

WHO'S THE FATHER OF MRS. BENTLEY'S CHILD?

“As For Me and My House” and the Conventions of Dramatic Monologue

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C RITICISM OF *As For Me and My House* has come a long way since Roy Daniells was “taken in” by Mrs. Bentley,¹ but scholars still tend to take her at her own word, concentrating their critical attention on the things she wants us to think are key issues and overlooking things she tries to play down. Following Mrs. Bentley’s directives, criticism has focused on aesthetic and religious concerns rather than on emotional and domestic matters, on her *current* marital difficulties rather than on the circumstances *leading* to her unhappy marriage, on Philip and Judith and “their” child rather than on Mrs. Bentley and Philip and “their” stillborn child. Therefore, although critics now realize that *As For Me and My House* is a point-of-view novel,² they have not recognized that Ross is presenting us with a specific kind of “unreliable narrative” — namely, a dramatic monologue.

Exemplified in prose fiction by such works as *The Sun Also Rises*, *Heart of Darkness*, and *The Good Soldier*, such narratives give us not merely a biased observer but one with a guilty conscience; the narrator’s past experience does not merely colour perspective but is the psychological *raison d’être* for the telling. On the one hand, therefore, such narratives are characterized by concealment, which takes the form both of dismissing essential information and of providing “honest” self-appraisals; on the other hand, such narratives evidence the “criminal who wants to be caught” syndrome and therefore involve the unconscious dropping of clues: the projection onto others of one’s own motives and the inadvertent trapping of oneself in contradictions. A final major characteristic of such narratives is that they stand mid-way between private and public “confessional” literature, between interior monologue and written articulation; in dramatic monologue an audience is assumed/implicit, with the narrative consequently taking the form of the narrator’s attempt convincingly to present a case.³

To describe the genre in this way almost makes it unnecessary to say anything further about the way in which *As For Me and My House* fits into the category. With its diary format but with entries which are too structured and retrospective to create the sense of introspective and immediate personal jottings, Ross's novel perfectly embodies the public/private narrative mode of dramatic monologue. Equally skilful and in keeping with the tradition is the way Ross has Mrs. Bentley deflect attention from herself by making her initial entry focus on Philip, a self-effacing strategy which she employs throughout the novel and which enables her to dramatize what she says about herself as a self-sacrificing woman. Nor is Ross less masterful in alerting us to the necessity of ferreting out the truth behind appearances, for he does this precisely through the obsessiveness of Mrs. Bentley's concern with hypocrisy. Designed, on her part, to convince the unwary that she could not possibly have anything to hide, her excessive ridicule of "false fronts" has the effect of generating just the opposite impression. Further contributing to this impression, of course, is her intense paranoia and sense of exposure — which extends to seeing the roses of the wallpaper as so many prying eyes and to interpreting the fact that the house is built close to the street as a plot on the part of the town to spy on her and her husband (pp. 12-13).

In turn, a second of Ross's strategies is to convince those readers who may sense that she is hiding something that her fear of exposure pertains merely to her religious hypocrisy and her masking of her real feelings toward the town — an even more subtle deflection, since it involves disarming the reader through the admission of a "failing," i.e., that she herself has erected a false front (p. 9). Her fear of being found out on this score, however, hardly calls for the "Gothic" terms in which she expresses her paranoia — her feeling that the house is "haunted" by the smell of "repression and decay" and by the "faint exhalation of the past," by something "lurking in the shadows" (pp. 12-13, 25). Moreover, if it has been her twelve years of experience in small towns that has taught her to dissemble, it was also twelve years ago that she married Philip; and here we come to the first real cause of Mrs. Bentley's obsession with hypocrisy: namely, the deception which led to her marriage in the first place.

