

T.J. Matheson

**“But do your Thing”: Conformity, Self-Reliance, and Sinclair Ross’s
*As For Me and My House***

It comes as something of a surprise to discover how little agreement there is concerning even the most fundamental aspects of Sinclair Ross’s *As For Me and My House*. Though most critics acknowledge the book’s power and complexity, many have had trouble determining its worth as literature; one has wondered if it was a novel at all.¹ Wilfred Cude considered the book “nothing short of brilliant,” inviting “comparison with fiction in the first rank of English literature,”² but Paul Denham, finding the many ambiguities “baffling,” believes we do it “a disservice if we call it a great work.”³ Regarding Mrs. Bentley’s reliability as first-person narrator, though Roy Daniells found her “wholly credible,”⁴ Denham concluded “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.”⁵ Daniells also believed Mrs. Bentley to be decent and well-intentioned, and described her as “pure gold” (p. vii), but other critics have found a mean-spirited and malicious woman made of “baser materials,”⁶ in no way a person to be admired. Nor is there agreement as to whom the novel is “about.” Most assume Ross is primarily concerned with Mrs. Bentley, but David Stouck sees her “true role in the novel [as] that of a reflector or mirror,”⁷ the figure of “prime importance” being her husband Philip.

The confusion surrounding these and many other issues led William H. New to conclude that the creation of such ambiguity may well have been Ross’s intent, the novel’s message being “Absolutes do not exist.”⁸ The inability of readers to make any kind of final judgment demonstrates that, given the complexity of human behaviour, approval or condemnation are both responses the author would “have his readers avoid.”⁹ New considered these instances proof of the novel’s strength, but Morton Ross, in his review of the critical literature, felt readers were increasingly being encouraged by critics to “generate and

supply the mystery"¹⁰ — essentially “read” meaning and complexity into the book — and in so doing, do the author’s work for him.

Morton Ross’s fear of “the progressive enlargement of the reader’s responsibility for contributing meaning”¹¹ to the novel is unquestionably valid; such a function is not the reader’s responsibility. Ross also wisely recognized that this proceeded in part from a tendency among critics to emphasize the question of the book’s “greatness” and its corresponding “place” in the canon of Canadian literature to the exclusion of other more basic issues which need to be dealt with before any such larger discussions can profitably take place. One such aspect of the book certainly worthy of further study is the Bentleys’ hypocrisy or, more accurately, the causes of it. Critics almost unanimously take this hypocrisy for granted, presumably seeing it as typical of the compromises with integrity which many were forced to make in order to survive the Depression.¹² For whatever reason, no one to date has tried to offer an explanation from within the text that might explain *why* the Bentleys have chosen to live such duplicitous lives. This is surprising, for upon reflection it becomes evident that Philip and his wife were not originally under any obligation to choose the lives they did, much less remain in them. Though fate and circumstances played a part in shaping their destinies, the Bentleys also made decisions; as the novel proceeds, Ross repeatedly reminds us there were alternative courses of action open to them both.

Given the above, it is possible that if we could determine why the two main characters made such decisions — i.e., discover some dominating principle behind their behaviour — we would then be able to resolve the many apparent inconsistencies in their actions by seeing such acts as part of a pattern that is itself consistent, and recognize that both Bentleys are consistent characterizations as well. Such a pattern does exist. It can be shown that, though the Bentleys appear to behave incongruously on many occasions, both have been obsessively dominated by a compulsion to conform to what they believe to be society’s expectations of them as respectable citizens, and their behaviour reflects that compulsion. Though they once possessed genuine goals, the desire for respectability prevented them from achieving the fulfilment that can only be the product of a self-reliant dedication to those goals. Furthermore, the self-loathing that has proceeded from their mutual sense of failure has virtually destroyed them as individuals and has all but destroyed their marriage. Their constant quarrels, their projected anger and hostility, their sheer frustration: all are directly traceable to their failure to have embraced self-reliance as a method of directing their lives and determining their behaviour.

