I let him be the man about the house'—so, towards the ends [sic], her power to castrate is still sharply voiced . . ." (145). How is the female reader, listening to a female narrative voice, to react to this image of woman: Mrs. Bentley is manipulative in her weakness, desperate in the measures which she takes to keep her man, her sole sense of identity for she has foregone all else, including a career as a pianist. Legitimatizing her actions by reference to "a woman's way," Mrs. Bentley presents herself as representative woman. She is, says D.J. Dooley, "both individual and type" (37). In "The Silent Woman," Marcia Landy articulates the problem for the female reader of male-authored texts: "And the image of herself in literature she has been asked to appreciate, is that of silence, receptivity, and responsiveness to the needs of the man" (20). The warden here is hostage to the prisoner's needs; to Philip's potential as artist, Mrs. Bentley is especially hostage. Silently she skulks about the house when the creative fit is upon him. Her existence, name, and identity are submerged in Philip, the Possible.

Passive/manipulative has been the predominant reading of her character in those critical studies that take Philip as central in this supposed "portrait of an artist" novel. "For centuries in Western culture," writes Sherill Grace, "women have experienced themselves as 'other,' powerless, or if powerful, as evil" (44). Mrs. Bentley is not either/or, but both: "at times oppressively vicious but always vulnerable" (*Patterns of Isolation* 150), John Moss

describes her. Mrs. Bentley's journal reveals her experience of powerlessness while recording at the same time an exercise of power which is in its nature "tyrannically capricious," a malignant form of power, which as Mary Wollstonecraft notes, arises in powerlessness (132). And beyond the text, in critical assessment, as Morton L. Ross has pointed out, Mrs. Bentley is further disempowered—her role as narrator debunked (194). Dispossessed of narrative authority and further of text ("Left in her hands, it falls just short of existence as text, as story" [Seim 104]), the narrator of *As for Me and My House* is critically known as Blameable Mrs. Bentley—disliked and dismissed.

2.

Indisputably a manipulator, Mrs. Bentley is, however, much more than that for this is surely one of the most complex characters in English Canadian fiction. And it is this complexity which compels the reader to press beyond the initial "another marginal woman" reading of this novel. Invaded ("the sand drifts everywhere") and imprisoned ("the house a cell"), Mrs. Bentley is a character of complex ironies. She is a prisoner who imprisons ("I've destroyed him") and a watcher who is herself watched not only by the townspeople of Horizon but also by Philip: "a precipitant . . . clearing his eyes for a moment so that he could see me in his life for what I actually am" (37). And if she is manipulative, it is because she is hopelessly oppressed. The oppressors are spatial, temporal, physical, domestic, and marital. On their first Sunday in Horizon the "big vacant stillness of the place" oppresses the couple. What stretches before the Bentleys, however, is not just the vastness of space but the vacuity of time—the endless Horizons of the foreseeable future. The elements—the rain, dust, snow, and especially the wind—oppress Mrs. Bentley. The wind "makes me feel lost, dropped on this little perch of town and abandoned" (5), "a queer helpless sense of being lost miles out in the middle of it . . ." (35). The prairies, covered with snow provoke a similar "queer, lost sensation," and on another walk, she experiences "a lost elemental feeling." Similarly, the summer dust, "so thick that sky and earth are just a blur," threatens "one step beyond, you think, and you'd go plunging into space" (73).

Space, time, and the physical elements conspire in monstrous oppression.

The monster with which Mrs. Bentley must engage is predatory nothingness, chiefly represented by the wind, "the agent of oblivion" (Ricou 83), but it is not the external environment alone which threatens Mrs. Bentley with nothingness. Beyond the gritty detail of wind, dirt, and rain, Mrs. Bentley's diary records in unrelenting detail the domestic world of cramped rooms, daily household chores, and tin-can meals. The oppressive domestic routine exacerbates, and only sometimes relieves, the marital tension which results from Philip's indifference. Philip's indifference is a threat equal to the wind's: "To have him notice me, speak to me as if I really mattered in his life, after twelve years with him that's all I want or need" (16). Against the indifference of environment and the indifference of her husband, Mrs. Bentley asserts her existence. It is in the diary she is made—self-born, rising up not in spite of, but in engagement with, their indifference.

