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Straight or Bent
Textual/Sexual T(ri)angles in *As for Me and My House*

Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House* (1941) has long been considered an icon of English-Canadian fiction, as numerous critical analyses testify. Those collected in two volumes of essays (edited by Stouck 1991 and Moss 1992) illustrate the wide range of approaches adopted to this enigmatic diary novel and the variety of interpretations proposed. Yet Keath Fraser's recently published (1997) memoir of Ross has put into question all the preceding studies, by speaking openly and directly for the first time about Ross's homosexuality and its bearing on his most famous novel. The questions raised are not limited to the meanings previously assigned to the text: they concern also the apparent conspiracy of silence around this dimension of Ross's writing. This aspect seems to be a classic example of the "open secret" that Eve Sedgwick associates with the institutional treatment of discreetly homosexual writers whose work, or at least its literary value, is supposed to have little to do with their sexual orientation. The author "may very well have been homosexual—but it would be provincial to let so insignificant a fact make a difference to our understanding of any serious project of life, writing or thought" (Sedgwick 1990: 53). Many critics situate Ross's novel in a corpus of "Prairie fiction" characterized by its depiction of small-town hypocrisy, where what is hidden is usually expected to be related to illicit heterosexual relations. Most appear not to consider the possibility of homosexuality existing in such a milieu, and if they suspect it, they choose to ignore it.[1] However, Ross's novel can be read differently, by dissociating it from its English-Canadian connotations,

and placing it in the comparative context of the diary-novel as a genre, particularly in France and in Québec, where this type of narration has often been associated with the questioning of gender identity and sexual orientation (Raoul 1993). This focus will, I believe, confirm that the interest of Ross's novel extends well beyond its regionalism.

The author most clearly representative of the French diary-novel tradition is André Gide. Lorraine McMullen (7-8) informs us that Ross was very fond of French novels, especially those by Gide and Proust, and that he read them in the original when he was living in Montreal. Admittedly, this does not necessarily mean that at the time of writing *As For Me and My House* Ross already knew Gide's most famous diary novels[2] (*La Porte étroite* 1909; *La Symphonie pastorale* 1919; *L'École des femmes* 1929). He may well, however, have already read a novel he considered important, Aldous Huxley's *Point Counter Point* (McMullen 8), which was published in 1928 and has many similarities to Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (1925), including the use of notebooks. In Gide's novel, extracts from Édouard's diary discuss his attraction to an adolescent boy. Even if there was no direct influence, Ross must have recognized a strong textual and sexual affinity when he discovered Gide's fictional journals. Like Gide's texts, Ross's novel functions as a palimpsest, by means of the diary form which allows the author both to hide and reveal a subtext related to his forbidden sexual orientation. In fact it is striking that, deliberately or not, Ross incorporates into one book elements that appear in several of Gide's fictions. As in *La Porte étroite* (and its companion novel, *L'Immoraliste*), the plot concerns a marriage between a man who appears not to be attracted by women and a woman who loves him. As in *La Symphonie pastorale*, the story revolves around a hypocritical pastor, whose wife sees more clearly than he does regarding his unacknowledged physical attraction to an adopted child (a blind girl in Gide's novel). Mrs. Bentley's diary, like Éveline's in *l'École des femmes*, conveys the disillusionment of a gifted pianist married to a man who refuses to communicate with her because of his own false front. Although Ross is less direct than Gide in *Geneviève*, the sequel to *L'École des femmes*, he also broaches the problem of how to combine homosexuality (or a *mariage blanc*) with parenthood.[3] The fascination of Ross's text, like that of Gide's *récits*, results from the need to assess not only what the main characters realize about their own sexual orientation, but also what their partner can be assumed to know about it, and whether they know what (or that) their partner knows.

