SINCLAIR ROSS'S AMBIVALENT WORLD

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ONE OF THE MOST HAUNTING phrases in all of Canadian fiction has to me always been the last line of Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*. The ambivalence of it puzzles, irritates, confuses. When Philip Bentley at that time protests that to name his illegitimate son Philip would be to raise the possibility of not knowing which of them is which, his wife — the central character-narrator — writes in her diary: "That's right, Philip. I want it so." And so the novel closes. At first that "*I* want it" seems to reveal a great deal; it speaks the voice of the manipulating woman who has already almost destroyed her husband by confining his artistic talents, and who even now does not let up. For Philip in such a climate to leave Horizon and the ministry and run a book shop somewhere appears still to be his wife's decision, and the future seems bleak indeed.

The picture's other side — for it has one — is, though not exactly rosy, certainly less bleak. If we can accept that Mrs. Bentley's final remark is a sign of a new-found humility — 'I *want* it so" — and this is certainly the received interpretation[1] — then she and Philip have some hope of escaping their hyprocrisy towards themselves, towards each other, and towards the towns to which they have been inadequately ministering. Both views are reasonable. This one is supported by the climactic scene in which the storm in Horizon blows down the building's false fronts and Mrs. Bentley angrily reveals to Philip that she knows that their adopted baby is really illegitimately his own. The other view acquires its credibility from the book as a whole, from the character we see self-revealed in the

pages of her admirably constructed diary. For Ross has consciously constructed it after all; the calendar system itself is enough to tell us that. But what does he really want us to think at the end then? Which view of his character does he want us to accept? There is a third possibility: that it is neither the one nor the other view, but the ambivalence itself which is desired aim — not based on an indecisiveness about who his character really is, but emerging out of a carefully constructed web of viewpoints, Mrs. Bentley's and ours, pitted ironically against each other so that we come to appreciate not only the depth and complexity of the narrator and her situation, but also the control in which Ross artistically holds his words.

The scene which gives us some indication of this lies between the storm scene and the final words of the novel. It is their last Sunday in Horizon, and Mrs. Bentley writes:

> After three or four years it's easy to leave a little town. After just one it's hard.
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> It turns out now that all along they've liked us. . . . 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.
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> It's blowing tonight, and there's dust again, and the room sways slowly in a yellow smoky haze. The bare, rain-stained walls remind me of our first Sunday here, just a little over a year ago, and in a sentimental mood I keep thinking what an eventful year it's been, what a wide wheel it's run.

It is the first time she has ever complimented the townspeople or found anything attractive about the small town way of life. But is she sincere now or has she, since the storm, learned another hypocrisy? That ambivalence again.

The importance of this episode for the novel as a whole is not just the revelation of the new attitude, but the image which follows it, that of dust and rain, for if the imagery is structured as well as the events of the novel, it should serve to support the themes and to confirm our interpretation. The simple "polar opposites" view of Mrs. Bentley, that is, as being *either* success *or* failure at the end of the novel, would be supported if a strand of "polar opposites" imagery ran through the book, distinguishing truth from falsehood, good from bad. The false-fronted stores come at once to mind — yet after they have fallen we are still left with ambivalent scenes. The dust and rain, then, would seem to fulfill the function of delineating opposites, but they are even more deceptive than the falsefronted stores, and to force them into this technical role would be to distort what Ross intends. To illuminate this question, however, forces us back into the novel.

THE OVERALL IMPRESSION left by the book is certainly one of aridity: of dust and heat, the Depression on the prairies and the drought which went with it.[2] And accompanying the unproductivity of the land is the dryness of the people: Mrs. Bentley, who cannot bear a child; Philip, who does not believe in his church and cannot comfort the people; the people themselves, who in Mrs. Bentley's eyes cannot appreciate anything or anyone beyond their own restricted world. Yet this directly conflicts with the view of them she gives us at the end of the book, so obviously "in Mrs. Bentley's eyes" is the operative phrase here. By extension, we suspect all of her affirmations, finding in them partial truths that ring ironically against the complex realities Ross ultimately allows us to glimpse.

