NO OTHER WAY

Sinclair Ross's Stories and Novels

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This is a fundamentalist town. To the letter it believes the Old Testament stories that we, wisely or presumptuously, choose to accept only as tales and allegories.

AS A NEWFOUNDLANDER, I have always felt a great fondness for the writings of Sinclair Ross. I do not quite understand the nature of the attraction, whether it is his concept of a prairie nature — hard, with overtones of fatalism — which corresponds to my own view of Newfoundland, or whether it is simply his wry observations of the circumlocutions of the Puritan way — a sensibility which also strikes a familiar note. In any event, whenever the term "Canadian novel" comes to mind, I find myself gravitating towards Ross and particularly towards his sometimes puzzling first novel, *As For Me and My House*.

Reading through *Queen's Quarterly* of the late 30's and early 40's, it is not too difficult to recognize branches of the novel. Here are the familiar characters and concerns of Ross's world: the Steves, the Philips, the Pauls, the young boy with the horse ("A Day with Pegasus," 1938); the chance intrusion of the artist into the prairie town ("Cornet at Night," 1939); the paralyzing lack of communication between husband and wife ("The Lamp at Noon," 1938, "The Painted Door," 1939); or, for that matter, between friends ("Jug and Bottle," 1939) which leads inevitably to further betrayal; the "unappetizing righteousness" and pansy-embroidered motto, "As For Me and My House We Will Serve the Lord" of "Cornet at Night."[1] Here, too, in the short story, as in "No Other Way," first published in *Nash's* magazine (London, 1938), is the unmistakable silhouette of Mrs. Bentley. Older, more haggard than the protagonist of *As For Me and My House*, Hatty Glenn is equally dependent on the love of her still-elusive husband of over twenty years.

Reviewing the short stories and novels, I seem to find that character recedes into the emotional landscape; the primary impression is of those short paragraphs

which establish the natural landscape and its relation to a perceiving consciousness. Throughout Ross's work, there is a sense of a bleak, hard nature — the loneliness and isolation of the prairie winter, the indifferent sun which scorches the summer wheat. Against this nature, man is insignificant:

> In the clear bitter light the long white miles of prairie landscape seemed a region strangely alien to life. Even the distant farmsteads she could see served only to intensify a sense of isolation. Scattered across the face of so vast and bleak a wilderness it was difficult to conceive them as a testimony of human hardihood and endurance. Rather they seemed futile, lost, to cower before the implacibility of snowswept earth and clear pale sun-chilled sky. (*Lamp at Noon.*)

Mrs. Bentley, looking across the open prairies and towards the Alberta foothills, recognizes both man's insignificance and his need to project human meaning into the natural landscape:

> We've all lived in a little town too long. The wilderness here makes us uneasy. I felt it the first night I walked alone on the river bank — a queer sense of something cold and fearful, something inanimate, yet aware of us. A Main Street is such a self-sufficient little pocket of existence, so smug, compact, that here we feel abashed somehow before the hills, their passiveness, the unheeding way they sleep. We climb them, but they withstand us, remain as serene and unrevealed as ever. The river slips past us, unperturbed by our coming and going, stealthily confident. We shrink from our insignificance. The stillness and solitude — we think a force or presence into it — even a hostile presence, deliberate, aligned against us — for we dare not admit an indifferent wilderness, where we may have no meaning at all. (*As For Me and My House*)

This is a nature against which man must struggle — not just to become a man — but simply to exist and perhaps, if he is particularly fortunate and determined, to exist in some meaningful way. Most of these stories are a legacy of the drought years of the thirties on the prairies — the depression moving imperceptibly into the war years. Even in Ross's second novel, *The Well*, where the protagonist, Chris Howe, is given an urban childhood, the primary emphasis is still placed on the essentials of survival: "to outwit, score, defeat, survive — Boyle Street had permitted nothing else." However, as is later suggested in this novel and throughout the first novel, existence of some meaningful way becomes the ultimate goal. For Philip Bentley this search for meaning involves the attempt to find dignity and purpose in nature and in himself through his art:

> Tonight Philip made a sketch of Joe Lawson.... He's sitting at a table, half-hunched over it, his hands lying heavy and inert in front of him like stones. The

> hands are mostly what you notice. Such big, disillusioned, steadfast hands, so faithful to the earth and seasons that betray them. I didn't know before what drought was really like, watching a crop dry up, going on again. I didn't know that Philip knew either.

In many of the short stories and also in some of the entries in Mrs. Bentley's journal, human action is presented as the reaction to natural events. The young farm boy of "One's a Heifer" is sent out into the open prairie because a blizzard has caused the cattle to stray; Ellen, the young wife of "The Lamp at Noon," is driven to madness by the incessant wind and dust beating against the walls of the house and stable, "as if the fingers of a giant hand were tightening to collapse them." This reaction to the natural event can precipitate a quarrel, most often between husband and wife, sometimes with a young boy as the interested bystander, and the development of the plot quite often lies in the working out of the emotional tension that has been generated by the conflict.