This guessing game is inseparable from the form and function of the diary novel, which reflects within the fiction the author-actor-reader triangle that produces the novel. The fictional diarist adopts all three roles: the narrating "I" of the moment of writing is identified with the narrated self-as-character in the unfolding story, and in a supposedly private journal the writer is also the immediate (and potential future) narratee and decoder of the text (Raoul 1980). This triangular structure is often duplicated in a fictional editorial frame. In *L'Ecole des femmes*, for example, "Gide" explains how he came by Éveline's diaries, and invites the reader to join him in assessing them. Such a mediatory pre-text is conspicuously absent in *As For Me and My House*, where our acceptance of the diary as Mrs. Bentley's, in spite of the male author's name, is a straightforward case of suspension of disbelief. Nor does her diary play a part in the plot, as in many fictional journals. Its destiny remains unknown: Mrs. Bentley does not re-read her text and "discover the truth," as does Gide's Pastor, and Philip does not gain access to the diary, like Jérôme in *La Porte étroite*. Mrs. Bentley never recognizes that she has produced a novel (see Woodcock 78), as do the narrators of self-referential diary fictions, beginning with Sartre's *La Nausée* (published in 1938, the year before Ross was writing his novel, see Fraser 45). On the contrary, this "purloined" diary remains concealed, and the reader is left wondering whether its hidden meaning (obvious once seen) is known to her, to Philip, or to Ross himself. For once one has recognized the homosexual subtext, it is impossible to ignore it, indeed it appears as textually overdetermined.

A closer look from this perspective makes it difficult to believe that Ross was not *de mauvaise foi* himself, when he claimed not to have consciously thought of this novel as a depiction of homosexuality (Fraser 32, 40). The triangular narrative structure based on changing roles or angles is reflected in the shifting pattern of relationships in which the Bentleys are implicated, each occupying in turn the position of desiring subject, desired object, and analytical (jealous) observer, or third person apparently excluded. Yet the relationship of rivalry draws two conflated rather than contradictory desires together, revealing the attraction of the same—the homoerotic—in competition with that of the other, the different or heterosexual. These patterns illustrate Eve Sedgwick's model (1985: 21-27) for the mediated *rapprochement* between potential same-sex partners, camouflaged by the presence of a third person of the opposite sex who serves as

both decoy and link. A series of such triangles produces the "tangles" faced by Mrs. Bentley, the knots which she attempts to unravel to establish a semblance of the only acceptable trio—an oedipal family composed of mother, father and son (see Buss). In spite of their irreconcilable differences, the Bentleys do not renounce the desire to found a "house," a lineage, although the line is bent rather than straight. The false fronts that provide a dominant metaphor throughout the text are not removed, but slanted: the masks are askew, just enough to reveal that not only Mrs. Bentley's femininity is a "masquerade," to use Irigaray's term (80), but so are Philip's masculinity and the maternity and paternity that both will claim in the end. Heterosexual gender and generation must appear to remain inextricably entwined, but constantly risk disconnection. A closer examination of these two aspects—gender as masquerade and reproduction as counterfeit—will pave the way for a return to the comparison with diary fiction in French, and in particular the image of genderless self-engenderment in Québec diary novels.

The gender-blurring that permeates Ross's novel begins, as Helen Buss (193) has shown, with Ross's choice of a "feminine" form (the private diary) and a female narrating voice, to produce a text in which the male author is nevertheless assumed by most critics to identify, not with Mrs. Bentley, but with her husband, Philip.[4] Robert Kroetsch's influential early study (reprinted in Stouck ed.) established the "house/horse" opposition as central to this novel, and to Prairie fiction in general. It is based on a polarisation between two genders, each defined in opposition to what the other is supposed to be. The woman's house connotes stability, continuity and containment as the result of sexual activity. The man's horse represents the opposing values of movement, change and freedom: sexual promiscuity for the sake of discovery and self-indulgence, rather than reproduction, responsibility and respectability. A similar dichotomy appears in Québec fiction as "une route, une maison."[5] The title *As For Me and My House* raises the initial question as to *whose* the house is, in the Bentleys' situation. In fact, it belongs to neither of them, but to the Church that they despise. Both are equally excluded from ownership, and the shingle they hang up is strictly temporary. Mrs. Bentley is not really a housewife, any more than Philip is a genuine Father of the Church.