Since Ralph Waldo Emerson originated the term "self reliance"¹³ a brief review of his essay of that name can be helpful, for it contains the most thorough definition of the term. It will be recalled that, to Emerson, the highest and most virtuous form of action was that which proceeded from inner conviction. In opposition to these convictions were the forces of society constantly pressuring the individual to conform. For Emerson, there was no necessary dilemma here, for "Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind."¹⁴ Answering its call constituted the only true morality and the only route to fulfilment and self-respect: "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist" (891). Though a man "will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it," one must inevitably follow the call of one's convictions, for "What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think," even though in a superficial sense "It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion" (893). And why not conform? To Emerson the answer was obvious: "The objection to conforming . . . is, that it scatters your force." Emerson goes on to give the example of the man who, in opting to "maintain a dead church" and thus conform, is playing a kind of blindman's-buff, being led this way and that in a vain and ultimately enervating attempt to anticipate what the public expects of him. Recognizing that such conformity is antagonistic to self-development, Emerson adds that it becomes difficult "to detect the precise man" the conformist is, because the true self is hidden behind a facade, a false personality that is a necessary requirement of the conformist's posture. Expendng vital energy to satisfy the wishes of society creates a situation where "much force is withdrawn from your proper life. But do your thing, and I shall know you. Do your work, and you shall reinforce yourself" (893). The essay concludes with a final reminder that "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself. Nothing can bring you peace but the triumph of principles" (909).

Even a cursory review of "Self-Reliance" reveals it to be most relevant to Ross's novel. Such a link is not surprising when we recall that, as a Unitarian who later left his church, Ross would have been impressed by the example of self-reliance set by Emerson himself, perhaps North America's most famous Unitarian apostate. For whatever reason, the author's depiction of his two main characters has been strongly influenced by a concept of self-reliance unmistakably reminiscent of Emerson's as delineated in his essay. For who are the Bentleys other than a married couple who maintain a dead church, or at least one whose creeds and tenets we have every reason to believe are dead to them? It is difficult to absolve Philip or his wife of the charge of failing to have done their "thing," that is, paint or play the piano, in

lieu of which they chose a secure and socially-respectable but unfulfilling life in a community where they are surrounded by people who think they know what their duty is.

Philip's character is difficult to assess, as the limitations of the journal form prevent our ever seeing him directly. However, if we can accept Mrs. Bentley at the very least as a reasonably accurate reporter of events,¹⁵ a good deal can still be discerned about him. It soon becomes apparent that, though he may fulfil the requirements of his profession dutifully, if not enthusiastically, he is still a withdrawn, passive man, rarely capable of initiating action. Furthermore, it is obvious that he is stagnating, and in this respect is reminiscent of Emerson's conformist whose force has been so scattered there is no energy left whereby he could impel himself into a more dynamic relationship with the world. What decisions he has made have been provoked by a desire on his part to secure the approval of conventional society and by *a priori* assumptions of what that society would consider "appropriate" behaviour. Though Mrs. Bentley rationalizes that "He made a compromise once, with himself, his conscience, his ideals" (18), such compromises — invariably made in the interests of conforming — have characterized his entire life. Philip's illegitimacy may make his original desire for society's respect understandable, but it does not make it excusable or even defensible. For Philip "came to feel that for all the ridicule and shame he was exposed to" as a consequence of his illegitimacy, "it was his mother to blame" (29). Rather than direct his contempt where it belonged, at the members of the community who mocked him when he was young, "he recoiled from *her* with a sense of grievance and contempt" (30, *my italics*), a reaction that could only be the product of his readiness to accept without question the community's mores, however arbitrary those mores might be.

Mrs. Bentley is far from correct to emphasize "defiance of his surroundings" (30) as an important motivating force in his early life. Though she tries to believe "he despised their Main Street minds" (31), the fact that "the Church was for only the approved and respectable part of the town" was the main factor behind his decision to enter it. The Church, far from "offering escape" as Mrs. Bentley would have it, offered social acceptance, but at the expense of his integrity, for even then, if what we are told can be believed, Philip was aware the choice involved a conflict between "his pride [and] what he wanted most from life" (32). It is also evident his decision was at no point a reflection of any philosophical or even sentimental sympathy with the Church's goals, for his library contains "Everything but theology" (46). On those rare occasions when he does speak of religion, he dismisses it as an "illusory" world produced when man tries to give "life and form" to a

“void” (112), and sounds more like an agnostic than the fundamentalist Christian he purports to be. Mrs. Bentley feels responsible for having “kept him in the Church” (107). But since “He was in his fourth year at college when [she] met him” (32), and had had ample time to see the sacrifice to his principles that was involved, the decision to remain, at least initially, was made by Philip on his own.

At the age of 36, Philip appears to be an aloof and misanthropic man, but one whose behaviour, for all his misanthropy, is consistently determined by a fear of incurring community criticism. This is a man so unwilling to antagonize the community that he once killed his pet dog in response to a parishioner’s criticism of its presence; a man so timid he will not even smoke a pipe, either publicly *or* in private, lest he be discovered.