So it is with the dust and rain, which reveal the complexity that several separate points of view create. The image becomes one not of affirming polarities of good and bad, but of exploring what is real in the world. Mrs. Bentley's view is thus not the only one we are conscious of, for the technique of the book, Ross's words in Mrs. Bentley's diary, establishes a linguistic tension that allows us to view the narrator with distance, objectivity, dispassion: and so perceive the irony and ambivalence — the "jests of God", in a sense, if we can anticipate Margaret Laurence — which characterize reality in Ross's world.

Although from the very beginning, that is, we come up against Mrs. Bentley's explanation of things, the false fronts and social attitudes of Horizon, the first detail of weather we see is not one of dryness but one of a "soft steady swish of rain on the roof, and a gurgle of eave troughs running over". April rains are usually a symbol of hope, of nurture for new growth, of Christian sacrifice and forgiveness, but here in this "disordered house", they (ostensibly for the first time) leak through the roof and stain the walls. Obviously the rain in reality does not serve to refresh, just as the "Christianity" hypocritically uttered by Philip or by Mrs. Bentley's townspeople is powerless to affect the environments through which they move.

We see this most clearly in the Partridge Hill episodes. In this little country town, beyond Horizon, the people are experiencing their fifth straight year without a harvest, yet they continue to place faith in the ministerings of the Church. Sardonically, in June, Mrs. Bentley writes, "This was the day out at Partridge Hill we prayed for rain." The Church ceremony is thus reduced to pagan ritual, and she and Paul Kirby, the equally sardonic schoolteacher, "tie" in their reaction: "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." It is just this ambivalence, explicitly enunciated here, expressing at once the impossibility of taking sides and the human inclination to do so, which the book communicates throughout.

Paul's continuing habit of uttering etymological facts, which seems almost gratuitous in the novel at times, is not thematically unrelated. He has already told us, for example, "*pagan*, you know, originally that's what it meant, *country dweller*", and in June in Partridge Hill this echoes through the scenes we see. Paul's problem is that he cannot live outside his world of arid facts. Whereas he thinks he knows what's around him and withholds himself from it, others are encountering, experiencing whatever is there. The problems that others (like the farmers) do have, however, emerge not just physically from that encounter (the drought, the land), but from a state of mind in relation to the experience that is not unlike Mrs. Bentley's or Paul's own. Mrs. Bentley later wonders if she is "the one who's never grown up, who can't see life for illusions"; the farmers for their part live in one sense in a dream world that does not recognize the present, for it acknowledges only two times, the good harvest and the possibility for one, "the year it rained all June, and next year".

April rains, for the Bentleys, then, had been destructive; June rains do not exist. The persistent faith in rain seems ironic, therefore, and with this in mind we move back to Mrs. Bentley herself. She likes water, wants it, apparently needs to go walking in the rain, for example, and so heads out in it whenever possible. Even snow will do, though then reality gives way "to the white lineless blend of sky and earth". "Horizon" seems itself to be reality, therefore, just as the present is reality, and like the farmers with their belief in June rains, she comes headlong into conflict with it. Once in a recital she played Debussy's *Garden in the Rain*; now she tries to build one, but water is scarce and all that blooms is a single poppy — while she is away.

Similarly, her view of her husband is founded in this dream of fruition. That he is an artist is what *she* says, but whether or not he indeed has talent, he lacks the milieu that might foster greatness. She sees his artistry, moreover, in terms of her own image, just as he (with his "sons", Steve and young Philip, as well as with his God) creates in his:

> It's always been my way to comfort myself thinking that water finds its own level, that if there's anything great or good in a man it will eventually find its way out. But I've never taken hold of the thought and analyzed it before, never seen how false it really is. Water gets dammed sometimes; and sometimes, seeking its level,

> it seeps away in dry, barren earth. Just as he's seeping away among the false fronts of these little towns.

When Philip is ill, too, it is she who says he has nausea — causing Paul to flinch, because his etymological sensibility is outraged. *Nausea* "is from a Greek word meaning *ship* and is, therefore, etymologically speaking, an impossibility on dry land".

That Philip needs a change of environment is true, but again it is Mrs. Bentley who voices the desire, even acts it out when she walks recurrently down the railway track as far as the ravine. When Philip goes with her, she locates her wish in his eyes, and finds the possibility of escape — the possibility of a fruitful, ordered future — in the train to an outside world.