When they met, Philip was an aspiring artist, eager for culture and for "someone to realize in flesh and blood the hero-worship that he had clung to all through his hard adolescence." Lonely and hungry for companionship, he was nevertheless fearful of any relationships which might jeopardize his career. Thus "For a long time he held aloof," Mrs. Bentley tells us; "At heart, I think, he was distrustful not only of me but of all of my kind," knowing "instinctively that as a woman I would make claims upon him." What occasioned him to lose his distrust after three years of resistance, accordingly, was that Mrs. Bentley, apparently, was not just a woman but an artist, someone who not only knew that "he needed above all to be free" but who also shared the same need, which

indeed is what she also wants us to believe: "Before I met him I had ambitions too. The only thing that really mattered for me was the piano. It made me self-sufficient, a little hard. All I wanted was opportunity to work and develop myself" (p. 16). Furthermore, she was also apparently an intellectual, someone with whom he could relate on a non-*sexual* level. But this, of course, was merely a pose; throughout the present of the narrative she is totally unappreciative of Philip's books, just as art for her is/was merely a means to an end. Or as she herself explains of her meeting with Philip:

he came and the piano took second place. . . . I forgot it all, almost overnight.

Instead of practice in my spare time it was books now. Books that he had read or might be going to read — so that I could reach up to his intellect, be a good companion, sometimes while he talked nod comprehendingly.

For right from the beginning I knew that with Philip it was the only way. . . . For a while, before understanding the lie of the land, I even read theology." (p. 16)

Now Mrs. Bentley, to be sure, would have us see her instant abandonment of her career and her attempt to make herself an ideal mate as evidence of her intense love for Philip, and perhaps that was her motive. Similarly, she may even generate a certain amount of sympathy as an unfortunately unliberated woman when she observes, "Submitting to him that way, yielding my identity — it seemed what life was intended for" (p. 16). But none of this alters the fact that the first "false front" was the image of herself that she presented to Philip before they were married.

Small wonder, then, that Mrs. Bentley harps so much upon Philip's romantic expectations and subsequent disillusionments. On the subconscious level it is her way of articulating her guilt for deluding Philip; on the conscious level it is her way of rationalizing her guilt by putting Philip in the wrong: if he had been more realistic he would have seen the "*lie* of the land." In turn, we now see the irony of Mrs. Bentley's description of Philip's naiveté *before* they met, and why it sounds so much like a description of their meeting and his reactions *after* they are married:

After living so long and intensely in the future he couldn't accept a reality which, instead of the new way of life he had been striving for, turned out to be just an extension of the old. When he did try to make friends it was in the wrong places, among people who seemed to possess and offer this new way of life, who *deceived him with a shallow poise and sophistication*. His naive, country-town eyes saw a kind of glamor, I suppose, and for a while believed in it.

He was forever being disillusioned, forever finding people out and *withdrawing into himself* with a sense of hurt and grievance. (p. 32; emphasis ours)

In short, if the Philip of the present is forever withdrawing into his study, it may have to do with the way Mrs. Bentley invaded his privacy by deceiving him before they were married.

BUT IT WAS MERELY PHILIP'S naiveté that led him to marry Mrs. Bentley and is her guilt merely a matter of having pretended to be an intellectual and an artist instead of a conventional woman looking for a man and content to realize her aspirations through him? If so, then in making this the cause of the marital tension between the Bentleys, Ross himself is guilty of the disproportion which Mrs. Bentley sees in the relationship between the size of the rectory and that of the church; the former looks so diminutive in contrast to the latter that she is "reminded of the mountain that did all the fussing and then gave birth to a mouse" (p. 13). But fussing that gave birth to a mouse is, of course, precisely what happened to the Bentleys — their marriage resulted in a stillborn child, an experience which seems to provide a more logical reason for Mrs. Bentley's guilt. Furthermore, this is the very reason which she herself hinted at, when at the outset of the novel she "wished for a son again, a son that I might give back a little of what I've taken from him, that I might at least believe I haven't altogether wasted him, only postponed to another generation his fulfillment" (p. 5). The problem with such an explanation, however, is first that it contradicts what Mrs. Bentley has just said about Philip's primary concern being artistic creativity rather than procreativity; second, if it is really her barrenness that Philip holds against her, then he is a monster indeed; and third, this is the explanation she would like us to entertain — a sure sign in dramatic monologue that it is misleading.