Because this conflict is intimately connected with the struggle for survival, the tragedy of these stories is that there is often no possible reconciliation of any kind. When an author's horizon is composed of "the bare essentials of a landscape, sky and earth," there are no compromises open: if land and weather fail man, the struggle for survival can only end tragically, the extent of the tragedy being largely determined by the strength of the person concerned. Will, the young farmer of "Not by Rain Alone", has a moment of bleak recognition when he suddenly sees the future which must surely lie ahead of himself and his sweetheart, Eleanor:

> He was thinking of other dry spells — other wheat that had promised thirty bushels and yielded ten. It was such niggard land. At the best they would grub along painfully, grow tired and bitter, indifferent to each other. It was the way of the land. For a farmer like him there could be no other way. (*Lamp at Noon*)

As in the poetry of Pratt, this struggle against nature becomes a test of endurance in which only the very strong such as Paul of "The Lamp at Noon" survive, but with such heart-breaking self awareness as to make it almost unendurable, while those who are weaker, such as his wife Ellen, are destroyed. As Laurence notes, Ross's men seem to know by instinct and by habit that strength, if not actual, at least apparent, is demanded, and each of them refuses to communicate to his wife those admissions of failure and of helplessness which would undermine the appearance of strength until the final, irreversible betrayal. John, the good but stolid farmer of "The Painted Door," is simply unable to communicate; his wife's tragedy is that she can see but not accept the fact until it is too late. Paul

of "The Lamp at Noon" cannot accept his wife's anguish; even after the final devastating betrayal when he realizes that compromise with the land is no longer possible, when his crops are completely destroyed and he is stripped of "vision and purpose, faith in the land, in the future, in himself," he is still attempting to find a way to withstand his wife and to go on: "For so deep were his instincts of loyalty to the land that still, even with the images of his betrayal stark upon his mind, his concern was how to withstand her, how to go on again and justify himself." For a farmer such as Paul or Will or the John of "A Field of Wheat," there is "no other way" than to go on, and this continued struggle against tremendous odds becomes a revelation of the real self, as is suggested in Ross's description of the stripping down of Paul's character to "a harsh and clenched virility . . . at the cost of more engaging qualities . . . a fulfillment of his inmost and essential nature."

For other characters of Ross's fictional world, the stripping down which leads to self discovery is equally important. Often made in terms of a sudden discovery of one's essential nature, it delimits the path that this nature must follow. For the country boy of "Cornet at Night," a chance meeting with a musician, Philip, makes him aware of his vocation as an artist: "This way of the brief lost gleam against the night was my way too. And alone I cowered a moment, understanding that there could be no escape, no other way." (*Queen's Quarterly*, Winter 1939-40). For the Bentleys, the gradual stripping away of the "false fronts" of dishonest life leads to the realization that they must get away from the kind of world that the small town of Horizon imposes, to a community where essential self can be safely revealed: "I asked him didn't he want to get out of the Church, didn't he admit that saving a thousand dollars was the only way".

Ross's earliest references to the "way" which character and environment impose are found in his first published story, "No Other Way." Hatty Glenn, the female protagonist of this story, is a simpler character than Mrs. Bentley, as she is most strongly motivated by the habit of parsimony. After a lifetime of "grubbing" while her husband "schemed," she is weather-beaten while he is still comparatively attractive; to make matters worse, he now ignores her. In a moment of insight, she recognizes that nothing in the world can better her relationship with her husband, and that for her there is "no other way" than to continue along in the same tragi-comic fashion:

> She glanced over her shoulder and saw the half-chewed turnips being slobbered into the dirt. December — January — a pail a day.

And then in a flash she was clutching a broom and swooping into the garden. 'Get out, you greedy old devils! After them, Tubbie!'

Butter twenty five cents a pound. There was no other way. (*Nash's*, Oct. 1934)

In Ross's more sober stories, character and environment can combine like a vise to grip a character and set up a course of direction that even repeated failure does not change. His characters appear to be driven, like those of Grove in *Settlers of the Marsh*, to act as they do until one or another of a partnership is destroyed. When Paul is finally willing to make some compromises with the land, he finds his wife mad and his child dead. Having betrayed her husband, Ann of "The Painted Door" has a revelation of his intrinsic strength and determines to make it up to him. He, however, has already walked out into the blizzard where he freezes to death. Coulter, the inept recruit who has been repeatedly befriended by the soldier narrator of "Jug and Bottle," is accidentally let down by his friend. Crushed by an overwhelming burden of guilt and despair, and with no one to turn to, Coulter kills himself: " . . . caught helpless in some primitive mechanism of conscience like a sheaf in the gear of a thresher, borne on inexorably by the chain of guilt to the blade of punishment." (*Queen's Quarterly*, Winter 1949-50). Many such scenes of human despair and futility suggest that the President of the Immortals also has his sport with the people of Ross's prairie. Mrs. Bentley comments on this when observing the work-torn country congregation which is still waiting and praying after five years without a crop: "And tonight again the sun went down through a clear, brassy sky. Surely it must be a very great faith that such indifference on the part of its deity cannot weaken — a very great faith, or a very foolish one."