> At last we heard a distant whistle-blade, then a single point of sound, like one drop of water in a whole sky. It dilated, spread. The sky and silence began imperceptibly to fill with it. We steeled ourselves a little, feeling the pounding onrush in the trestle of the bridge. It quickened, gathered, shook the earth, then swept in an iron roar above us, thundering and dark.

Paradoxically the train comes from, passes through, and heads for "Horizons", which are realities, not dreams, and must be faced. The "water sickness" is in a sense Mrs. Bentley's, not Philip's; therefore, a function of her perhaps unconscious dream and a further indication of her imposition of her own point of view onto the world around her.

WHAT ROSS DOES to communicate these ironies and ambiguities is to blur the edges of his images. Absolutes do not exist. For all that the recurrent water images seem to accompany an inability to come to terms with reality, that is, the water is not itself "bad" — it only becomes so when in a person's viewpoint the dream it represents stands in the way of altering the present. When the dream and the reality come into conflict, the water takes on the characteristics of the desert, the arid land. At the ravine, thinking of Judith, Mrs. Bentley writes:

> Philip and I sat in the snowstorm watching the water rush through the stones — so swift that sometimes as we watched, it seemed still, solid like glass.

Later, knowing of the affair between Judith and Philip, she notes:

> The rain's so sharp and strong it crackles on the windows just like sand.

The similes work in the opposite direction as well. At Partridge Hill, "There was a bright fall of sunshine that made the dingy landscape radiant. Right to the horizon it winked with little lakes of spring-thaw water." But we also hear of "dust clouds lapping at the sky", of "dense, rigid heat" and "planks of sunlight". We're told that the August heat "was heavy and suffocating. We seemed imbedded in it, like insects in a fluid that has congealed." This last image recurs again when Philip seduces Judith, and Mrs. Bentley wakes, listens, and knows: "like a live fly struggling in a block of ice". For her, during the winter that follows, "The sun seems cold". These are not all working to say exactly the same thing. There are times, apparently, when the dream serves a useful function in the mind of a people, but again, when the reality — "Horizon" — is obscured, the dream is frozen, becomes as hard and apparently sterile as the dust and sand.

The ambivalence we are left with at the end of the book is not absolutely resolved by these observations, but they bring us closer to understanding it. In presenting and exploring a single point of view, *As For Me and My House* runs the danger of seeming shallow, of allowing no aesthetic distance from which we can respond *to* the narrator as well as participate in her verbal reactions to the world. Fortunately Ross's technique, his control over the words he allows Mrs. Bentley to use, creates the ironic tension which raises the book from a piece of "regional realism" to a complex study of human responses. Mrs. Bentley herself is all too prone to approve or condemn, but Ross would have his readers avoid this. By his images and through the other characters, he shows us, in fact, how Mrs. Bentley's polarization of Horizon (this world, arid, sterile, bad) and the Bookstore (dream, water, fruitful, good) is invalid and gradually breaks down. That she and Philip ultimately do leave to try to set up the bookstore is perhaps cause, therefore, for us to see her as a failure, continuing as the manipulator she has been before.

But then we still have her compliment about Horizon's townspeople to contend with, and her acknowledgment in the same breath of both the dust and the rain stains. Here she seems to be aware of reality at last; if so, her future might hold at least some success. But reality to Ross is still not clearcut, and that the book should end so ambivalently seems ultimately part of his plan. The ambivalence is founded in his imagery, founded in the lives of the characters and the nature of their world, germane to the whole novel, magnificently distilling what it has

tried to say. When we become conscious of this, we become not only involved in the book, but like the people of Horizon, no matter how apparently sure of themselves, still sensitive to doubt and so to reality as well.

FOOTNOTES

[1] See Roy Daniells, "Introduction" to *As For Me and My House*, 1957, v-x, Cf. Warren Tallman, "Wolf in the Snow", in George Woodcock, ed., *A Choice of Critics* (Toronto: Oxford, 1966), 53-76.

[2] See Donald Stephens, "Wind, Sun and Dust", *Canadian Literature*, no. 23 (Winter 1965), 17-24.