Accordingly, though clearly the "stillborn" child has something to do with the problem, we have not yet arrived at the full explanation. Nor, significantly, do we, until near the end of the novel — specifically not until Mrs. Bentley has become convinced that Philip has committed adultery. Then she tells us, in the context of explaining that the rhapsody she is practicing is the same one she played the night Philip proposed, that on the night in question he came to her "erect and white-lipped" and asked her to marry him. Such a description sounds less like that of a lover and more like that of a man who has steeled himself against his natural inclinations. And this Mrs. Bentley admits — but explaining it in terms of Philip's pride, which makes it difficult for him to admit that he needs her. She also lets slip, however, that on that night she had an "expectant" audience and that her desire to reach him "put something into [her] hands that had never been there before" (p. 141).

If the reader is beginning to suspect that it is not merely artistic talent but a different kind of trump card that she holds, such suspicions are confirmed by the off-hand way in which she refers to their marriage. After preparing us to see it as the climax of three long years of courtship, she dismisses the crucial event with the brief statement, "Any way we were married."⁴ This statement, moreover, follows from her observation that "Had I not met him then he might have *got*

away as he planned, eventually realizing his ambitions” (emphasis ours), an observation which led to her wondering why she did not feel better about “the way [she] won [her] place in his life despite him.” Furthermore, one should note that for a woman who is very conscious of dates, Mrs. Bentley is extremely vague in referring to when their child was born, saying only, “The next year there was a baby” (p. 33). And finally, of course, Mrs. Bentley presents both her living with Philip and the birth of the child as dating back to twelve years ago. Bearing in mind that a stillborn child is a full term pregnancy, one realizes that if the child had been conceived in wedlock it would today be eleven, not twelve.

In short, although Mrs. Bentley would have us believe that Philip is a man “trapped” by the church, the real trap in which he found himself was the biological one; although she would have us believe that he was seduced by the church’s promise to finance his education, the real “whore of Babylon” — as it were — is herself. It was not the church which took advantage of him but she who took advantage of his innate sense of moral responsibility. His stiff-necked resolution to marry her was not a matter of his overcoming his pride to admit his dependency on her but rather a matter of ensuring that his child should not go through life with the stigma of illegitimacy which plagued him. That Mrs. Bentley should devote so much of her recapitulation of Philip’s past to this very stigma thus now begins to fall into place — less as a way of explaining *him* than as a way of explaining the reason for their marriage. Similarly, one begins to understand why the entry in which she explains how Philip “compromised” himself with the church is also the entry in which she explains the way in which she “yielded” her identity.

Even more importantly, perhaps, one begins to understand why Mrs. Bentley has such mixed reactions to Philip’s commitment to the church and why she emphasizes his moral integrity at the same time she ridicules his institutional affiliation. His uprightness was the very quality she depended upon for their marriage in the first place, and upon which — believing that he does not love her in her own right — she must depend for its continuance. Hence the significance of her terror when she dreams of Philip’s crashing down his Bible and of the fact that it is this dream that is the catalyst for her first confession of how they came to be married. Hence also the significance of the church board meeting where she interrupts Philip “before it was too late, before he could do what he should have done twelve years ago” (p. 73) — namely, leave the church and her.

What also begins to make sense is Mrs. Bentley’s eagerness to adopt Philip’s adulterous offspring when she did not support the adoption of Steve — indeed, there is a clear suggestion that she was the “someone” responsible for his removal to the orphanage. To adopt Steve would have been to give Philip a replacement son, but it would not have been to balance the moral score; to alleviate her guilt it is necessary for her to be in the position of the wronged party — a situation

which explains, first, why instead of being bitter about Philip's adultery she responds as if she were "the guilty one" (p. 124), and second why her narrative creates the impression that if she did not somehow engineer the adultery she was nevertheless waiting for something like this to happen.

Nor is Mrs. Bentley only subconsciously aware of the kind of fundamentalist guilt-for-a-guilt morality she is practising, for she explains the logic very clearly in her analysis of why Philip accuses her of having an affair with Paul: "is it a sense of guilt that drove him to it. Unknown to himself even, deeper than his consciousness. . . . Guilty himself, is his impulse to find me guilty too? Does the thought that he has been unfaithful rankle? Is he trying to bring us to a level where we must face each other as two of a kind?" (p. 135).