Mrs. Bentley is certainly aware that as the Parson's wife she must maintain a certain standard of housekeeping, just as she must wear a certain

style of hat, but it does not come naturally to her. She repeats numerous clichés about "a man's way" and "a woman's way," echoing her friend Mrs. Bird, even claiming to accept the necessity of becoming a "parasite" or an "empty shell" (99, 199) in order to appear to be a successful wife. Yet her relationship with the house is hostile. Like many female diarists, she resents her imprisonment and fears it may drive her insane.[6] It is she, not Philip, who feels a constant need to get outside, and walks along the railroad tracks, whatever the weather. However, Mrs. Bentley does subscribe to the belief that being a "real woman" necessarily entails motherhood. Because she is barren, she perceives herself as old at thirty-four and unattractive, in spite of evidence to the contrary. She attributes her frustration (and Philip's) to the lack of a child, as much as to their common abandonment of artistic ambition. She has had a stillborn baby, and her present apparent sterility is presented as the reason for Philip's failure to become a father, rather than the reverse. She provides no explanation for the absence of any subsequent pregnancies. The childless home is blamed for Philip's refusal to grow up. His "broodless" (6) wife has constantly to fight the temptation to mother or nurse him (46-47, 50). Although she claims that this annoys him, he in fact appears to offer little resistance. Philip is actually the one who adopts a type of narcissistic withdrawal typical of many diarists, closeting himself in the womb-like refuge of his study to make his drawings and sleeping a great deal.[7]

The mainstay of Mrs. Bentley's self-construction as feminine is that she must "let him be the man" (5), but it is all too apparent that the only way for her to do this is to *act* for him, in both senses of the term. Since he is not good with his hands (except at art), she wields the pliers and chops the wood, or secretly finds someone else to do it. Yet her own hands are those not only of a woman but of a pianist. She is no more "naturally" inclined to manual labour than he is. And he, in his turn, is quite capable of it, when it does not involve doing it for her. It is around Mrs. Bentley that Philip cannot perform "like other men" (175). With her he is reduced, in spite of his size, to the helpless womanly role of passivity, seclusion and being spoken for (in sexual as well as verbal terms). In spite of numerous references to his rigid straightness and uprightness in public, this seems to be as much of an illusion as his simulated religious convictions. On the one occasion when he acts in a "manly" fashion (at the time of the fire), his wife informs him that he is not dressed for the part (170).[8] We are con-

stantly reminded that Philip is playing a role and that he is (according to the narrator) a poor actor (22, 192). He can only "be himself" on his own behind his study door, where the "artist in him" (6, 25) can abandon the simulation of both pastoral piety and virile efficiency. His attempts at conventional masculinity are just as much of a masquerade as his wife's femininity. As Mrs. Bentley points out, "It doesn't follow that the sensitive qualities that make an artist are accompanied by the unflinching, stubborn ones that make a man of action and success" (135). She claims that his study knows "what he really is," but (like her) "won't let slip a word" (61). Since she is quite willing to show his pictures to others, it does not seem to be only his artistic "bent" that is being concealed.

The definition of the Bentleys as "artists" is inextricably bound up, in this small-town conservative context, with doubts as to their conformity to dominant gender roles, and by extension their sexual orientation. Fraser informs us that Ross's mother deflected questions about her son's failure to marry by citing his artistic character. In French novels of the 1930s and Québec fiction of the 1940s and '50s there are numerous male diarists with mundane jobs like Ross (a bank clerk), who dream of becoming writers or artists, and who see this tendency in themselves as in conflict with the masculine image they wish to preserve.[9] The originality of Ross's novel lies in its juxtaposition of two characters, one of each sex, who have both apparently sacrificed their artistic ambitions (and sexual fulfilment) in order to conform to the "norm," and who both ultimately blame the other for this choice. It can only be justified by the production of a child who will redeem them by succeeding where they have not: failure in art and life can be compensated by self-reproduction, but the latter appears to be dependent on a successful heterosexual relationship.