ON THE WHOLE, despite the suggestion of naturalism, particularly in the metaphor used to describe Coulter, Ross is not a naturalist in the sense of Norris's *The Octopus* or even in the modified sense of Stead's *Grain*. There is a strong streak of determinism running through Ross's work, but it is most often kept firmly within a Christian context through a respectful address to "Providence," albeit with some irony as suggested by the title, "Not by Rain Alone," of one short story where the crops fail. Philip of *As For Me and My House* " . . . keeps on believing that there's a will stronger than his own deliberately pitted against him . . . a supreme being interested in him, opposed to him, arranging with tireless concern the details of his life. . . ." The good man of "The Run-

away" finds himself troubled by God's justice, especially when the scales are eventually weighed in his favour: "What kind of reckoning was it that exacted life and innocence for an old man's petty greed? Why, if it was retribution, had it struck so clumsily?" (*Lamp at Noon*).

The whole question of the ways of the Old Testament God to man is an important one for the characters of Ross's fictional world and particularly in relation to the first novel, *As For Me and My House*. Here this question carries with it that latter-day Puritanism of the psychological search for self, often expressed in terms of the "way" that must be taken. As in Rudy Wiebe's novel of the prairies, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Harold Horwood's description of Newfoundland, *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*, or Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*, the novel presents a world in which the outward representations of Christianity are without real meaning — simply empty forms without spirit — and in which characters must learn to reject the false gods without before it is possible to find the true God within and, as a sign of this, an authentic sense of direction.

Ostensibly, the "way" of *As For Me and My House* is the Christian way indicated by the title. But this structure is steadily undercut through the central metaphor of the "false-front" and through explicit statement until we come to see the Bentleys metaphorically as pagan priest and priestess ministering to an Old Testament World. It is not until the novel has moved full cycle through sin, sacrifice, and repentence, that there is a pulling down of the old false gods and a revelation of the true self. In this sense the novel is, as is suggested by Roy Daniells in his fine introduction to the New Canadian Library edition, the struggle of the Puritan soul to find the way. At the beginning of the novel, Mr. and Mrs. Bentley, the new clergyman and his wife, are hanging out their shingle, "As For Me and My House . . ."; at the end of the book they are taking it in. In between, the process of the novel has involved a shedding of their defenses, a breaking down of the hypocritical "false fronts" behind which they have hidden both from each other and from the townspeople.

The metaphor of the "false front" is probed in basically psychological terms. Philip Bentley, aware that his new role as minister is hypocritical, is tortured by his own dishonesty. Unable to draw or paint constructively, he is reduced to turning out drawing after drawing of self-analysis: Main Streets with their false-fronted stores, all "stricken with a look of self-awareness and futility." In the journal entries which make up the novel, his wife admits that there is something in Philip's art which "hurts," but as she finds it easier to live in Horizon she refuses to sympathize: "False fronts ought to be laughed at, never understood or

pitied. They're such outlandish things, the front of a store built up to look like a second storey." Yet when she erects her own false front against Main Street, she discovers that she is just as vulnerable as Philip:

> Three little false-fronted towns before this one have taught me to erect a false front of my own, live my own life, keep myself intact; yet tonight again, for all my indifference to what the people here may choose to think of me, it was an ordeal to walk out of the vestry and take my place at the organ.

The Bentleys also erect facades to hide from each other. He has attempted to mould himself into the ordered life which she considers practical and in so doing, is alienated from her, while she takes up the role of the hard-working woman of the manse, inwardly chafing but outwardly content with her husband's meagre tokens of affection. Without any hope for the future other than a parade of Horizons, each like the one before, Philip turns on his wife as the major instrument of his imprisonment, punishing her through the withdrawal of his love. The novel is orchestrated by Philip's emotional withdrawals, "white, tight-lipped," and the closing of his study door which shuts out his wife while she, in turn, escapes into the night, the granaries, and the railroad tracks.

There is a strong emphasis on the build-up of emotional tension throughout the novel. In comparison with the suffocating atmosphere of the house with its ever-present aura of sexual tension, even the bleakness of the prairie landscape offers a kind of freedom. We are told again and again that one or the other attempts to escape the claims of intimacy by pretending to be asleep when the other finally comes to bed. This situation continues until finally they make up and the process begins again. It is this heightening and release of emotional tension which would seem to characterize the novel's form: the first half develops through a cycle of wind and drought chronicling Steve's coming and going, and the eventual rains where the Bentleys are reunited; the second part of the novel works through the darkness and despair of winter, ending with the death of Judith and the birth of her child in April.