AS MUCH AS SUCH AN ACUTE ANALYSIS helps to explain why Mrs. Bentley wants to see Philip as an adulterer, however, so much does it also undermine her conviction that he is guilty in this respect. Just as we know that Philip's accusations are unfounded, so we begin to see that her evidence for his unfaithfulness is without substance. That Philip is fascinated by Judith's appearance and agonizes over sketching her can be explained by his being an artist. That Judith weeps when Mrs. Bentley sends her oranges is explicable either as the natural reaction of an outcast to a gesture of sympathy or — if the oranges are meant to brand her as a prostitute — as the equally natural reaction of a woman who feels betrayed by an erstwhile friend. Further contradictory evidence is that the sexual relationship of the Bentleys seems to improve at the same time that Philip is supposed to be looking elsewhere and also by Mrs. Bentley's own admission that the baby does not look like his father.

Less easy to invalidate at first reading is that Mrs. Bentley awakens one night — a date corresponding with the gestation period of Judith's child — to find Philip not beside her, and when going in apparent search of him she overhears from the lean-to shed Judith's little laugh: "A frightened, soft, half-smothered little laugh, that I've laughed often with him too. There's no other laugh like it" (p. 123). Actually, however, Mrs. Bentley has uttered a relatively similar sound not very long ago — specifically when Paul came by to show off his horse: "I stroked him too, and when he took my collar in his teeth and gave a pull let out a sudden, high-pitched laugh. I remember the laugh, because there was such an abrupt, self-conscious silence afterwards" (p. 41). Moreover, in response to the sexual connotations set in motion by this laugh Philip gives his own "forced, derisive little laugh" (p. 145) when she attempts to convince him that she really was not playing for Paul on the night of the "duplicate" Liszt concert.

Nor should one forget that the apparent conception of Philip/Judith's child takes place in the lean-to shed reconstructed as a room for Steve — the would-be

replacement for the Bentley's "stillborn" — which comparable site was the location of Mrs. Bentley's first decision to become a hypocrite: "It was twelve years ago, in our first town, that I learned my lesson, one day when they caught me in the woodshed making kindling of a packing box" (p. 3). Since twelve years ago is also the supposed age of the stillborn child, one begins to suspect that the remark she now interprets as evidence of small-town notions of propriety was really an indication of matronly concern for a pregnant wife — with the further implication that Mrs. Bentley was in some way responsible for the stillbirth as a result of extensive physical exertion.

Suggesting even further that Mrs. Bentley's "discovery" of Philip's infidelity is predicated by her own guilt is the dream which precedes it — a dream in which someone is stealing Minnie's hay, while El Greco seems too far away to hear her, and Paul explains to her that it wasn't in the dog's nature anyway to chase burglars. Focusing only on the theft of Minnie's hay, and identifying with the horse, Mrs. Bentley interprets the dream as a forewarning of what she is about to discover, thereby deflecting attention from the fact that Minnie was Steve's horse — whose "hay" she had in effect stolen, just as she had in effect stolen Steve from Philip, occasioning the latter, she would have us believe, to turn to Judith. Equally played down in her conscious interpretation is the fact that she and Paul appear together, with Philip appearing in the lonesome guise of a dog howling at the moon — or the threatening guise of the skeleton-unburying dog of Eliot's *Waste Land* (see here the ominous dog references pp. 121, 128). One should also not forget that when Mrs. Bentley hears the "tell-tale" laugh she is under sedation — so that the likelihood of her having heard anything, or the likelihood of her hearing correctly, is seriously questioned in a very concrete medical sense.