Mrs. Bentley recalls fondly the days when he smoked, believing it brought them together as “partners in a conspiracy” (14). We learn “It was always late at night [when he smoked], when there was no chance of anyone coming to discover him or smell the smoke.” Though she remembers that his was “a strong, reassuring knee to lean against” in those days, the reader cannot help but question the strength of a man who went to such extravagant lengths to conceal what many would even then have regarded as a more or less harmless habit. For Philip hid his “pipe in the back shed so there wouldn’t be a trace of smell when callers came”; sent “out of town for tobacco”; and was “on tenterhooks till it came lest they overlook his instructions and use a mailing wrapper that would reveal the contents to the postmaster” (14). No one would dispute that in such communities many would consider the minister’s smoking sinful, and few would dispute the power such people might have in effecting his dismissal (after all, it is Mrs. Bentley’s discovery of another hidden pipe in the manse that triggers her memory). But the very intensity of Philip’s fears and the extreme methods he employs to protect himself from possible community reaction — to say nothing of his remaining in the Church under these conditions — say much about him. Behind Philip’s “secrecy and furtiveness” is a horror of incurring the wrath of conventional society as a consequence of violating a code which he himself recognizes is both hypocritical and unreasonable. Though he angrily threw his pipe away one day, arguing that “since he *couldn’t* smoke in daylight like a man he wouldn’t smoke at all” (14, my italics), the reader should not see this as a sign of strength or even of honesty on his part, because it is so obviously a decision made reluctantly, and motivated by his compulsion to conform to community standards. Implicit in Philip’s assumption that he “couldn’t” smoke is the belief that the community may never be defied. It does not seem to occur to him that another,

more honest and self-reliant lifestyle is possible. Behaving as if he were literally chained to the Church, he cannot see that the shackles, however real, are of his own making, the product of his all-consuming need to be accepted by society. It is for this reason that every criticism of his behaviour, however trifling, he interprets as an absolute command and responds accordingly.

Philip's relationship with Steve Kulanich does much to bring him out of his self-imposed world of conformity, if only temporarily. For the first time in his life Philip behaves with a sense of purpose, born of his affection for the boy, and the results are dramatic. In Steve's interests Philip stands up to the insufferable Mrs. Finley, keeps (rather than shoots!) the dog Greco, buys Steve a horse, begins to paint in oils and, if Mrs. Bentley can be believed, has been "changing of late, growing harder, more self-assertive" (113). But when Steve is taken from them, the bottom drops out of Philip's life and he regresses to a state of passivity once again.

Although it is difficult not to feel pity for Philip when he loses Steve, it is important to realize that his inability to confront the community has been partly responsible for the boy's departure. For, at the Church Board meeting ostensibly held "for no purpose other than to help [them] solve their problems" (72) but in fact called to pressure them to give the boy up, Philip succumbs to this pressure. Mrs. Bentley can be criticized for interrupting Philip precisely when he appears to be mustering sufficient strength to speak honestly in public for the first time in his life. But it should not be overlooked that there is nothing to prevent Philip from subsequently interrupting her in turn and doing "what he should have done twelve years ago" (73), other than his fear of defying the members of the community who have called him to task. Later, when the priests come for Steve, as before, "Philip didn't argue or protest" (115) since they too represent authority figures he cannot imagine himself challenging.

In these scenes, I think we are meant to see that Philip, in his passivity, has contributed to the outcome of events. Surely the impassioned speech Mrs. Bentley prevents might well have won him support and sympathy. While this cannot be known, Philip's failure to speak his mind may well have created the impression that the matter was not something of intense interest to him, or an issue in which he believed deeply; at all events, his silence has done him no good.

Philip's affair with Judith West follows closely upon the departure of Steve. Although it is the first time to the reader's knowledge that he has taken the initiative and behaved in a decidedly unconventional manner, the affair should not be seen as evidence of any positive development within him, because it is not accompanied by any corres-

ponding growth on his part, if his behaviour following the town's discovery of her pregnancy is any indication. Nor does the affair itself strike us as behaviour that is the product of deep conviction. It occurs at a time when Philip's self-esteem is at an all-time low, and may be nothing more than a pathetic attempt to cement a relationship with anyone who is willing, in the wake of his failure to have maintained one with Steve. Whatever his motives, the same obsession with preserving his reputation continues to dominate him. While few readers would expect him to stand on a scaffold proclaiming his guilt, Philip's absolute detachment reveals him at his weakest. Remaining silent to the end, he allows Judith to face the community entirely on her own and, as far as we know, initially goes to see her only at Mrs. Bentley's suggestion, although alternative courses of action are open to him. Financial help and assistance in relocating Judith — to say nothing of simple moral support — are certainly within the realm of possibility. But even these responses would entail some danger of exposure, however slight, and such risks he is simply too timid to undertake.