At the ranch, Laura immediately perceives Philip as effeminate, someone who "draws little pictures" and is "not the right kind of man" to bring up Steve (123), the adolescent boy they plan to adopt. Philip dresses up like one of the (cow)boys, but in spite of his name he does not share their passion for horses, and when his wife flirts with one of them he is not disturbed. Fraser's discussion of the homosexual subtext in *As For Me and My House* focusses mainly on the role played by Steve, whom Mrs. Bentley describes as "ominously good-looking" (54).[10] That she is afraid Philip will be drawn to Steve by something more than fatherly affection is indicated by her otherwise unreasonable fear and jealousy of the boy ("There was

something rankling in me that reason couldn't justify," 56). It seems not to be the first time that a similar situation has arisen, since she assumes that Philip's infatuation will not last, reminding herself that "if history repeats itself it may not be so very long" (70). Other references imply that Philip has a past history of dalliance with female members of former congregations, but among Philip's old drawings she finds one of "a handsome lad" (201). This otherwise superfluous reference indicates that there may well have been earlier attachments to young boys, since Philip's private drawings depict those who "draw" him (in Horizon, Steve and Judith). She is afraid that Steve may have "the looks, mind and imagination" to "make Philip's marsh-fire a long one" (100), but encourages herself with the thought that Steve will change, and Philip will see him "as he really is" (70).

That Philip is attracted to young men rather than to women is mutely trumpeted by a copious trail of clues throughout the text. We know that he was reluctant to marry (44, 157), and did so when the woman in question seemed the least "womanly," closer to the androgynous artist figure. His wife mentions that he does not care for women (85), that he loves her as much as he could any "of her kind" (15), that he cannot forgive her for being "just a woman" (31). She states explicitly that he "likes boys" (9), and that women are "not as necessary to him as to most men" (22). While he may have a passing and trivial interest in a female, he remains "out of the reach of a woman" (23). Later, she remarks that "[Steve] wasn't really a rival. He belonged to a part of Philip's life that was always barred to me anyway" (164). Yet she is overtly jealous when Philip prefers to be alone with Steve (60, 84). She also notes on no less than seven occasions that Philip, who usually recoils from all physical contact with her (117), likes to touch Steve, to "press against him" (70) and stand with his hands on his shoulders (a gesture that Ross recognized as typically homosexual: Fraser 59). All these references initially appear "innocuous" in their context, but the accumulation is insistent. Although Philip is no horseman in the concrete sense, this "lover of horses" is said to "have taken Steve for Pegasus" (see Fraser 48), as a means to dream. Mrs. Bentley sees that "Steve is to do the things he tried to do and failed" (70). As Fraser emphasizes, there is a narcissistic identification on the part of Philip with this younger version of himself, marked like him by "the tangle of his early years" (153), especially the absence of a real father (66). This last element not only reflects Ross's own experience, but corresponds to the conventional Freudian pattern for

male homosexuality, as does Philip's desire to relive his own life through a younger version of himself.[11]

It is the episode at the ranch, which marks the half-way point in the diary, that speaks the most openly to the sexual frustration of Mrs. Bentley (surrounded by pictures of stallions or prize bulls and randy cowboys), who confronts an alternative model of female behaviour represented by the androgynous Laura. Philip appears to be "out of it," but is in fact becoming even closer to Steve. While his wife flirts with a cowboy ("hoping that Philip might see me" 128), and Paul looks jealously on, Philip is "sprawling on one of the benches" with a sleeping Steve, "supporting his shoulders to keep him from slipping forward" (129). It seems that Mrs. Bentley has reason to fear that Steve has "taken Philip from her" (69), that he means more to him than she does (99), and that this affection confirms that he was never really "hers" (145). It is certainly made abundantly clear that Philip is reluctant to have sex with his wife, or even to kiss her (Banting 37). Her "amorous attentions" have never been welcome (102), and he is constantly pretending to be asleep when she goes to bed. When he does occasionally "want" her, it is conspicuous by its rarity and perceived as a favour or concession to her. The most that she can really hope for is that he "won't mind," she cannot expect eagerness on his part (158), and when they do make love it leaves no feeling of "consummation" (199). Mrs. Bentley admits to feeling "queer" and describes herself as "a queer one" (203), but the term seems to apply more obviously to her husband. He would dance with her if he knew how (64), but he does not. The text encodes Philip overwhelmingly as a man whose sexual preference is not for women.