Ultimately, therefore, the only real proof that Philip is an adulterer is his refusal to deny her accusation to this effect. But does Philip's refusal to exonerate himself really constitute an admission of guilt, or does it rather signal his awareness of the burden of guilt under which his wife has laboured all these years and his understanding of how much she needs this form of absolution? — and how little she understood his previous attempt to provide it with the words: "If a man's a victim of circumstances he deserves to be" (p. 19)? Has Philip always loved his wife and has his apparent coldness really stemmed from the way in which she made him feel that she did not want affection? Does his seeming acquiescence to her charge stem from a recognition of her tremendous need for a child and his own feeling of not having fulfilled her in this respect? Has he seen in her repeated complaints about his inadequacy as a provider and in her relationship to Paul a criticism of his masculinity, and does he see in going along with her assumption that he is an adulterer a way of regaining sexual stature in her eyes? If it is not illogical to see Mrs. Bentley imagining herself barren even though she

has conceived, is it not also possible to see Philip in imagining himself infertile even though he has impregnated her?

Such is the complex of motives we would like to advance, especially because Philip's refusal to set his wife straight about his supposed paternity constitutes his single instance of hypocrisy or deception — in a novel in which these are the major concerns.

BEFORE ONE CONCLUDES that Philip may be having the “last laugh,” however, one must further consider the way in which his alleged paternity of Judith's child reflects on the question of his paternity of the “stillborn” child. If Philip is not the father of the former, does the logic of symmetry suggest that neither was he the father of the latter? Encouraging one to consider such a possibility — and in keeping with the premise of dramatic monologue that all information reflects on the problems of the protagonist — is the otherwise gratuitous introduction of a former admirer of Mrs. Bentley, in a recollection she provides when she and Judith go for a walk along the railway tracks and risk scandal by riding back to town on a handcar with two trackmen who have picked them up. Out along the tracks, the two of them make “angels” in the dust, indentations which are mainly “behinds and wings.” In this context, Mrs. Bentley observes that Judith “used to do it with the neighbor boy who keeps asking her to marry him and I used to do it with another neighbor boy called Percy Glenn.” With this boy, despite parental opposition, Mrs. Bentley became “fairly good friends. Later we played duets together, and helped each other studying harmony and counterpoint” (p. 77). Given the way in which music is associated with sexuality in Philip's proposal, and his reading of sexual connotations into Paul's response to her playing of the “duplicate” Liszt concerto, to interpret the playing of “duets” etc., as a sexual euphemism does not seem far-fetched. Indeed, Mrs. Bentley herself does not allow one to read her association with Percy on a purely aesthetic level, since she goes on to explain that after she married Philip she wrote to Percy that she had become a small-town preacher's wife, and when he replied that “it seemed a pity,” her response was to “[worry] Philip with amorous attentions in the middle of the afternoon” — recall here that Mrs. Bentley regards Philip's sexual attentions after the Judith affair as symptomatic of his guilt.

Moreover, Mrs. Bentley emphasizes that this second child is “his” — “Your baby” — and that she twice refers to the first as “the boy of *his own* I haven't given him” (pp. 36, 49; emphasis ours). In short, if Philip can afford to be magnanimous in allowing Mrs. Bentley to believe he was an adulterer because he knows he is not guilty, she can be gracious in adopting his bastard because it compensates for the way in which she had cuckolded him.

Indeed, Mrs. Bentley specifically suggests that Philip “came second” sequentially as a lover — although ultimately first in her affections — when she tries to analyze whether Judith really means anything to him: “If she did he would hate me now. . . . I know if I were married, not to Philip, and then Philip came, I know I would hate the first one. I know I would never submit to him again” (p. 124). Designed to emphasize her commitment to Philip, the observation also suggests that Mrs. Bentley is capable of having “submitted” before she met her husband. Similarly, when Mrs. Bentley testingly tells Philip about Judith’s pregnancy and he responds “It’s the kind like that, who slip just once — ” she breaks in, “You can never tell though. Sometimes it’s the mild, innocent ones that are the sly ones. A woman usually knows what she’s about” (p. 147). In addition, one should notice how much of Mrs. Bentley’s attention to Steve focuses on the true nature of his parentage and on whether heredity will assert itself regardless of upbringing — an issue she never had to face in the case of her own child.

Perhaps this is the main reason why, for all the apparent signs of renewal and reconciliation which attend the conclusion of the novel, many readers have not felt comfortable about the prospects for the Bentleys. The really important false front has not come down, and there remains the question of how Mrs. Bentley and subsequently Philip will respond when the child begins showing its true paternity.