Given the above, it is difficult to see how Philip could be genuinely "stirring, quickening, like a bed of half-dead coals that someone is blowing on" (157), or to believe there is really "so much new life surging up within him" (157). In response to Mrs. Bentley's suggestion that they adopt Judith's baby, he can only reply meekly that "since [she] was the one who would have most of the work and the responsibility, it was for [her] to make the decision" (155), even though the child she is considering adopting is his own. It is virtually impossible, then, to see how the purchase of the bookstore would ever provide an opportunity whereby Philip would be able to pursue his original goal in life, because he is so obviously unchanged. Though on one occasion Paul, possibly to be polite, compares Philip to "a French artist [doubtless Gauguin] who decided one day he couldn't stand his business or family any longer, and just walked off and left them" (128), the reader sees nothing but the contrast between the self-reliant and nonconforming French genius and the spotlessly respectable but pusillanimous Philip. In all likelihood he will continue as before, earning a meagre living in the bookstore and supplementing his income by drawing posters, a far from fulfilling future considering how "he hates printing and letter" (142). While the bookstore may represent a move in the right direction for Mrs. Bentley, there is no evidence the future offers much for her still weak and passive husband.

Although there is little to suggest that Philip loved Judith and much to indicate he felt nothing for her at all, Judith appears to be genuinely in love with him, judging from her behaviour in his presence as recorded by Mrs. Bentley, Judith herself, and Paul Kirby as well,

together exist in the novel as foils to the Bentleys; both possess a strength of character which allows them on occasion to act in defiance of community mores. Much of Judith's behaviour is considered unconventional by the town, and though she is disapproved of, this disapproval has not affected her adversely. Very much her own woman, she is capable of "stooking in the harvest fields like a man" (11), going "to the city to take a commercial course" (11), and, of course, having her affair with Philip. In her frank admission that "I am not a coward for the things I want" (56) the contrast with the Bentleys is painfully clear. Judith is also a woman of considerable courage; she does not succumb to pressure to reveal her lover, and it is a silence the reader respects, for it demonstrates both her strength and the sincerity of her feelings for Philip.

Though in one sense Judith certainly fails — she is a decidedly unlucky woman — on another level she can be regarded as quite successful in Emerson's sense of the word, for she does possess self-reliance and her life has been the product of an honest adherence to convictions. Though destroyed, she has not been defeated; as well, the destructive forces have been accidents of fate rather than the consequences of weaknesses within her.

Similarly, the pedantic but well-meaning Paul Kirby possesses a self-reliance which he both demonstrates and even acknowledges explicitly. At times he stands up to the town, openly opposing their preposterous notions of what constitutes "proper" language. Admittedly, the instances involved are petty, but the implications drawn from them are not for, as Mrs. Bentley sees, these confrontations proceed from his conviction "that most of his own values have been sounder all the time" (70). Confident as he is of his values, he is better able to "know these town people and see them for what they are"; as such, they do not intimidate him as they do the Bentleys. On one occasion he refers to his own possession of "self-reliance" (70), and Mrs. Bentley's growing respect for him is derived in large part from her awareness of this, together with her sense of the difference between the "useless" Philip and the more resourceful younger man. Though at one point she rationalizes that even if "Paul could have a hundred virtues and Philip one, . . . Paul would still just come to Philip's shoulder" (135), later, before their departure from Horizon, she catches herself "wishing Paul were with [her]" (159) and wondering "might it have been different if we [she and Paul] had known each other earlier. Then the currents might have taken and fulfilled me" (160). Plainly, Paul serves as an example of alternative behaviour for the reader and Mrs. Bentley alike.