Steve is dressed up by Philip and Mrs. Bentley to look like "the preacher's son" (90), but he refuses to accept the role, preferring to keep his Catholic religious images and masculine tendency to brawl. He never appears to reciprocate the attentions that Philip bestows on him. One critic supposes that he resents Philip's "fatherly" attitude (Woodcock 97), but it is equally plausible to attribute Steve's reticence and his turning to Mrs. Bentley to an intuition of something else. Their house is full of "little closets" (18). Philip is constantly closeted in his study, but it is Steve who draws our attention, through his drawings, to the symbolism of the "leaning tower of Pisa," the square, straight water closet whose angle becomes increasingly precarious, until it is finally blown down.

Mrs. Bentley's attitude to Steve is ambivalent. She mediates a relationship between him and Philip, only to break it when it threatens her own relationship with her husband. Seeing Steve through Philip's eyes, she admits his attractiveness, and there is one occasion when she seems as close as Philip to succumbing to it: "I sat down beside him on the cot.... we looked at each other; then I went sentimental for a minute, and he let me. I didn't know anything like this could happen to me" (90). Here she speaks of Steve as if he were Philip. He even has Philip's "white lips," and like Philip "lets her" show her emotion. She can love him only through or as Philip, with a "twisted, hybrid love" (145). She and Steve are rivals for Philip's attention, which she tries to attract by showing that she could seduce Steve by her piano playing (as she had Philip). This result depends, however, as it did before, on her desexualisation. The effect is only to intensify the "conspiracy" between Philip and Steve against the matrons of Horizon, particularly Mrs. Finlay, who, one at first assumes, is responsible for having Steve removed. This explanation later appears less likely. Would she join in the fond farewell party at the station, if that were the case? The anonymous "someone" who denounced them (152-53) may very well be Mrs. Bentley herself (see Hinz and Teunissen), since she admits to her diary that she is glad he has gone, only to wonder later if they should have kept him a little longer (160). This may be her last resort, to keep hidden the "dark, strange, morbid passion" (153) that she believes Philip to have for Steve, whose presence has become as dangerous to their false propriety as the lack of faith which Steve's observation also makes difficult to conceal: "Philip, Steve and I.... it's such a tough, deep-rooted tangle that it hides. And none of them knows" (80).

The addition of Steve to the Bentley dyad initially enables them to establish a simulacrum of the conventional oedipal model (they repaint their shingle), but it cannot last, because Steve is seen by Mrs. Bentley as a rival for Philip's desire. Two other triangles are suggested as alternatives: both function by setting up another rival for each of the Bentleys, one who might possibly enable one of them to produce a child. The first is suggested by Philip's drawing on the school blackboard of himself, his wife, and the schoolteacher, Paul. The second is introduced when Mrs. Bentley, while playing the organ in church, sees in the mirror that her husband's gaze is fixed on Judith as she sings.

If Philip does not like women and definitely prefers adolescent boys, why does he have an affair with Judith? It seems that he is not attracted to her

because she is a woman (although she "dresses up" to gain his attention), but in spite of it, because of her youth, her voice and love of music, her physical strength and energy and her rebelliousness. These are the qualities that drew him to Mrs. Bentley when they first met, and that also attract Mrs. Bentley herself to Judith. When Mrs. Bentley believes that they have slept together, she interprets it as "on the rebound"; it happens just after he has received a cold letter from Steve, and she surmises that Judith is serving as a substitute for the boy in Philip's affections (164)—and in Steve's bed. At the time she is also replacing his wife, who is too ill to take care of the house. Mrs. Bentley may have been instrumental in bringing Judith and Philip together, but it seems to me difficult to deduce from her diary, as some critics have implied, a scheme on her part to use Judith as a surrogate mother and then dispose of her. Judith's death is indeed too convenient, but it would be more convincing, in my view, to propose that she may have willed her own death, having recognized Philip's immunity to female seduction, than that Mrs. Bentley is somehow responsible for it.

