ROSS'S DISAPPEARING PRAIRIE IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

by
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Sinelair Ross's 1941 novel *As For Me and My House* is hailed by eritics as one of the great works of prairie fietion. Most of these erities have treated the prairie as a trope of emptiness or barrenness, and have proceeded from that point to describe the prairie as reifying the desolation of the Beutleys' marriage. This tradition has produced a particular set of readings of the novel, all centered around the idea that the prairie somehow represents a variety of barrennesses. A contemporary re-telling of the novel, Pamela Banting's short story "The Imposter Phenomenon," suggests a new reading of the work of the prairie in Ross's novel. Although the prairie is absent from Banting's story, the Bentleys' marriage has ehanged very little. The reader of both texts returns to Ross with fresh perspective and renewed consideration: if the prairie can disappear and leave the desolate marriage still at the center of the story, perhaps there is another way to read the overwhelming sense of place in *As For Me and My House*. The ways Banting's work plays off the original text suggest an alternative reading of the prairie in *As For Me and My House*.

Ross's novel and Banting's story begin:

> Philip has thrown himself across the bed and fallen asleep, his elothes on still, one of his long legs dangling to the floor.[1]

The image of this man, hidden from his wife by his elothes and proteeted by the refuge of sleep, is in both stories one of spiritual and emotional exhaustion. Ross's narrator, who never names herself and musr perforce be referred to as Mrs. Bentley, uses this opening passage of her journal to describe the difficult time Philip has had "putting up stovepipes and opening crates, for the fourth time getting our old linoleum down," saying "He hasn't the hands for it. I could

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use the pliers and hammers twice as well myself, with none of his mutterings or smashed-up fingers either, but in the parsonage, on calling days, it simply isn't done" (R. 5). In a matter of three sentences, Philip has been established as unfit for and unsuited to a labor his wife would enjoy and do competently, but must forsake under the terms of the society they inhabit. Ross's Philip, we learn from his wife, is a minister by trade but an artist by vocation; yet it is Mrs. Bentley, as Robert Kroetsch points out, who "makes her art"[2] by keeping the journal that is the novel. The opening entry is focused on Philip, lying on the bed, worn out by his inability to "unite [his] avocation and [his] vocation."[3] Banting's narrator, however, leaves Philip there on the bed and locates herself, "pen in hand, staring toward the window and intermittently writing in my notebook" (B, 220). She goes on to give a brief writing autobiography, describing her "passion for scribblers" and her distaste for five year diaries with their "narrow lines" (B, 221). lack of space, and stiff bindings. The cramped quality "reduced the day's phenomenology...to an abrupt, empirical statement of fact," causing Banting's narrator to

> feel discouraged at how dull and uninteresting my life was and it seemed to be at least partly the diary's fault. Its only themes were distances attained (rarely transgressed) or confinements and contractions of space (B, 221).

Her language contrasts this falsely inviting object with the prairie landscape of Ross's novel, suggesting that it is the absence of constraint inherent in the open space of the prairie that makes Mrs. Bentley's journal possible. The fact that Banting's narrator is a writer by vocation and avocation creates at once unity and disunity between the texts. Both narrators use the journal form to build, in careful layers, the portrait of a troubled and troubling marriage. The assertion of a writerly past, present, and future lends Banting's narrator a certain authority in her own identity. Thus it is no surprise that Banting's narrator has a name of her own and a story to go with her naming, while Ross's narrator resists naming herself and thus fixes her identity, at its essence, as Philip's wife.

It seems traditional, in Ross criticism, to read the spiritual and physical barrenness of the Bentleys' marriage as reflecting the prairie landscape, and to extend this mirror imagery to declare the barrenness of the marriage as a result of childlessness:

> the term "barren"...moreover, has several levels of meaning in the novel. A land without rain, the prairie is barren of trees; the Bentleys' marriage is spiritually barren just as it is physically barren, the latter owing to Mrs. Bentley's inability to have a child; and Philip, whom Mrs. Bentley claims to be an artist, is also seen to be artistically impotent.[4]