In the first chapter, we are introduced to the Bentleys' ostensible Puritan ethos: the shingle, the statement of Philip's creed, and the bargain by which the Bentleys co-exist with the townspeople: "In return for their thousand dollars a year they expect a genteel kind of piety, a well-bred Christianity that will serve as an example to the little sons and daughters of the town." But we soon discover that this "well-bred Christianity" is form without spirit, the false front of a behaviour without belief; it is a modern form of paganism in which the forms or conventions of a faith are perverted into a substitution for faith itself. This is explicit in the

extended metaphor at the conclusion of the first chapter where the clergyman and his wife are ironically identified as the "priest and priestess" through whom the people make offerings to the small town gods of Propriety and Parity:

> . . . the formal dinner of a Main Street hostess is invariably good. Good to an almost sacrificial degree. A kind of rite, at which we preside as priest and priestess — an offering, not for us, but through us, to the exacting small-town gods Propriety and Parity.

In this metaphor, they are revealed as handmaidens to the Puritan false gods of behaviourism — the mechanical acts of behaviour which remain after the true religious spirit has gone out of action. "Propriety," the well-bred Christianity which Mrs. Bentley cites, is the outer form of circumspect behaviour which replaces spontaneous action grounded in love; "Parity", social prestige, is that form of behaviour which results in the establishment of a village elect (notably the trinity of Mrs. Finley, Mrs. Bird, and Mrs. Bentley) and the exclusion of the damned (such as Judith and Steve) on grounds of social elitism rather than in terms of the true Christian love which results in brotherhood and justice. In this schemata, everything is turned upside-down; consequently, when justifying the adoption of the Roman Catholic orphan, Steve, to the Protestant church elders, Mrs. Bentley can see herself as the devil's advocate:

> So I parried them, cool and patient, piety to my finger tips. It was the devil quoting scripture, maybe, but it worked. They couldn't answer. . . . He [Philip] looked on, flinching for me, but I didn't mind. I'm not so thin-skinned as he is anyway. I resigned myself to sanctimony years ago. Today I was only putting our false front up again, enlarged this time for three.
>
> Philip, Steve, and I. It's such a trim, efficient little sign; it's such a tough, deep-rooted tangle that it hides.
>
> And none of them knows. They spy and carp and preen themselves, but none of them knows. They can only read our shingle, all its letters freshened up this afternoon, *As For Me and My House — The House of Bentley — We Will Serve the Lord.*

In this context, the supposedly Christian structure of the novel is ironically reversed. In Joshua, the source of the original quotation, a choice has been made by the Israelites. They have rejected the pagan gods of the Ammonites and chosen the true God, Jehovah. In the first chapters of Ross's novel, it would appear that the Bentleys have chosen the pagan gods, but the development of the novel leads to some new possibility characterized by a new honesty, a child, and "a stillness, a freshness, a vacancy of beginning", suggesting a movement from the Old Testament to the New. In the larger metaphoric framework of the book, this develop-

ment is characterized by the storm that sweeps through the town of Horizon, demolishing most of the false-fronted little stores on Main Street.

Philip's first sermon in a new town is always "As For Me and My House We Will Serve the Lord." Mrs. Bentley explains that it contains Philip's "creed": "The Word of God as revealed in Holy Writ — Christ Crucified — salvation through His Grace — those are the things Philip stands for." However, soon it becomes clear that Philip does not believe the Christianity he preaches. As a young man, he was sure that "he was meant to paint", and had used the Church as a steppingstone to an education. Had he succeeded, he might have lived with his conscience, but a wife, the depression, and a rapidly-mounting sense of guilt and despair anchor him firmly to the false fronts of Main Street: "having failed he's not a strong or great man, just a guilty one":

> He made a compromise once, with himself, his conscience, his ideals; and now he believes that by some retributive justice he is paying for it. A kind of Nemesis. He pays in Main Streets — this one, the last one, the Main Streets still to come.

As this reference to retributive justice would indicate, Philip's strongest instincts are towards a kind of pagan Nemesis or fatalism. Mrs. Bentley, observing the country people of Philip's charge, senses this same primitive response in the "sober work-roughened congregation":

> There was strength in their voices when they sang, like the strength and darkness of the soil. The last hymn was staidly orthodox, but through it there seemed to mount something primitive, something that was less a response to Philip's sermon and scripture reading than to the grim futility of their own lives. Five years in succession now they've been blown out, dried out, hailed out; and it was as if in the face of so blind and uncaring a universe they were trying to assert themselves, to insist upon their own meaning and importance.
>
> 'Which is the source of all religion,' Paul discussed it with me afterwards. 'Man can't bear to admit his insignificance. If you've ever seen a hailstorm, or watched a crop dry up —— his helplessness, the way he's ignored — well, it was just such helplessness in the beginning that set him discovering gods who could control the storms and seasons. Powerful, friendly gods — on his side. . . . So he felt better — gratefully became a reverent and religious creature. That was what you heard this morning — pagans singing Christian hymns . . . *pagan*, you know, originally that's exactly what it meant, *country dweller*.