Steve's first appearance is vaguely threatening because as Philip's eager response to Steve indicates, she stands to lose even the little attention which she has so carefully hoarded. The boy and man's absorption in one another sends a shudder through Mrs. Bentley: "I don't know what came over me—maybe just the wind, the plaintive way it whined. I seemed to feel myself vaguely threatened" (42). No wonder she begrudges every minute Philip and Steve spend together. Steve rejuvenates Philip, but Mrs. Bentley does not, as she had hoped, gain worth or even notice in Philip's eyes as a result of his rejuvenation (Chambers 33). It is not along these lines—adoptive and substitute—that her worth will be found. Nor does Steve's departure after three months as their adoptive son restore Philip to her. Philip's indifference is thereafter a "dead impersonal kindness." During her August illness, Philip is "kind these days, from such a great distance . . ." (120).

During her illness, Mrs. Bentley is cared for by Judith West whose principal physical feature, Mrs. Bentley has remarked earlier, is the whiteness of her face. "She gives a peculiar impression of whiteness while you're talking to her, fugitive whiteness, that her face seems always just to have shed" (11). Soon after meeting her, Philip tries to capture that feature:

It's Judith tonight he's drawing. Or rather, trying to draw, for the strange swift whiteness of her face eludes him. The floor is littered with torn-up, crumbled sketches. He's out of himself, wrestling. There's a formidable wrinkle across his forehead, and in his eyes tense moments of immobile glare. . . . That's the part about him that hurts, the way he does wrestle, the way he throws himself into his drawing, his fierce absorption. . . . I wish I could reach him, but it's like the wilderness outside of night and sky and prairie. . . . (24-25)

Philip's indifference to Mrs. Bentley is clearly connected in her mind with nature's. Mrs. Bentley can't reach Philip because turned from her, he is reaching for the wind, dreaming perhaps like Sylvia Plath of "horses fluent in the wind" (109). That his relationship with Judith is consummated in the flesh rather than in art matters little and matters a great deal. It matters little because either way (flesh or art), he is turned from his wife. It matters a great deal because now the wilderness is withindoors. The wind is this side, her side, of the false fronts. The question is—will it blow her away, erase her, or will she, further threatened, further diminished, finally turn upon it, turn to it?

From the beginning, in *Horizon*, Mrs. Bentley has been afraid of the wind and the chaos it threatens: "To relax, I felt, would be to let the walls around me crumple in" (38). Her reinforcement against the wind is a domesticity focused upon Philip, but she comes to realize not just the futility but the error of this effort.

It always turns out the same when you make up your mind that what's right for you must be right for someone else. I made up my mind about Philip once . . . and I was so sure that my little way of sympathy and devotion was the better way. Maybe there would be three of us today a lot happier if I'd had El Greco to teach me his lesson fourteen or fifteen years ago. (150)

This entry, with its astounding frankness, follows the longest lacunae (twenty-four days) in the journal. El Greco, the stray wolfhound, found, like Steve, brief asylum in the Bentleys' home, but bread and milk and safety, as Paul points out, are not what the hound needs: "He was a wolfhound; we should have let him live like one" (149).

In the year of her diary, in the very process of confronting the truth about herself—and the writing is that process—Mrs. Bentley realizes and acknowledges the folly of her “attempt to bind Philip to her with the cozy bands of domesticity” (Bowen 44). That realization, cumulative not sudden, is set down in January, the bitter month in which El Greco disappears. The winter entries of this diary have received the least critical attention, even though it is in these entries and the spaces between them that Mrs. Bentley really develops. However monotonous the rains of spring and the dust of summer, in the undifferentiated and unremarkable days of winter, she nears the condition—nothingness—that she most fears. She almost disappears as the journal entries peter out. There are sixteen entries for May, thirteen for June and July, but only three in the months of November and December, two in January and February, and three in March. Structured April to April, the journal’s initial leisurely pace yields, in the tedious winter months, to brief, bitter truths.