It is, of course, Mrs. Bentley who best exemplifies the disastrous consequences of a life where self-reliance has been sacrificed for security. Even the first page of her diary-journal reveals a woman whose decisions, no matter how inconsequential the circumstances, have been determined on the basis of how she feels she *ought* to behave as a clergyman's wife. Although knowing she could "use the pliers and hammer" in getting the linoleum down "twice as well" as the inept Philip, she claims that "on calling days, it simply isn't done," arguing that "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" (3). Aside from the obvious weakness in her reasoning (isn't it just possible some members of the community might find her capacity for hard work praiseworthy?) it is also evident that, as this is only her first day in Horizon, she has no way of knowing precisely how this particular town would react to her assumption of such a task. Instead, she has both anticipated the community's response and has implicitly chosen to regard this response as sacrosanct and inviolable. Furthermore, when we learn it was fully twelve years ago when a parishioner first remonstrated with her about her taking on "masculine" chores, we see she has been prepared to bow before social pressure for some time; absent in her recollection of that event is any account of how she responded, or any indication she responded at all. There is no evidence we are reading the diary of a once proud woman whose independence was gradually eroded by social criticism;¹⁶ what information we possess of her past indicates that throughout her adult life she has been trapped by a sense that she is obliged to conform and suppress her own desires in the process. Resentful of the Mrs. Finleys of the world though she may be, she cannot help but respect their status; Mrs. Finley is, after all, President of the Ladies Aid and "must" be deferred to. At no point does it occur to her that if, as she herself notes in passing, Mrs. Finley's leadership is "self-assumed," there is nothing to compel people to accept it. But Mrs. Bentley cannot bring herself to admit this, for she would have to admit as well that the conventional values Mrs. Finley upholds were suspect; the approval the community extends to her in exchange for her conformity, groundless; and the security she receives as an accepted part of this community, without true foundation.

Mrs. Bentley's almost daily agonizing over how she "should" behave in virtually every social situation involves a remarkable expenditure of energy. Not only does she plan out her "simple, unpretentious meal" (6) for the Finleys but her table talk as well. Unable or unwilling to behave naturally in even the most innocuous circumstances, she plays the piano "with the soft pedal down" (13) for fear of drawing attention

to herself; refuses Paul's offer to ride his horse on the grounds that "Horizon might not approve" (36); decides she cannot dig her garden, for "The proprieties permit the mistress of the parsonage to grow a garden, but hardly to put her foot to a fork or spade" (44); determines she will "have to be friends with [the unconventional] Judith warily" (12); and refrains from inviting the courteous and sophisticated — but socially "inferior" — Slav to her house to hear her play the piano (78). As even her husband sees, Mrs. Bentley is obsessively "afraid . . . of what the town thinks" (71).

While the taking in of Steve might be construed as evidence of burgeoning strength on her part, it is evident that, although her decision, it is one she has embraced with trepidation, for she admits ambivalence at the outset and wonders fearfully "what's Horizon going to say" (52) to their taking in a Catholic boy. Later in the novel, she reveals herself to be just as susceptible to public opinion as ever, for she takes "his crucifix down . . . thinking he wouldn't notice" (112), likely in response to someone's having earlier "caught a glimpse of the crucifix above his bed" (72). Even her defence of Steve at the Church Board meeting is perfunctory — she makes "a good case" (73) for Steve rather than an impassioned one — and her interruption of Philip says much about her own timidity in relation to the community. Interestingly enough, in the speech she makes at the meeting she defends her position on the grounds that she is simply conforming to traditional principles of Christian charity. In seeing herself here as "the devil quoting scripture" (61), it is evident that she has not honestly confronted the townspeople with their bigotry, but has simply justified her decision with reference to professed community standards that not even the most bigoted among them could openly challenge.

Lest we dismiss Mrs. Bentley as merely contemptible, pathetic, or even comical, Sinclair Ross has taken pains to show that such a self-denying approach to life leads in the direction of tragedy, at least in terms of the loss of human potential that is its consequence. For Mrs. Bentley appears to have possessed considerable potential as an artist herself, quite possibly more than her husband. Readers will be impressed to learn that she can play "Bach" (68), "Chopin waltzes and mazurkas" (69), "some of the Gypsy-Hungarian themes from the Liszt rhapsodies" (69), "Debussy's *Gardens in the Rain*" (77), and most notably "the *Appassionata* Sonata and Chopin's *Polonaise in A Flat Major*" (107), the last two of which she performed in a recital she gave "at nineteen" after only seven years of study. Clearly, we are looking at a woman who once possessed exceptional musical ability, but who mysteriously abandoned her career, settled for marriage "to a

preacher" and life "in a little prairie town . . . playing *Hymns with Variations* for the Ladies Aid" (77).