The primary Old Testament distinction between Israelites and pagans is the monotheism of the chosen people. God's covenant given to Moses states that the Ammonites and other pagans will be driven from the Promised Land, but that the Israelites must guard themselves carefully from the "images" of the pagans: "for

thou shalt have no other gods before me." This association of image or idol-worship with paganism is also suggested in Ross's novel. There are early references to Mrs. Finley, the "small-town Philistine" who would like to mould the town "in her own image." If Philip had a child, Mrs. Bentley tells us, he would mould it "in his own image." Philip is also the product of his own twisted image of his dead father. From a photograph, a trunkful of old books, and the discovery that his father wanted to paint, he has developed himself by emulation: "They say let a man look long and devotedly enough at a statue and in time he will resemble it." Similarly, Philip's concept of the Church is an unhappy child's picture modeled on the image of the Main Street Church: "Right or wrong he made it the measure for all churches." And, as he has moulded his own character on that of his father, so he attempts to mould Steve: "For there's a strange arrogance in his devotion to Steve, an unconscious determination to mould him in his own image . . ." When Steve is removed from the household, Mrs. Bentley's primary regret is that Philip has never seen through to the real boy, "fond of bed, his stomach, and his own way":

> An idol turned clay can make even an earthly woman desirable . . . he's one idol tarnish-proof. Philip will forget the real Steve before long, and behind his cold locked lips mourn another of his own creating. I know him. I know as a creator what he's capable of.

THIS WHOLE COMPLEX of Old Testament idol, image, and paganism, suggests a framework of ironic illusion supported by the names of the characters.[2] In each case there is ironic reversal, Eliot-fashion, in which the novel character can be seen to be acting in a manner similar to, yet opposite from, that of his Biblical counterpart. Philip, deacon and evangelist, did preach "salvation through His Grace" and did convert from idolatry; the apostle Philip is rebuked by Christ because of his request for material proof of the existence of God: "Lord, show us the Father and it sufficeth us." In Ross's novel, Philip the preacher substitutes the image of an earthly father (the photograph) for a heavenly one and, as he has modeled himself upon that image, succumbs to the new paganism, the idolatry of Self.

There are also suggestions throughout the text that Mrs. Bentley has been raising up her own images, in particular that of Philip, the sensitive and impressionable artist who must be mothered along in the direction which she best sees

fit. She does not come to see how wrong she has been in her wilful attempt to structure her husband's life until after her encounter with the prairie wilderness and Philip's raging attempts to catch the strength of the land on canvas: "Water gets dammed sometimes . . . it seeps away in dry, barren earth. Just as he's seeping away among the false fronts of these little towns." She also realizes that she has attempted to mould her husband's life largely because she has a false image of his real nature: "I've taken a youth and put him on a pedestal and kept him there." With the recognition that the Philip she has known for twelve years is little more than the false front of their single and joint romantic projections, comes the more difficult and sometimes whistling-in-the-dark formulation that Philip's periodic thrashings-out against the hypocrisy of his own life are not as contemptible as she has previously, and somewhat smugly, assumed:

> And if it's finer and stronger to struggle with life than just timidly to submit to it, so, too, when you really come to see and understand them, must the consequences of that struggle be worthier of a man than smug little virtues that have never known trial or soiling. That is right. I know. I must remember.

Mrs. Bentley must remember because her whole life is posited on her husband; although he is her creation, he is also her god and ground of being: "I haven't any roots of my own anymore. I'm a fungus or parasite whose life depends on his." Like Hatty Glenn, for her there is no other way than to keep going on: "Somehow I must believe in them, both of them. Because I need him still. This isn't the end. I have to go on, try to win him again . . . It's like a finger pointing." But unlike the earlier struggle which borders on the trivial, Mrs. Bentley's struggle is often admirable because there is a strong sense of discipline and the larger good in her sense of direction. There is no doubt that her motives are often self-interested, but it is a self-interest which acknowledges its own presence and which makes some attempt to modify itself.

In the first cycle of the novel, she is threatened by Philip's affection for Steve and in the second by his affection for Judith. As a result, she begins to admit the self-destructive nature of their marriage and to probe her own motives: "For these last twelve years I've kept him in the Church — no one else. The least I can do now is help get him out again." In this conclusion there is some positive choice and her feeling that "there's still no way but going on, pretending not to know" modulates into the discovery that there is one way out of Horizon: "saving a thousand dollars was the only way." Mrs. Bentley's "only way," the bookstore in the city, in contrast to the "no other way" of many of Ross's characters, suggests an intelligence capable of choice. Realizing that the foundations of her own

morality have also been modelled on the untried virtue of a smug Main Street, Mrs. Bentley gropes, with lapses, toward some other way.

As in the short stories, nature has a relation to human action; Mrs. Bentley is often impelled towards the way she must follow by the force of the wind. At the beginning of the novel, the wind establishes the emotional landscape of Horizon:

> It's an immense night out there, wheeling and windy. The lights on the street and in the houses are helpless against the black wetness, little unilluminating glints that might be painted on it. The town seems huddled together, cowering on a high, tiny perch, afraid to move lest it topple into the wind. Close to the parsonage is the church, black even against the darkness, towering ominously up through the night and merging with it. There's a soft steady swish of rain on the roof, and a gurgle of eave troughs running over. Above, in the high cold night, the wind goes swinging past, indifferent, liplessly mournful. It frightens me, makes me feel lost, dropped on this little perch of town and abandoned. I wish Philip would waken.