The ostensible "emptiness" of the prairie has led Ross scholars to locate Mrs. Bentley's failure to bear a child at the emotional heart of the text. It is the accepted view among many critics to see the prairie as empty, a reading that may be more easily justifiable for the dust bowl prairie than it is today. Readers of Willa Cather, for example, are certainly familiar with Jim Burden's "Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out,"[5] yet even Jim soon discovers that the prairie is far from empty. It may seem painfully obvious (and thus literarily naive) to point out that couples who do not enjoy much in the way of physical intimacy often don't have children,[6] and that this lack of intimacy would certainly exacerbate any fertility issues already present in a marriage. The fault, if blame must be apportioned for a childless marriage, is not entirely Mrs. Bentley's. There is plenty of textual evidence for the dearth of physical closeness of any sort in the Bentleys' marriage. At one point Mrs. Bentley is literally forced to buy a rare sexual encounter with her husband with a surprise gift of art supplies. Philip acts nonchalant at first, then reacts as his wife knew he would:

> It was all good, even the shy, half-frightened way he looked at me, and the hint of promise as his hand grew tight on mine. Maybe I ought to have more pride, think of the other nights, and remember that this time it's only because I bought him canvases and paints. Maybe I oughtn't to, but I will. That's the kind he is–and the kind I am. Better for paints and canvases than not at all–than his shoulder hard against me like a wall. (R, 118)

Mrs. Bentley enjoys this brief moment of power, the "shy, half-frightened way" her husband looks at her, although it is also clear that she feels she ought to be ashamed of the commercial nature of the transaction. The economics of Mrs. Bentley's desire, along with the stillborn baby born soon after the Bentleys'

marriage and Philip's increasing resentment of a wife who needs emotional attention, suggest a troubled, infertile relationship. Linking the emotional infertility of the Bentleys' marriage to a commercialization of Mrs. Bentley's desire rather than to an emptiness of landscape is a reading of Ross that is easier to come to after a reading of Banting.

Philip's shoulder "hard against [her] like a wall" recalls other instances in the novel when walls, and other domestic spaces, confine and imprison Mrs. Bentley, further complicating previous readings of Ross's landscape. She defies the climate to work in her garden, for example, saying "I'd rather be out in the wind and fighting it than in here listening to it creak the walls. It's so hollow and mournful when there's nothing to do but listen. You get so morbid and depressed" (R, 58), and, later "The house huddles me. I need a tussle with the wind to make me straight again" (R, 59). The wind is an energizing opponent, in contrast to the enervating domestic space of My House (another term layered with meaning in the novel), and the prairie itself is an equally vital and challenging force. The ground itself becomes complicit in Mrs. Bentley's twin desires to engage in physical contact with a living thing and find spiritual escape from the town: "My fingers want to feel the earth, dig in it, burrow away until the town is out of sight and mind," (R, 58-9). Mrs. Bentley goes outside, flees the house, even when most people are heading for shelter, suggesting that outdoors is better than indoors even when it is dangerous.

Re-examining the nature of the Bentleys' childlessness also calls into question previous readings of the prairie. Philip's imagined desire for a child seems less a longing to parent than a longing to create in his own image, as Mrs. Bentley notices when they take in an orphaned Catholic boy:

> He hasn't seen him with his eyes yet, just his pity and his imagination. An unwanted, derided little outcast, exactly what he used to be himself...As he starts in to dream and plan for the boy it's his own life over again. Steve is to carry on where he left off. Steve is to do the things he tried to do and failed (R. 70).

The notion that Philip needs Steve to re-live his life is doubly threatening to Mrs. Bentley: not only does it devalue their relationship and Philip's decision to marry her, it suggests that Philip has given up trying to imagine an alternative for himself. This dooms Mrs. Bentley to an endless succession of

towns like Horizon as it refigures Philip and Philip's desires; while his drawing exposes false fronts, his ability to imagine an alternative life is stifled by low self-esteem, and his human interactions are thwarted by his inability to read people and places accurately.