The entry regretting her folly, “my little way,” is followed by the unpalatable truth about herself: “I haven’t roots of my own anymore. I’m a fungus or parasite whose life depends on him. He throws me off and I dry and wither” (151).

These perceptions—the recognition of folly and dependency—are the work of the wind that has entered in, and the agency of that wind, Judith West, a presence who is so much more than the “wisp” of a girl she appears to be. She is the primitive force that having entered in, must be met. “I’ve fought it out with myself and won at last. We’re going to adopt Judith’s baby” (154). Mrs. Bentley’s battle—“I fought it out”—occurs in the second longest gap in the journal. The entry comes after fifteen days of silence. Two things are important here. The fight is with “myself,” but the victory (“and won”) has implications for what “We’re going” to do. Mrs. Bentley’s great aim is not to get out of domesticity but to get on with it. She would turn the house of bondage into a living house, “bring it to life.”

“My little way” of “sympathy and devotion” gives way to confrontation; the fight “with myself” is followed by an explosive confrontation with Philip, what Ricou (89) calls a “fit of rage” (89):

I ran to the bedroom door, flung it open, and showed him the baby. "Your baby!" I cried. "Yours——" and he stopped white for a moment and said in a slow hollow voice, "You were with her then—and she told you—" (163)

an explosion which parallels and inverts the public confrontation which Mrs. Bentley forestalled earlier in *Horizon*. This time it is of her own making. Neither passive nor manipulative, Mrs. Bentley in this scene is confrontational. She dares, as Cude points out, "a revelation of her knowledge" that could "jeopardize what was left of the marriage" (7). The walls, whose crumbling she has feared, collapse, revealing a group of three, a family, a family identified with a child. "It's in the eyes, a stillness, a freshness, a vacancy of beginning" (165), but what begins here will not be without confusion, a confusion which Mrs. Bentley invites. The child bears Philip's name ("lover of horses"); the child's name encodes the chaos from which he came.

"Two of us in the same house you'll get mixed up. Sometimes you won't know which of us is which."

That's right, Philip. I want it so. (165)

She has allowed the wind into her life. Leaning into it, wanting it, she declares her want. Her "I want it so" is an assertion of presence.

"The Man's desire," Coleridge writes, "is for the Woman. The Woman's desire is for the desire of the Man" (1.14.91). Mrs. Bentley, in her year-long struggle, discovers that wanting Philip to want her is parasitic. While remaining within the domestic framework, and she imagines no other, she enlarges her desires. "What I want" replaces "what I want from you."

In the struggle "with myself," Mrs. Bentley confronts the force (the wind figured in *Judith West*) that threatened annihilation; in the explosion with Philip, she challenges head-on his indifference. In both cases, she struggles against her worst fears—her insignificance, her unimportance. Mrs. Bentley does not change their lives through her scheme of saving for a bookstore; she changes their lives by changing herself.

3.

In *As for Me and My House* Ross explores through a female

character the human need, the basic human need, to be seen, to matter, to live and in living to count. This need, as expressed by Mrs. Bentley, is cast in the most domestic of terms—to bring a house to life. As the title phrase “*Me and My House*” indicates, the narrator and the house are intricately connected; revive one and the other lives. This is not a story of a woman’s escape from domesticity in order to make her life count. Mrs. Bentley would find worth where she lives.