It is important to see that the energy Mrs. Bentley has had to expend in conforming to the town's expectations has been at the expense of her art, and the effects on her musical skills and self-confidence alike have been devastating. Now when she performs at the Ladies Aid she is "sick and numb" when she sits down to play and "crushed and empty" following her performance, sure that she "had failed" (144). Admitting her "fingers are wooden," that "Something's gone dead" (151), she blames Philip for the loss of her talent, arguing that "that's what he's done to me" (151), unwilling to admit that her conscious choice of Philip over her art and the redirection of her energies necessitated by that choice provides a far more likely explanation of her wooden fingers.

Percy Glenn, the boy with whom she once studied music, who "went to England shortly afterwards" (77) to continue his studies and whose career culminated in "a concert tour of South America" (77) is important to the novel, for his success puts Mrs. Bentley's failure in sharper focus. Though she rationalizes that meeting Philip gave her "another goal" (108) — i.e., marriage — the true reasons for her decision to abandon her career are more complex and subtle, for she obviously knew at the time that such a decision would force her to renounce her own ambitions. Unlike Percy Glenn, whose belief in himself allowed for no wavering, Mrs. Bentley chose — and went out of her way to choose — the safer and more conventional route of marriage. Had their relationship been originally passionate or intense — had Philip swept her off her feet — such a decision would not be hard to understand. But all the evidence suggests Philip was as remote and cold then as he is now; Mrs. Bentley concedes that "For a long time he held aloof" (33) and that it took considerable effort on her part to win her "place in his life *despite* him" (33, my italics). Given his evident lack of interest, what could she conceivably have hoped to receive from this distant, withdrawn, and also reluctant, man?

She may have been initially attracted by the instant status she believes accompanies the wife of a clergyman; at one point she comments of a minister's wife that "Her prestige is second not even to that of the proven leaders" (44) of the community. Mrs. Bentley is also a very insecure woman with little confidence; her self-esteem is very low. When alone, or on walks in the country, she feels a "queer, helpless sense of being lost" (35); nature often creates in her "a doomed feeling, that there's no escape" (73). While the bleakness of drought and Depression surely makes such responses understandable, these experiences are also confirming within her views of herself that she has long

taken for granted, views another person would not necessarily feel. It is doubtful that anyone who sees in nature *only* a reminder that she “may have no meaning at all” (100) has ever had a strong belief in her own abilities; it is also evident this is only one of a number of ways in which a person might react to such a scene. Where a self-reliant woman could move beyond this awareness of cosmic meaninglessness by trying to forge personal meaning for herself — not an impossible task for a person with talent — so great was Mrs. Bentley’s lack of confidence that she chose the life of a clergyman’s wife because it offered her a security and status she did not believe she could obtain on her own.

Because she has so little faith in herself, she fears, and may always have feared, genuine freedom with all its attendant risks and uncertainties, believing she is incapable of utilizing such freedom successfully. That the issue of freedom and her inability to attain it loom large in Mrs. Bentley’s mind is best seen in her reaction to Philip’s affair. When she awakens from a dream, (in which, significantly, her “hands were tied” (123), walks to the lean-to and hears them together, it is interesting to note that the moral issue seems relatively unimportant to her. Though aware she has been betrayed, her initial response is not intrinsic outrage over the betrayal but a terrifying recognition that the betrayal has forced her to consider her “right now to be free,” immediately followed by what is probably one of her oldest assumptions regarding herself, that “I can’t be free” (124). She then minimizes the importance of the adultery, rationalizing that Judith “was there, that was all” or that “She can’t mean anything to him” (124), in order to keep from facing the prospects of living on her own.

These exhaustive attempts to interpret Philip’s behaviour in a way that will not necessitate her having to leave him indicate, as she herself admits, she “need[s] Philip still” (125), even as a faithless and unrepentant spouse, which indicates that even in this state he is still fulfilling an important function in her life. Yet in the absence of visible love or affection, how can this be? One possible answer is embedded in a revealing comment she made about her early impression of Philip. At one point she remembers how she “used to look at Philip’s work, and think to [herself] that the world would someday know of him” (59).