The episode of the paints demonstrates how desperate Mrs. Bentley is for physical connection with her husband, and how, after twelve years of marriage, she has learned to read her husband and manage this particular desperation. But she is not starved for sex alone. "To have him notice, speak to me as if I really mattered in his life, after twelve years with him that's all I want or need" (R, 23). The great compelling loneliness driving such a speech echoes in the empty spaces of the marriage like a "howl in the wind" (R, 186). At this moment the "false-fronted" (R, 7) town seems genuine compared to the Bentleys' marriage.

In Banting's story, as I have noted, the prairie itself is gone, leaving only a "hot dry wind blowing hard all day long" while this Philip spends the day "putting together that new metal shed, bolting it to the heavy patio bricks he levelled first for its base" (B, 231). His artwork has changed, too: while Ross's Philip draws sketches that include "a single row of smug, false-fronted stores, a loiterer or two, in the distances the prairie again," (R, 7) this Philip "draws drawings, not objects or images. No prairie scenes of high clouds and weather-beaten shacks, or abandoned machinery and barbed-wire fences for him. No false-fronted dry goods stores, hardware stores, or banks" (B, 233). The prairie has vanished from the story and from Philip's artwork, but the barrenness of the marriage remains. Although the following passage appears in nearly identical form in Ross's novel, the context of this contemporary re-telling serves to relocate the deepening estrangement between husband and wife:

> Yet living with Philip for so long now I've gradually become helpless and weak and spiritless before him. There's nothing left inside me but a panting animal; character and mind against it are of no avail. The way I watch his face for a flicker of awareness or desire; the way I gauge the pressure of my hand against his shirtsleeve, so quick and hungry, all the time so absorbed in the drawing he's been doing. I sicken, and despise myself, and still keep on. The night comes when he wants me, and it's wonderful, but the sense of ease or consummation is temporary. We both know that inevitably another drought will follow (B, 228).

This drought, this lack of nourishment so tempting to attribute to the prairie, has, in Banting's story, moved within the walls of Ross's house. The walls no longer suffice to form a boundary between domestic interior and the natural world without, and the actual landscape can no longer be mistaken for a refleetion of the lives played out upon it. The "bleak vision" attributed to Mrs. Bentley in one reading of the novel, "her own barrenness and the emptiness of her life [that] finds its counterpoint in the dust bowl landscape surrounding the Bentleys in Horizon," (Thacker, 200) seems to me, after reading Banting, to be more specifically located in an uneven awareness of desire and the Bentleys' inability to create a meaningful language for their marriage. In Ross's novel, the passage ends quite differently:

> I sicken, and despise myself, and still keep on. The night eomes when he wants me, but it brings no ease or consummation. I'm ashamed afterwards. I lie awake, living again through the night I listened to him with her–wauder off to think how white and haggard he looks, to ask myself what's going to happen when the baby's born (R, 199).

Mrs. Bentley's shame, in both versions, means that she finds no ease in achieving, however briefly, the reciprocation of her desire. Philip's affair with Judith West during Mrs. Bentley's illness (and not without her knowledge, although he is not a good enough reader to notice) apparently results in Judith's pregnancy and the birth of the son Mrs. Bentley had hoped for all these years. Mrs. Bentley is determined to adopt this child, but as is apparent in the above passage, Judith's child is resident in the tiny house long before its birth. The baby's arrival is the mechanism by whieh Mrs. Bentley is able to effect Philip's change of profession. Her language as she discusses the Church suggests an elaborate, lifelong punishment even as she ostensibly regards the baby as Philip's savior:

> He must leave the Church. There are some, no doubt, who belong in it, who find it a comfort, a goal, a field of endeavor. He, though, isn't one of them. 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 not dare let his son

see him as he sees himself; and he's no dissembler (R, 203).

If Philip feels shame and guilt at being associated with the Church, what will he feel in the daily presence of the child he (apparently) conceived with another woman? This is Mrs. Bentley's ultimate revenge for Philip's adultery. It also speaks to the power of Philip's emotions in the marriage: Mrs. Bentley's guilt at having to purchase a moment of intimacy, pales in comparison to Philip's. Her recognition of his feelings of shame drives the end of the novel, while there is no suggestion that Philip ever recognized the nature of the transaction of the paints. Mrs. Bentley's remark "and he's no dissembler," shows her recognition of an area where she does have power in the relationship: she is able to read Philip, while he is constantly misreading (or refusing to read) her. Her ability to read also informs her ability to imagine, and then create, an alternative to the endless succession of little towns.