Perhaps Ross understood that this need—the human need to count—is particularly aggravated for a woman, a wife, a childless wife. The childless wife is an ideally positioned character through which to explore this theme. Children obscure the issue because mothers count so much. Mrs. Bentley, the childless wife, surrounded by indifferent nature and wed to an indifferent husband, grimly confronts her own insignificance. Some critics, like McMullen and Chambers, link the evening hour of Mrs. Bentley’s journal writing to the Puritan custom of recording the “Christian soul’s progress towards grace” (Chambers 26; McMullen 60). Robert Kroetsch comments that the time of writing is “that precious, mysterious time when day turns to night, when reality collides with dream” (“Afterword” 217). Mrs. Bentley writes in her journal in the evening, in those hours when mothers settle their children for the night, recalling with the children the day’s events. Mrs. Bentley’s writing fills that void. In the very first entry (8 April) surveying their present situation, their arrival in Horizon, Mrs. Bentley writes, “And huddling there I wished for a son again . . .” (5). In and through the diary the childless woman discovers her significance.

“Perhaps the major reason for the limited critical appreciation of the book,” writes David Stouck, “is the mistaken belief that because Mrs. Bentley is the narrator, she is the novel’s central character. This assumption relegates Philip Bentley to a secondary role and overlooks the artist’s story theme which gives the novel its universal interest” (143), but it is the theme deriving from Mrs. Bentley’s character which gives the novel universal appeal. Mrs. Bentley, the complex central character, articulates for all of us, men and women alike, the yearning that our lives count.

Ross’s novel is not an exploration of “the female condition,” but through the central female character, Ross “masterfully” explores the human condition. Mrs. Bentley admires in the people

of Partridge Hill, the rural portion of her husband's charge, their primitive assertion "in the face of so blind and uncaring a universe" (19). Paul describes Partridge Hill as "Humanity in Microcosm." That is what Mrs. Bentley is—blameable and brave. That she is female is not incidental; it is paramount. As John Moss notes, "Ross defers to Mrs. Bentley" ("Mrs. Bentley and the Bicameral Mind" 83). Ross masters this theme by turning it over to a woman who knows that if she does not become mistress of her life, she will not exist. Mrs. Bentley is manipulative of others' lives until she realizes that the only mastery that matters is that exercised over her own fears.

The journal not only documents change, it is instrumental in that change. The repetitious nature of Mrs. Bentley's writing enacts the vacuity of her own life; at the same time, words constitute her only way out. A silent woman, she is not. Her condition provokes the journal; the journal records her greatest and growing fear—her meaninglessness in the cosmos and in her marriage. Writing it out, she confronts it. Confronting it, she survives. Ross empowers Mrs. Bentley with words, and her words set them both—husband and wife—free.

Reviewing the past and describing the present, Mrs. Bentley acknowledges as useless the possessiveness and manipulations through which for years she has attempted to keep the little she has. Beyond that little, she fears, lies nothing at all—only the wind's abandonment and Philip's indifference. Confronting these, she emerges where there is risk and confusion, change and uncertainty. Of course the ending must be uncertain; she has chosen uncertainty. "That the book should end so ambivalently seems," writes W.H. New, "ultimately part of his [Ross's] plan" (67). She stands now ruffled by the winds she no longer fears, among the ruins of old walls. This wreckage was wrought with words.

I began this essay by considering Mrs. Bentley as a figure who is at once "less than human" (McCourt) and a castrating manipulator (Stouck), but the complexity of the character, whose consciousness is so fully revealed to us through her journal, transcends the passive/manipulative reading. In *As for Me and My House*, Ross offers the reader an unusual experience, a male-authored text in which the reader is invited to identify not with a

masculine but with a female experience and perspective presented as the human one.

It seemed to Stewart C. Easton, an early reviewer of the novel "an impossible book for a man to have written." The story, told by the wife in the first person, was "an appalling task for any man to handle," but only a man, the reviewer assured his readers, could have written it.

On second thoughts [sic] perhaps only a man could have done it. No woman could have seen herself so clearly, analyzed the pity and the tenderness and the dislike, and yet kept it free from sentimentality, balanced and complete. (18)

Ross succeeds in the "appalling task" precisely because he can, unlike the reviewer, imagine a tough-minded, ruthlessly frank female narrator, one whose words name, and in naming overcome, the condition which threatens her.

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