It is entirely possible that she originally saw marriage to Philip as a way whereby she could remove the risk of the unknown from her own life, gain security and status through him, later enjoy the fruits of his artistic successes and, most important, make the abandonment of her own future as an artist palatable, by enabling her to see it as a sacrifice made nobly by her in the cause of his career. If the above is true, it explains in turn why she places so much emphasis on Philip as an artist, even though there is much evidence to suggest he possesses only

average ability.¹⁷ This, of course, Mrs. Bentley could never accept; on the contrary, as if trying to convince herself of something she does not really believe, she repeatedly tells herself she "must" see Philip as an artist, and after the adultery "must remember" (135) that he is one, for only if Philip is a true artist can she see her own sacrifice as meaningful. One senses in the very shrillness of her claims that on another level she knows she is fooling herself, and has actually been cheated by this "failure," this "preacher instead of a painter" (16). Try as she might, part of her cannot ignore those "useless" hands that let her down. But, as an open admission of Philip's mediocrity is out of the question, she continues to cling to the fiction that Philip is a genius frustrated only by circumstance, whose adultery was even part and parcel of the "passion of the artist, for seeking, creating, adventuring" (126), ignoring Philip's own reminder that "If a man's a victim of circumstances he deserves to be" (119).

Mrs. Bentley's decision to save money and purchase a bookstore appears to be a genuine move in the direction of self-reliance on her part. It is interesting that her decision is made immediately following their vacation, proximity to the self-reliant Laura presumably having sharpened Mrs. Bentley's sense of how unsatisfying the conformist's life can be. Though it takes undeniable courage on her part to renounce that which is secure for the unknown, Ross complicates the issue by showing that Mrs. Bentley has not changed much inwardly. Even after having made her decision, she continues to defer to the mores of the town, returning the money Steve made by selling rides on his horse "to forestall a scandle[!] over the minister's son going into the livery business" (111) and abjectly lying to Mrs. Rawlins when accused of implanting in Steve liberal theological notions. Though firm in her resolve to press former communities for money owing them, she is forced to admit at times that "a thousand dollars and getting away from Horizon isn't nearly as important as [she is] pretending to believe" (130) because, as Ross knows and as she even dimly sees, in the absence of inner change a mere geographical relocation will solve nothing, will in no way make Philip "free of" his hypocrisy, "able to respect himself again" (139).

Preoccupied with Philip's hypocrisy as the sole impediment to their happiness, she has all but totally ignored her own, has failed to acknowledge the extent to which it was timidity rather than fate that kept them both in the Church for so long, and has remained oblivious of the fact that only when such mutual deficiencies are faced could genuine improvement be possible. So, though the false fronts are momentarily blown down, and Philip is at last allowed his pipe, one feels that while their future may be less restricting than the past twelve

years have been, the chances of both Bentleys moving into genuinely self-reliant spheres of activity are slim at best.¹⁸ Perhaps the novel's ending represents the only realistic course open to them; perhaps some peace of mind is now possible, at least for her. But the reader is certainly left with the feeling that, had they been more aware of the fulfilment implicit in self-reliant behaviour from the outset, they would never have found themselves in *Horizon* in the first place. As the false lure of security would have meant nothing to them, so there would have been no need to conform, and genuine happiness as a product of dedication to their respective goals might have been theirs.

Once the pervasive presence of self-reliance within the novel has been recognized, many of the problems critics have encountered can be resolved. Though ambiguities will doubtless remain, it is now evident that the presentation of ambiguity was not Ross's ultimate intent, as New argued, for we can see the characters themselves as having been conceived in relation to a concept that accounts for their behaviour and unifies the fictional narrative as well. Nor is the above interpretation yet another attempt to impose a meaning on the text which is not present, for the informing concept is one to which we have been repeatedly alerted. Mrs. Bentley's own use of the term in her narration; the Bentleys' obsession with keeping up appearances; the dread both experience at the very thought of being seen in the act of non-conforming; and the presence of several characters who are clearly self-reliant foils: all point to the importance of self-reliance as a deliberately inserted key whereby the book can be understood.

As well, the more problematic aspects of Mrs. Bentley's narration — the extravagant apologia for her husband's talent and behaviour, together with her oft-expressed contempt for him, or her obsessive fear of defying a community she simultaneously sees through and loathes — these and other examples of her ambivalence to the world around her need not lead us to conclude that Ross has invested his narrator with mutually exclusive responses that call into question her credibility as a created character and, as such, weaken the entire novel. Though many specific comments made by Mrs. Bentley may be less than credible, the comments themselves, viewed cumulatively, are entirely credible when seen as consistent manifestations of a timorous personality.

Seeing the Bentleys in this manner also renders the morally judgmental responses to them so frequently encountered in the critical literature at once superfluous and irrelevant. Weak and imperfect though the Bentleys may be, their belief in the supreme value of respectability (even the move to the bookstore presents no fundamental conflict with this belief) is so deeply ingrained a part of their

personalities that any genuinely critical or even disinterested look at their lives is clearly beyond them. To respond in a censorious way to such obviously debilitated victims seems almost beside the point, because such a response assumes they possess an autonomy for which no evidence exists in the text.