The wind makes Mrs. Bentley aware that she has been lost and abandoned, dropped, as it were, on this point of Horizon, the place where land and sky meet. In a real sense, Horizon is as much a psychological state as it is a town; it is the place where one is lodged when it is impossible to go either forward or backward, the stationary perspective. The Bentleys are caught in this self-destructive stasis, and it is in the first few chapters of the novel that Mrs. Bentley is forced to recognize her alienation from Philip: "I wish I could reach him, but it's like the wilderness outside of night and sky and prairie, with this one little spot of Horizon hung up lost in its immensity. He's as lost, and alone." But she too is lost on the same horizon: "There's a high, rocking wind . . . and I have a queer, helpless sense of being lost miles out in the middle of it, flattened against a little peak of rock." Philip, listening to the wind, slips away from his wife and closes the study door between them: "Not that things between us tonight are much different from any other night . . . [but] tonight, because of the wind, we both seem to know." In Philip's next painting of the false-fronted Main Street the wind sets itself against the town and Mrs. Bentley reads there her husband's state of mind: "The false fronts . . . are buckled down in desperation for their lives . . . And yet you feel no sympathy . . . you wait in impatience for the wind to work its will."

The power of the wind in the painting suggests the destructive force rising in Philip. In the first half of the novel, the Bentleys sat together in a little ravine and watched the railway go by, each knowing it was the way out which repeated Horizons had denied Philip; the second part of the novel would appear to begin

at this same ravine where Philip takes stock of himself and determines to shape his own way, to "take things as they come — get what you can out of them." His decision, "if a man's a victim of circumstances he deserves to be," inevitably leads to Judith West. Now aware of Philip's infidelity, Mrs. Bentley despairs in a closed horizon:

> I stopped and looked up Main Street once, the little false fronts pale and blank and ghostly in the corner light, the night encircling it so dense and wet that the hard gray wheelpacked earth, beginning now to glisten with the rain, was like a single ply of solid matter laid across a chasm.

This suggestion of a closed world in which there is only one bridge of solid matter, the road which is also the way of Horizon itself and which ends in darkness, is repeated in Mrs. Bentley's next visit to the ravine. There, cloud and earth join together to form an impenetrable horizon, mirroring her emotional state.

But the novel has already moved to an anticipatory upswing, Mrs. Bentley watching the night train go out is for the first time, like Philip and Judith, and old Lawson of *The Well*, at one with the quickening train wheels: "It was like a setting forth, and with a queer kind of clutch at my throat, as if I were about to enter it, I felt the wilderness ahead of night and rain." At Christmas, she continues this journey to venture over the high prairie snow. From this real horizon, the small town of Horizon is seen in perspective. It is no longer her whole mental horizon, but simply "a rocky, treacherous island" in the snow. When she next visits the ravine with Paul, her perspective is completed. Near the end of the novel, when the wind nails her against the grain elevator, she is still feeling lost and abandoned but there can be no question that she will go on with Philip. Similarly, Philip visits Judith West to tell her that the Bentleys will adopt the coming child and then move to a bookstore in the city. Both decisions pave the way for the final confrontation between husband and wife when the great wind storm blows down most of the false fronts on Main Street.

This novel raises several disturbing critical issues including the death of Judith West, the character of Mrs. Bentley, and the validity of Philip's claim to be an artist.[3] I am inclined to believe that Mrs. Bentley is no more or less culpable than she might be expected to be under her circumstances. Through her own stubbornness and pride of possession, she contributes to her own betrayal, but there is sufficient evidence to indicate that she also suffers toward her own redemption. Judith West's death does seem painfully unnecessary, particularly when juxtaposed to Mrs. Bentley's cruel remarks:

> For me it's easier this way. It's what I've secretly been hoping for all along. I'm glad she's gone — glad — for her sake as well as mine. What was there ahead of her now anyway? If I lost Philip what would there be ahead for me?

Yet, on further consideration, it would appear that there was, in fact, no other way for Judith, either in terms of the deterministic nature of Ross's art or of the novel's mythic structure. Her sacrifice, like that of Steve and El Greco, can be seen as the last sacrifice required by the pagan gods of Main Street. And, as in the short stories involving a betrayal, her death is accomplished through the forces of nature — the soft, spring mud which exhausts her, precipitating the birth of her child.