Judith and Mrs. Bentley become closer because of their shared desire. Mrs. Bentley identifies with the younger woman, even feeling sorry for her because she will discover, as she herself has, that Philip is inaccessible: it may well be this that Judith is at first not aware of and then "knows" (120-21, 160), rather than her own desire for Philip. Judith appears in many ways as a younger Mrs. Bentley, especially because of her love of music, and in this the attraction between the two women is parallel to that between Philip and Steve. Mrs. Bentley expresses surprise when she first notices Judith's breasts, deploring in the same breath that she herself has "never got along with women very well" (102). She claims that before meeting Philip, she was "impatient of what seemed their little rivalries and infatuations," and that since then she has been "afraid" (102). Is she afraid that they might attract Philip? Or afraid of female homosexuality, since she has become aware of Philip's orientation? She was also disturbed by glimpsing Mrs. Bird's nakedness through her dressing gown (79), and strongly attracted to Laura. The "queerness" she ascribes to herself may represent her own repressed sexuality, which nevertheless seems to be frustrated primarily because of Philip's coldness.

It is finally Mrs. Bentley who replaces Judith, as mother to her child, and the substitutions end up being in the realm of generation rather than gender. I am assuming (unlike Hinz and Teunissen) that Philip did sleep with

Judith (if not, how would he know that she "slipped just once"? 193), but that Mrs. Bentley is right in thinking that it "didn't mean anything" (163, 177). I also find it unlikely (as did Ross: Fraser 32) that Paul could be the father of Judith's child, although there is certainly some room for doubt as to whether it is in fact Philip. Paul is away at the ranch at the time when the child is conceived. More importantly, unlike Philip he is concerned for authenticity. He wishes to explain why he goes to church although he is a "pagan" (111), and is obsessed with naming and the "true," "original" meaning of words (including the association of "fuschia" to "Fuchs," and the description of the easel he gives Philip as a "little ass": see Mitchell and Banting). If Philip's name is "Bent" (probably his mother's rather than his father's), Paul Kirby's is "curbing" (Compton 65) rather than "curved": he represents a straight schoolteacher's line, and masters his horse. Mrs. Bentley's "what if... (she had married someone like Paul)" scenario (209) concludes that Paul would not, like Philip, have presented a "heedless wall." Unlike Philip, Paul would have been a suitable father, a legitimate one who maintains (however ironically) that "patriarch" is a "noble word" (213). If he were the father of Judith's baby, he would have married her. The combination of Judith and Paul, like that of Judith and Dan, the farmer who courts her, or Mrs. Bentley and her old flame, the violinist Percy Glenn, provides only a shadow triangle, one that cannot happen because of Philip's seduction.

Paul is a potential substitute for Philip in the Bentley triangle,[12] one who could enable Mrs. Bentley to retain the feminine position of object of desire, and possibly provide her with a child—the message of the rompers (205), which he buys and gives to her. Unlike Philip, he knows how to dance and is eager to be her partner (128). He tries to "befriend" Philip (112), and admires him in a "clear, firm, simple way" that contrasts with Philip's likes and dislikes, which are always "troubled and smouldering" (168). The fact that Philip is so upset and apparently jealous at the effect of Mrs. Bentley's piano playing on Paul might, of course, indicate another possible permutation: that Philip is secretly attracted to Paul. This possibility cannot be ruled out (a homosocial unit is created by Paul, Philip and Steve sharing a tent at the ranch, 125), but it seems that Paul would not respond. He might, however, have been aware all along of "what [Mrs. Bentley] was sure [she] was keeping secret" (213): not that the baby is Philip's, but that Philip is an unlikely father.