Finally, acknowledging the importance of self-reliance as an underlying principle behind the creation of the novel enables the reader to appreciate the book in its totality as a credible account of social behaviour encountered all too frequently in twentieth century America, far from the chaotically-structured diary Denham found, replete with narrative inconsistencies that point only to a lack of authorial control. Once seen as such, the question of the novel's worth may then be addressed, for readers can now be assured they are dealing with a carefully conceived and intellectually unified work of art.

NOTES

1. Roy Daniells, "Introduction" to Sinclair Ross, *As For Me and My House* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970). Subsequent references to the novel will be cited parenthetically, within the essay. Daniells appraised the book as an aesthetically-flawed but still "genuine artistic achievement" (x), more "a long story rather than an articulated novel" (viii).
2. "Beyond Mrs. Bentley: a study of *As For Me and My House*," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 8.1 (February, 1973): 3-18.
3. "Narrative Technique in Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*," *Studies in Canadian Literature* (Spring, 1980): 116-124.
4. Daniells does not make it clear whether he finds her credible as a narrator or simply believable as a created character. However, there is nothing in his Introduction to suggest that he questions her veracity as a reporter or interpreter.
5. Denham, 119.
6. Cude, 7. Other predominantly negative assessments of Mrs. Bentley stress her controlling tendencies and her arrogance. John Moss, *Patterns of Isolation* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974), believes that her bitchiness is primarily responsible for their problems; David Stouck (see below, n. 7)) stresses her "power to castrate"; Laurence Ricou sees Mrs. Bentley's readiness "to usurp Philip's role . . . [and] cultivate the absurdly pious image to which they were to conform" as the cause of their plight [see *Vertical Man/Horizontal World* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1973, 85)].
7. "The Mirror and the Lamp in Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*, *Mosaic* 7.2 (Winter, 1974): 141-50.
8. "Sinclair Ross's Ambivalent World," *Canadian Literature* 40 (Spring, 1969): 26-31.
9. New, 31.
10. "The Canonization of *As For Me and My House: A Case Study*," from *Figures in a Ground*, ed. Diane Bessai and David Jackel (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978), 189-205.
11. Morton Ross, 205.
12. While the hypocrisy of both Bentleys is accepted by many, most attention is focused on Philip's, which is somewhat surprising given that so little is known of his inner thought processes. As well, some critics seem prepared to find excuses for Mrs. Bentley, or at least not be as hard on her as they are on her husband. D.J. Dooley, in his *Moral Vision in the Canadian Novel* (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Co., 1979), is typical of such approaches when he states that "Mrs. Bentley's own moral failures come from a nobler kind of error than her husband's" (41).

13. The essay "Self-Reliance" was first published in 1841. The *O.E.D.*, oddly enough, makes no mention of Emerson, even though it dates the first appearance of the word in 1837. *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Random House, 1981), specifically mentions Emerson as the originator of the term, first used by him in an 1832 poem, and later in the 1841 essay.
14. "Self-Reliance," from *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 1, Second Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), 891. Subsequent references are inserted parenthetically in the text.
15. D.J. Dooley sensibly resolved the issue of Mrs. Bentley's reliability when he observed that "her general credibility as a witness must be accepted, or there is no novel." See *Moral Vision in the Canadian Novel*, 40, my italics.
16. Readers who might be inclined to see defiance in Mrs. Bentley need look no further than Carol Kenricott, the heroine of Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (a novel often set against Ross's), for a contrasting figure. Unlike Mrs. Bentley, Carol continues to fight and challenge her community of Gopher Prairie to the end, albeit in a losing cause.
17. The approval of Judith, Mrs. Bird, Laura, or even Mrs. Bentley is not enough to convince us that Philip's work is anything other than mediocre, perhaps pleasing to the eye, but not necessarily the product of genius. Philip's fear of exposing his drawings to public scrutiny implies that even he may know his work is not first-rate, as does his hint to his wife that "the limitations of his hand and eye" (33) have kept him in Horizon. Mrs. Bentley's account of how he first became interested in art — a desire to emulate his father — indicates that his artistic aspirations were the result of a psychological compulsion to imitate an idealized figure, and not a manifestation of irrepressible talent.
18. It is difficult to see how Ken Mitchell, *Sinclair Ross, A Reader's Guide* (Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan: Coteau Books, 1981), could argue that "Ross's unambiguous projection for the Bentleys is one of hope and love somewhere beyond Horizon" (50).