There is a somewhat similar deterministic situation involved in the melodramatic death of the old farmer Lawson in *The Well*. Betrayed and shot by his young wife, he is stuffed down a well almost despite the efforts of the rather unattractive narrator, Chris Rowe, who appears to be swept along by the currents of destiny. What is most interesting about *As For Me and My House* in comparison with Ross's other work is that a more sophisticated third person is added to the central tragic situation — a Mrs. Bentley whose evolving consciousness is capable of compromise so that the total catastrophe of the stories and the near catastrophe of *The Well* is averted. Chris Rowe is also groping towards a sense of direction, but he is much cruder a character than either of the Bentleys. In fact, the novel itself has the kind of jagged relief which causes the reader to wonder — hopefully — if perhaps *The Well* is not the earlier of the two novels.[4]

Philip, the "non artist" as Warren Tallman calls him, "unable to discover a subject which will release him from his oppressive incapacity to create," does seem to find a subject from the moment he attempts to catch the elusive whiteness of Judith West's face. From this point onward his sketches move from the stasis of despairing Main Streets to the real horizon of galloping stallions, the country schoolhouse, the "strength and fatalism" of the prairie hills. But it is my impression that the real issue here is not whether or not Philip is a successful artist, but rather that he is motivated by some inner sense of direction which is other than the way of Main Street. Like Judith West, and to a lesser extent like Mrs. Bentley, Philip has a dream of an expanding horizon. And, as in the short stories, it is on the process of realizing this dream or of finding the way that Ross is focusing, rather than on the character Philip or on the artist Philip. In this sense, Philip is the abstracted principle and Mrs. Bentley the active process of the Puritan way; the two, as Roy Daniells notes, are part of a larger whole.

THE SIGNIFICANCE of Ross's achievement, and I fully agree with those critics who suggest that *As For Me and My House* is in the mainstream of the English Canadian novel, is that in nature, ethos and hero, Ross has captured all of these qualities which we attempt to invoke when we want to talk about Canadian writing. It is Ross's hard nature given tongue by Mrs. Bentley when she observes that the wilderness frightens us:

> We've all lived in a little town too long.... We shrink from our insignificance. The stillness and solitude — we think a force or presence into it... for we dare not admit an indifferent wilderness, where we may have no meaning at all...

which also recurs in Bruce Hutchison's book, *The Unknown Country*[5] and which is given the status of a literary myth in Northrop Frye's rationale for the "garrison mentality" of Canadian writing.[6]

Yet, in significant difference from the nature which leads to the formulation of Frye's "garrison mentality" or, for that matter, from the mental "pallisade" of William Carlos Williams's *In The American Grain*,[7] Ross does not seem to be suggesting that there is no god in nature if for no other reason than that his people would not allow it. It may very well be the Old Testament vengeful God, the Nemesis of Philip's guilty conscience, or simply the psychological projection of the will to believe. Nonetheless, the people of Ross's prairie appear to keep on waiting and believing that beyond the individual tragedies of such as "Not by Rain Alone," such endurance does have value. And, certainly, in the larger structure of the first novel, there is a kind of grace bestowed: Mrs. Bentley is supported in her struggle to find the way by the Old Testament metaphor of the pointing finger: "It was like a finger pointing again, clear and peremptory, to keep on pretending ignorance just as before." Ross gives an explicit psychological basis for this metaphor; yet, as it springs from the inner recesses of self and is associated with her desire to find the "way," it is not without implications of a transcendent function. Then, too, Philip undergoes a kind of salvation through grace. He does find other-directed subjects for his art and he is given a child which he so desperately wants. Most importantly, it is a child with all of the New Testament implications of "a little child shall lead them."[8]

It would appear that the religious frame of reference, even if only in terms of residual response, is still a very important part of the Canadian novel. It was with considerable surprise that I realized recently that a surprisingly large number of our twentieth century novels refer to specifically moral, often explicitly religious

concerns, as is suggested in the following titles: Grove's *Our Daily Bread, Fruits of the Earth*; much of Callaghan, including *Such is my Beloved, They Shall Inherit the Earth, More Joy in Heaven,* and *The Loved and the Lost*; Mitchell's *Who has Seen the Wind?*; Klein's *The Second Scroll*; MacLennan's *Each Man's Son* and *The Watch that Ends the Night*; Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley*; Wiseman's *The Sacrifice*; Watson's *The Double Hook*; Laurence's *A Jest of God*; Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*; Horwood's *Tomorrow Will be Sunday* and Kreisel's *The Betrayal.*

Why might this be so? There does not appear to be a comparable movement in the American novel of the last twenty years, although a successful argument might be made for the preceding three decades.[9] There is the obvious fact of the unpopulated land itself: Canada, particularly the prairie, is still largely open space. In the midst of land and sky, as is explicitly suggested at the start of Mitchell's *Who Has Seen the Wind?*, it is difficult not to feel the cosmic setting. Then, too, the country is still basically regional; in the smaller communities religion still remains a strong force. Furthermore, our great wave of immigration was at the turn of the twentieth century rather than in the late eighteenth or nineteenth, as it was in the United States. This turn-of-the century immigration, particularly of Scotch Presbyterians and European Jews, has greatly strengthened the Old Testament concerns of our literature.