As for who the likely father might be, David Williams has recently argued that the “Scarlet Rompers” belong to Paul⁶ — an argument he could seemingly have greatly strengthened had he considered Ross’s onomastics. That is, while Mrs. Bentley believes she is naming the child after her husband, “Philip” — as Paul explains — derives from the Greek and means “a lover of horses” (p. 162), an epithet which describes Paul much more accurately than Mr. Bentley. Conversely, the name “Paul” calls to mind the Apostle noted for his asceticism and misogyny and thus a likely prototype for Mr. Bentley, the preacher. Similarly, to the extent that Williams argues that only Mrs. Bentley sees Judith’s child as premature and that if we look at her diary references to Paul and Judith for a month prior to the “little laugh” episode we find suggestions of their “affair,” he could have pursued to his own ends the implications of Mrs. Bentley’s observation, when Paul enters the novel for the first time, that “there had been a mistake in dates somewhere, and his country friends weren’t expecting us for another week” (p. 7).

Having provided Williams with this added ammunition, however, we must ultimately withdraw support, and in doing so recognize that the author in dramatic monologue uses factual details and names to forestall faulty leads. Thus three types of evidence indicate that Judith’s child was indeed premature: first, the information relayed by the doctor’s wife (p. 146); second, the physical strain which brought on the labour; and third, the description of the newborn child

(p. 161). Although the "mistake in dates somewhere" is a key clue, therefore, it needs to be aligned with the "prematurity" of conception of Mrs. Bentley's child. Equally, upon reconsideration one realizes that the names of Philip and Paul are actually most appropriate to their characters. Mr. Bentley, for example, is indeed a "lover of horses" in the form of his association with the mythical steed, "Pegasus" (see pp. 53, 106). Similarly, Paul Kirby is another "St. Paul" in the sense that like the Apostle who was knocked off his horse and subsequently changed his name, so the schoolteacher loses his initial belief in the value of a horse (p. 127), just as his interest in word changes is a central aspect of his character.

Moreover, although Williams' argument (that Paul's attentions to Mrs. Bentley are really his way of explaining his "affair" with Judith and of asking Mrs. Bentley to act as a type of mother-confessor) would suggest a nice symmetry to the likelihood that Philip's "affair" with Judith was only that of priest to penitent, too much evidence indicates that the schoolteacher is indeed courting the minister's wife. Not only are there the amatory innuendoes of his etymological derivations which culminate in his analysis of the origin of words like *cupidity*, *eros*, *venereal* and *aphrodisiac* (p. 76), but he pointedly explains to Mrs. Bentley at their first meeting that his liking of the hymns she plays has nothing to do with religion (p. 8), just as he later asks her to understand the real reasons why he, a rationalist, keeps coming to church (p. 84).

Nor is it possible to accept Mrs. Bentley's view that Paul is really seeking the intellectual companionship of Philip, for to do so one would have to discount the numerous times the schoolteacher tries to diminish Mr. Bentley in his wife's eyes. Thus he tells her that Steve has no hero to emulate and, when she catches his drift, quickly pretends that he is not discrediting Philip *per se* but only in his role as a minister (p. 70). Equally, though his gift to Philip of an easel sounds like a gesture of friendship, the spirit in which the offering is made becomes clear when he goes on to explain that the word comes from the Dutch for "little ass" (p. 104). At the same time, Paul would like to encourage Philip in his art for, as he explains to Mrs. Bentley when they come out of the study after Philip has "caught" them there looking at his pictures, "Why there was a French artist who decided one day he couldn't stand his business or family any longer, and just walked off and left them. It's a good sign." Missing his drift, Mrs. Bentley then asks if Paul thinks that this is the fate in store for her, to which he replies, "He'd be a fool" (p. 128). These hardly appear to be the attempts of a man to explain his affair with another woman, just as to see Paul as Judith's lover one would have to ignore totally his jealousy of Mrs. Bentley at the ranch and the significance of his explanation of the sexual connotations of a cowboy asking a woman to come and see his horse (p. 98) — and who should know better than Paul who gets all dressed up to come around and show Mrs. Bentley his bronco (p. 40).