Pamela Banting's short story, "The Imposter Phenomenon," is a contemporary reworking of Ross described by the author as "slavish and adoring" (B, 234). But what exactly has been reworked? The marriage is still a false front; Philip is still essentially detestable and spineless–but now Mrs. Bentley has a name of her own. Woolf's dictum has been reduced to something even more basic than a room and 500 pounds a year: a name of one's own. The church ladies have become a writers' workshop. It is the prairie, so seemingly essential to Ross's novel, that has been reworked to the vanishing point. This is the key that opens up a new set of interpretative possibilities. If Ross's novel is indeed, as Banting asserts, organized around the "language of desire,"[7] how can we continue to read the prairie as a barren, empty reflection of the Bentley's marriage?

It is the absent prairie in particular that seems to me to call for a rereading of Ross, if for no other reason than in the recognition of the way one text can work upon the reader to alter or enhance a reading of another text. Literary criticism shares in the phenomenon that the critic W.H. New describes as "the difficult, ambiguous rhetoric of living with and without borders."[8] Readers place works within one context or another in order to have a critical frame of reference: American literature, Canadian literature, prairie fiction. Texts move from one group to another depending on a particular reader's needs, as New recognizes, saying that "we need a sense of circumference to secure that which we share, recognizing always that we usually share more than we think we do, and that the margins move." Often we locate a novel as THE prairie novel or

THE coming-of-age novel, which, while it serves a perfectly reasonable purpose, does tend to limit the way we read it and allow it to read us. Great writers force us as readers to open ourselves up to a text, rather than wall ourselves in with narrowly-defined interpretations.[9] Although I recognize the practical need for a "sense of circumference," it seems to me that a larger and more humane reading of any text seeks to render borders–if not transparent–at least porous. To seek connection, rather than construct isolation.

In her essay "Miss A and Mrs. B: The Letter of Pleasure in *The Scarlet Letter* and *As For Me and My House*," Pamela Banting asks, "In both Canada and America, is the woman who refuses to name (herself or the Other, respectively) paradoxically the one most able to speak the great spaces and enormous silences?"[10] Her short story allows me to offer at least a partial response. Suppose it is, to use Robert Thacker's term, the prairie fact that makes it possible for Mrs. Bentley to write. Suppose that the absence of narrow lines and stiff binding, of city streets and other geographical and spatial constraints, frees the musician in Mrs. Bentley to tell her story. Then the prairie is an emblem not of barrenness but of hope, a symbol of the possibility of reconfigured boundaries. It offers a way to get out of the House and struggle against the wind, since, as Mrs. Bentley herself points out, a good "tussle" is better than sitting around feeling "morbid and depressed" (R, 58).

NOTES

1. Sinclair Ross, *As For Me and My House* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1941 reprint edition 1993), 5 and Pamela Banting, "The Imposter Phenomenon." *Alberta Re/Bound*, Aritha van Herk, ed. (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1990): 220. Further references to both works will appear parenthetically in the text.
2. Robert Kroetsch, *The Lovely Treachery of Words* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1989), 25.
3. *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, ed. Edward Connery Latham (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979), 277.
4. Robert Thacker, *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989), 199. Further references will appear in the text.
5. Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1954), 8.
6. I am by no means the first to point this out. See, for example, Pamela Banting, "Miss A and Mrs. B: The Letter of Pleasure in *The Scarlet Letter* and *As For Me and My House*," *North Dakota Quarterly* Volume 54, No. 2: 37.
7. E-mail correspondence with Pamela Banting, June 11, 1996.
8. W. H. New, Editor's Note, *Canadian Literature* 144 (Spring 1995): 7.
9. I am grateful to Robert Scott for suggesting this image.

10. Pamela Banting, "Miss A and Mrs. B: The Letter of Pleasure in *The Scarlet Letter* and *As For Me and My House*," *North Dakota Quarterly* Volume 54, No. 2: 32.

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