Another possibility may be inferred from the fact that naturalism did not take hold in Canada as it did in the United States. R. E. Watters, in an address to the Third Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association (Utrecht, 1961), gives a convincing rationale for this fact.[10] He further notes that as Canada experienced no wars of emancipation and liberation, Canadian fictional characters do not usually see existing social conditions in Zolaesque terms, nor are they particularly concerned with leaving established communities for a place where they might be more free, as is suggested in the American myth of the journey west. Rather, as the historical fact of the United Empire Loyalists would suggest, and as Frye and Watters both note, the Canadian hero is concerned basically with maintaining his own integrity within a chosen community. I would add to this that the works of Ross would suggest that naturalism cannot flourish where there is even a remnant of divine providence. Religion, even if largely residual or seemingly converted to demonism as it is in *As For Me and My House*, invokes another set of values which even if psychologically internalized, still supports the individual in his struggle:

> A trim, white, neat-gabled little schoolhouse, just like Partridge Hill. There's a stable at the back, and some buggies in the yard. It stands up lonely and defiant on a landscape like a desert. . . . The distorted, barren landscape makes you feel the meaning of its persistence there. As Paul put it last Sunday when we drove up, it's *Humanity in Microcosm.* Faith, ideals, reason — all the things that really are humanity — like Paul you feel them there, their stand against the implacable blunderings of Nature . . .
>
> And it was just a few rough pencil strokes, and he [Philip] had it buried among some notes he'd been making for next Sunday's sermon.

Unlike Huckleberry Finn, the characteristic American hero who determines "to light out for the territory" when civilization becomes too pressing,[11] the characteristic Canadian hero is the one who stays and endures — the farmers of Ross's prairie. If and when there is to be some way as there is for the Bentleys of Horizon, it must be an honourable way and one which is sanctioned by community.[12]

FOOTNOTES

1 Margaret Laurence has also noted this motto in her introduction to the New Canadian Library edition of Ross's short stories, *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories.*

2 Stephen, a devout Christian, was the first martyr; Paul (formerly Saul) witnessed the stoning of Stephen by the mob and was converted to Christianity; Judith, in the *Apocrypha*, gave her body to save her townspeople and was honoured by them. Mrs. Bentley, unnamed in the novel, would appear to have many of the characteristics of the Rachel of Genesis. She has no children, receives a son through a maidservant and finally does have a son of her own. This Rachel is also associated with the successful theft of her father's household "images" (gods) which she brings to her husband. Added to these references is the suggestion of the "bent twig" implicit in the name "Bentley."

3 See Roy Daniells's "Introduction" to *As For Me and My House*; Cf. William H. New, "Sinclair Ross's Ambivalent World," *Canadian Literature,* No. 40 (Spring, 1969), p. 26-27; Cf. Donald Stephens, "Wind, Sun and Dust," *Canadian Literature,* No. 23 (Winter, 1965), p. 20-23; Cf. Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow," *Canadian Literature,* No. 5 (Summer, 1960), p. 15.

4 In author's remarks appended to "No Other Way" in *Nash's* magazine, Ross is quoted as saying that he has written two novels: "failures, which publishers write me are interesting and compelling, but of small commercial possibilities. I am now starting to work on short stories, hoping gradually to build up a better technique . . ."

5 Bruce Hutchison, *The Unknown Country*, p. 3: "Who can know our loneliness, on the immensity of prairie, in the dark forest and on the windy sea rock? . . . We flee to little towns for a moment of fellowship and light and speech, we flee into cities or log cabins, out of the darkness and loneliness and the creeping silence."

[6] Northrop Frye, "Conclusions," *Literary History of Canada*, p. 830. "I have long been impressed in Canadian poetry by a tone of deep terror in regard to nature. . . . The human mind has nothing but human and moral values to cling to if it is to preserve its integrity or even its sanity, yet the vast unconsciousness of nature in front of it seems an unanswerable denial of those values."

[7] Cf. Warren Tallman, *Canadian Literature*, No. 6, p. 43. "The continent itself — the grey wolf whose shadow is underneath the snow — has resisted the culture, the cultivation, the civilization which is indigenous to Europe but alien to North America even though it is dominant in North America." Tallman's thesis in this article would appear to rest on the premises of William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain.*

[8] Ross, *As For Me and My House.* "In our lives it isn't the church itself that matters but what he feels about it, the shame and sense of guilt he suffers while remaining a part of it. That's why we're adopting Judith's baby. He'll dare not let his son see him as he sees himself: and he's no dissembler."

[9] Cf. Faulkner, Steinbeck, Warren.

[10] R. E. Watters, "A Quest for National Identity: Canadian Literature vis a vis the Literatures of Great Britain and the United States," *Proceedings of the Third Congress of International Comparative Literature Association.*

[11] *Ibid*, p. 237.

[12] "Last Friday they had a farewell supper for us in the basement of the church, made speeches, sang *God Be With You Till We Meet Again,* presented us with a handsome silver flower basket. It's the way of a little Main Street town — sometimes a rather nice way."