YET WILLIAMS MUST BE CREDITED for pointing us in the right direction when he identifies the “exchange” at the Ladies Bazaar as the key passage for discovering who is the father of Judith’s child. The exchange begins with Mrs. Wenderby selling to Paul “a pair of rompers” (p. 256) and, since she has throughout the narrative been critical of Paul’s use of physically suggestive language, according to Williams her sale is designed to brand him as fornicating father of Judith’s child. *Actually*, however, the “brand” does not stay with Paul; instead, he gives the rompers to Mrs. Bentley who in turn sells them to *Mr. Finley!*

Nor does Ross wait until the Bazaar, or the end of the novel, to indicate that Mr. Finley is the likely suspect; in keeping with the tendency in dramatic monologue of dropping clues via the narrator’s projection of his/her problems, Mr. Finley is introduced at the outset of the novel by Mrs. Bentley’s criticisms of Mrs. Finley: “Her husband, for instance, is an appropriately meek little man, but you can’t help feeling what an achievement is his meekness. It’s like a tight wire cage drawn over him, and words and gestures, indicative of a more expansive past, keeps squeezing through it . . .” (pp. 5-6). Moreover, Judith is presented from the outset as a thorn in Mrs. Finley’s side, as a “little country upstart” who ignores the mores of the town and whom Mrs. Finley wishes “would go home and marry some good, hard-working farmer with a background like her own” (1p. 11-12). Similarly, it was for the Finleys that Judith first worked when she came to town and from whose employ she was dismissed by Mrs. Finley — who was “afraid [she’d] come to no good end” (p. 57). It is also Mrs. Finley who objects to the Bentley’s adoption of Steve, arguing that because of his parentage and age “he’ll never really belong to you. If instead now you’d take a baby — . . . there are so many deserving cases — our own kind — clean, decent people —” (p. 61). As Mr. Finley’s bastard, Judith’s child is indeed of Mrs. Finley’s kind!

Furthermore, that Mr. Finley would be capable of such moral impropriety is suggested by Mrs. Bird when she advises Mrs. Bentley how to handle Mrs. Finley’s objections: “Only today I told Mrs. Finley that worse sins can come home to roost than those of your peasant ancestors” (p. 60). Finally, that Mr. Finley — Chairman of the Church Board and husband of the self-styled guardian of the morals of the town — should be the adulterer is as ironically appropriate in this novel about religious hypocrisy as it is poetically just that Mrs. Bentley should be adopting the offspring — as it were — of her chief antagonist.

Accordingly, a good way of concluding this discussion of *As For Me and My House* is to consider the charges of aesthetic failure that have recently been brought against it. According to Paul Denham, Ross fails to be true to the “diary” format he has chosen: things that one expects of such a mode are

missing — references to the time and place in which Mrs. Bentley does her “writing”; conversely, background information is included which jars with the “private” insights we expect of personal literature — “Is Mrs. Bentley really likely to write a summary of Philip’s past life in her diary . . .” after twelve years of marriage? Comparing the novel with such *Bildungsromane* as *Great Expectations* and *The Stone Angel*, Denham argues that “we never get a mature Mrs. Bentley’s account of her own past self. . . no such helpful perspective is available. . . what we get is Mrs. Bentley’s lucid and articulate awareness of her own blundering obtuseness in the present.” As a result, there is “ultimately, no way of knowing what to make of Mrs. Bentley, and therefore no way of knowing what to make of her narrative.” To similar effect, Denham complains that Ross’s tactics of characterization are faulty: presenting a concrete example of her vindictiveness, Mrs. Bentley then goes on to admit this quality, thereby preventing us from seeing her as truly vindictive. Denham also objects to the number of contradictions the novel contains — in particular to the fact that Philip hates music, at the same time that it was through music that “[Mrs. Bentley] was able to reach him . . . in the first place.” Although ironically he is the only critic to realize the real age of the stillborn child had it been conceived in wedlock and had it lived, he presents this awareness as a complaint that “the drought seems to have lasted for eleven years, since the death of their baby (p. 44), a violation of the historical facts. . .” Finally, Denham complains about the “implausibility” of the Judith affair — particularly her becoming “conveniently pregnant after one lapse from chastity.” To Denham, therefore, *As For Me and My House* has serious narrative flaws, and “we do the novel, and the study of Canadian literature itself a disservice if we call it a great work.”⁶ As our study should indicate, however, all of the failings Denham notes derive from no inadequacies in Ross’s text but instead from his own failure to approach the work as a dramatic monologue.