Whether or not Philip is actually the father of Judith's baby, its presence enables the Bentleys to establish a semblance of the patriarchal oedipal triangle. The child must be a son (204, 207), in order that he may bear Philip's name and be confused with him, continuing the winding and tenuous Bentley line. This line is actually matriarchal, engineered by Mrs. Bentley as Philip's mother's successor. Paul's explanation of the origin of words like "father" is the most fanciful of his etymologies: "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" (213). Mrs. Bentley "shakes her head": she is more likely to believe that the word for "mother" will emerge from the child's first vocalisations. Mr. Bentley "gives his wife a son," rather than the reverse, but it is as a result of her desire ("I want it so," 216). She allows him to be the father, but becomes a mother through her own efforts.

Fraser comments, as had earlier critics, on the relationship between Ross and his mother as a model for that between the Bentleys. Philip's misogyny, his resentment of his wife's control in spite of the fact that he benefits from her organisation of their life, echoes the complaints of a number of male diarists in Québec novels written before the Quiet Revolution. In a colonized society dominated internally by an alliance of the Church and older women, they perceive themselves as rendered impotent (though not castrated) by phallic mother figures whom they blame for depriving them of fathers to imitate (Raoul 1993). In a number of texts, their feelings of helplessness are accompanied by a fear of homosexual tendencies. The result in some later diary fictions, such as those by Hubert Aquin, may be the rape or murder of a woman, as the final proof of virility. None of these characters "comes out" as a homosexual, as in Gide's *Les Faux-Monnayeurs.* Rather, as in *As For Me and My House*, the appearance of conventional heterosexuality must be maintained at all costs. Whereas in Gide's text the counterfeit money is exposed as a fraud, in Ross's, as in the Québec examples, the wobbly false fronts cling tenuously on.

Many diary novels in the Québécois corpus end with a symbolic birth, which may, in the case of male narrators, represent the ultimate vengeance on the mother. Whether or not an actual baby is involved, it is usually the (re)birth of the diarist that is implied (Raoul 1993: 167-68.). The diary-writing period is seen as an incubation, a necessary narcissistic withdrawal prior to emerging as separate from the (m)other. Often the "birth of the book" (as the diarist recognizes the separate existence of the diary as text)

evokes the reincarnation of the diarist as Author/Writer. Although some critics see Mrs. Bentley's diary as a means for her to survive, or even to be "self-engendering" (Buss 196) or "self-born" (Compton 69), it seems to me that, compared to many other diary novels, this one avoids this conclusion. Here, the diarist emerges as a fake mother, rather than as a born-again speaking subject. Furthermore, not only is the baby illegitimate (and in a sense stolen from Judith at the cost of her life), but the diary/book is still-born like Mrs. Bentley's first child or Philip's abortive attempt at autobiography. We do not know what becomes of it. It remains hidden (within the fiction), replaced by the books of others in the store that is to substitute for the parsonage as a somewhat larger closet. The second-hand bookstore in particular is the locus of redistribution for pre-established knowledge and ideas (out)lived by others. Mrs. Bentley has already shown a predilection for the covers of books over their contents (209). This store to which they escape will be another false front and as much a prison as the religion which has dominated the Bentleys' lives so far.

It is illuminating to recall as a last point of comparison one of the best known Québec diary novels: Gérard Bessette's *Le Libraire*, which was published in 1950 and ostensibly set in the '40s, but like Ross's novel depicts a setting frozen in the '30s (the map of Saint-Jérôme dates from 1936). Like Philip in his study, Jodoin hides behind the books in the bookstore where he works, seeking to escape the gaze of the inhabitants of a Québécois Horizon. Equally stifled by religious hypocrisy and puritanism ("Her-eyes-on"?), Jodoin shares with Philip a shady past (he has also had to leave previous employment for unexplained reasons), an attraction to adolescent boys, and a reluctance to sleep with the "trivial" woman in his life (Raoul 1993: 170-78). However, the end of *Le Libraire* is spectacularly liberating: the hidden books related to free thought and sexuality will be released in the city, the false front replaced by the "libre air" of a new era, the Quiet Revolution (see Raoul 1993: 170-80).

Nothing of this nature occurs in *As for Me and My House*. There are two images in Mrs. Bentley's diary that may be read as representing a pregnancy, a "countdown" to release and renewal. The first is that of a balloon waiting to burst (150): it culminates in the release of wind, in the storm along with which Steve "blows over" (70). The calm that follows leads to a second "build up" (around Judith), this time described as an "abscess" (195) that needs to be lanced. Yet the violent scene of denunciation between

the Bentleys at the end is inconclusive. When Mrs Bentley cries "Your baby!" and Philip replies "she told you—" (214), she cuts him off in a gesture of verbal castration whose effectiveness is demonstrated by his silence. We cannot know for sure whether he was about to confirm or deny his paternity. What is clear is that at this point it suits them both that they should appear to believe in it. Mrs Bentley has succeeded in providing an appearance of "normality" in their relationship, and this result is what counts. It turns "the tangle grown between [them]" (186) into a neat and tidy marital knot, averting the danger that Philip might choose to join "his own kind," who are "reckless, spendthrift, bawdy" (135-36).

Fraser's memoir reveals just how difficult it was for Ross to join "his kind" publicly, even when he had the opportunity. He remained reluctant to bring his homosexuality out into the "limelight" and was willing to divulge his sexual experiences only in private, albeit as a means to posthumous exposure. In his life, as in his novel, the triangles that represented homosexuality in Europe in 1941 remained safely camouflaged behind a façade of "four-square" heterosexuality. Yet in *As For Me and My House*, as in the game of cat's cradle, a neat pattern of squares can be revealed as one of triangles, when the structure is "turned upside down," following Philip's advice (202), to show inversion as the right angle.

NOTES

1 More critical attention has been paid to the less hidden homosexual elements in some of Ross's short stories: see Andrew Lesk, "Something Queer is Going On Here: Desire in the Short Fiction of Sinclair Ross," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 61 (1997): 129-41.

2 Thanks to David Stouck for pointing this out to me.

3 Gide's *récits* were based on his *mariage blanc* to his cousin Madeleine, at a time when he hoped his homosexuality could be "cured." It has been discovered that parts of his wife's real diary are included in *La Porte étroite*. *Geneviève* provides a transposed account of a request he later received from a young woman to father her child (which produced a daughter). Fraser mentions that Ross did adopt an Italian boy, for a short time.

4 Fraser quotes Ross as stating that he meant to tell Philip's story, but became taken over by "her." Protean like Gide, Ross wove parts of his own life into Paul and Judith, as well as both Bentleys. One wonders whether experience or fantasy was at the root of *Teddy Do*, an abandoned novel about an incestuous father-son relationship, discussed by Fraser.

5 Studies of women writers (Germaine Guèvremont, Gabrielle Roy) particularly exploit this distinction.

6 Like the narrator of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's fictional diary, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1895), Mrs. Bentley feels exposed to the "eyes" of the wallpaper, as well as to the leaks from the ceiling. She has to reassure herself that she is sane and envies Philip his sanity (86, 166, 182).

7 Dubanski shows that Philip's drawings function like a diary.

8 Fraser comments on this, and on the various phallic symbols (pipes, hoses) scattered throughout the text (60). Ralph Sarkonak (personal communication) has also pointed out to me the homosexual connotations of cowboy paraphernalia (e.g. chaps).

9 These range from Duhamel's Salavin to Gabrielle Roy's Alexandre Chênevert (see Raoul 1980, 1993).

10 Richard Cavell commented earlier on this remark, interpreting it as a symptom of Mrs. Bentley's own fear of being inappropriately attracted to Steve.

11 See Lewes and Sedgwick for critiques of this theory.

12 Lorna Crozier, in her poems attributed to Mrs. Bentley, posits a secret affair between the narrator and Paul.

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