Such an approach, furthermore, answers precisely to the call for responsible criticism articulated by Morton L. Ross in his castigation of recent critics who argue that Mrs. Bentley is an unreliable narrator but then go on to conclude that the entire novel is without any definiteness and that the responsibility for *creating* meaning is left up to the reader. Designed to suggest the “modernism” of the novel, which in turn is supposed to be the grounds for its “canonization,” such criticism according to Morton Ross not only proceeds simply by an “I want it so” assertion that what were initially alleged as flaws are really virtues, but also such criticism has the effect of diminishing Ross’s role as directing intelligence. As he sees it, “Once we agree that Ross deliberately sacrificed the control of a reliable narrator, it would follow that we need to articulate the techniques and structures . . . by means of which he might continue to shape and guide his readers’ perception and understanding.”⁷

Such an articulation we have provided by approaching the work as a dramatic monologue, for in works of this kind — even much more than in straight point-of-view fiction or narratives in which the mature recording intelligence ironically undercuts an earlier self — the author remains firmly in control and functions as the reader's friend, encouraging him to use his emotional response not as an end in itself but as a means to ferreting out the clues he has provided. As such, dramatic monologue also perfectly combines the two poles of art exemplified by the Bentleys — human interest and careful structuring — just as our reading of the novel also comes responsibly to terms with earlier criticism of the work as repetitive and discursive, with such flaws being the inevitable consequences of the use of the diary form. For we now see that Mrs. Bentley is not *writing*, but *presenting*, her case to an implied audience, just as we now have a concrete explanation for her paranoia which also has the effect of creating an undercurrent of pity and terror which prevents the reader from *ever* becoming bored.

NOTES

- ¹ Roy Daniells, 1957 Introduction to *As For Me and My House* (1941; Toronto, 1970), p. vii. Subsequent references are to this edition.
- ² To date the best discussion of *As For Me and My House* as a point-of-view novel is to be found in Wilfred Cude's *A Due Sense of Difference: An evaluative Approach to Canadian Literature* (Maryland: Univ. Press of North America, 1980).
- ³ Although many of these features of dramatic monologue characterize the "fictional diary" as described by Valerie Raoul in *The French Fictional Journal* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1980), pp. 26-32, distinguishing dramatic monologue is the extent to which guilt prompts the narrative and an immediate listener — as opposed to reader — is implied.
- ⁴ One should notice that "anyway" is a word used repeatedly by Mrs. Bentley to dismiss issues she feels compelled to raise but the implications of which she does not want to explore. For example, after seemingly analyzing whether she was right to believe that Philip — like water — couldn't be blocked if he truly is/was an artist, she concludes, "Anyway I kept on. It was easier that way" (p. 103). Similarly, after raising the question of why she insists on sending Philip out to see the pregnant Judith, she turns quickly to a description of the *fait accompli* with the words, "Anyway I sent him" (p. 152). Or again, after touching on the subject of how she subtly encouraged Philip to investigate the possibility of their buying a second-hand bookstore, she excuses herself with the observation "Anyway it worked . . ." (p. 160).
- ⁵ David Williams, "The 'Scarlet' Rompers: Toward a New Perspective on *As For Me and My House*," *Canadian Literature*, 103 (Winter 1984), 156-66.
- ⁶ Paul Denham, "Narrative Technique in Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*," *Studies in Canadian Literature*, 5 (Spring 1980), 116-24.
- ⁷ Morton L. Ross, "The Canonization of *As For Me and My House: A Case Study*," in *Figures in a Ground: Canadian Essays on Modern Literature Collected in Honor of Sheila Watson*, eds. Diane Bessai and David Jackel (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978), p. 195.