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The Play of Desire: Sinclair Ross's Gay Fiction

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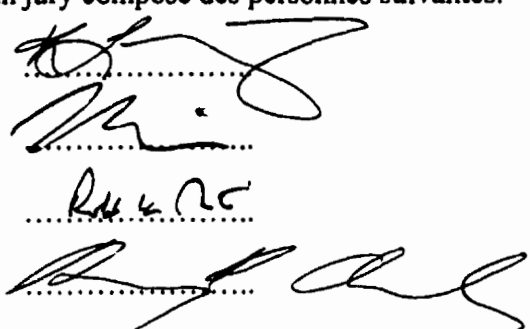

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Abstract

The tradition of an identifiable homosexual writing in Canada has long been suppressed in order that a virile heterosexuality might continue to be inscribed upon the national consciousness, especially in the process of building a national literature, in either English or French. The English Canadian canon is a consciously constructed literary place wherein only those texts, and their authors, that can be critically authorized to reflect this national "goal" are admitted. The aspiration and need for a "straight"-forward canon underscored—and continues to do so—an anxiety regarding presumably uncontrollable (sexual) desires seemingly inimical to its project.

Homosexual desire, this dissertation argues, has often been pathologized, criminalized and ignored, and the study of its place in writing by (or about) gay and lesbian Canadian writers has been woefully underexamined (if not suppressed itself). In order to rectify this situation, this dissertation recasts both the writing and the *reading of* the writing of Sinclair Ross. It argues that an appreciation of Ross must take into consideration the discourses circulating in Ross's formative years (and beyond), especially those discourses which prescribed a normative (hetero)sexuality and which controlled other sexualities by labeling them either deviant or criminal.

Ross's coded and "closeted" fictions reveal configurations of problematic identities, genders, and subjectivities, especially as these evoke and trouble

"acceptable" (sexual) desire. The threat (or promise) of a homosexual Other is suppressed or misrepresented in critical examinations of Ross's fictive characters, based largely on a misunderstanding, perhaps, of Ross's literary exhibition of the closet, one which underscores a strategic (though perhaps unconscious and necessary) encoding of what Eve Sedgwick calls "male homosociality."

Key to this dissertation's argument is the notion that Ross may have rejected as much as accepted psychosocial profiles of the homosexual in mid-century Canada. The influence of the work of sexology and psychiatry cannot be underestimated, though it was (and is) not the only formative discourse circulating during Ross's life. The trajectory of Ross's writing, from 1934 to 1974, reveals an ongoing and shifting concern with not only (sexual) "deviance" but also gender. The examinations of gender play and instability in Ross's early stories give way to a concern with the representation of a homosexuality not differentiated by "gender confusion"—such as a "manly woman"—but by an allegorized narcissism and/or sense of criminal deviance. Ross's growing awareness of the contradictions between what was considered sexually "criminal"—such as homosexuality—and the ability to write about it accurately (as far as one is able to do so) resulted in the inability of Ross's "homotexts"—his stylized representation of homosexuality—to withstand the contradiction.

Informed by gay and lesbian studies, queer theory, and feminist theory, this dissertation illustrates my contention that queering Ross both reveals new avenues for textual exploration and threatens foreclosure of a critical understanding of the impossibility of homosexual subjectivity in his fiction. My critical interventions

propose that an understanding of the unstable categories of desire, identity, and subjectivity are required in order to comprehend Ross's concerns with "homosexual difference" and changing configurations of gender and sexuality.

Résumé

La tradition d'une écriture homosexuel identifiable au Canada a été supprimé pendant longtemps, afin de permettre l'inscription d'une hétérosexualité virile sur la conscience nationale, surtout en cours de développer une littérature nationale en anglais ainsi qu'en français. Seul les textes des auteurs autorisés à refléchir ce "but" national sont admis dans le canon anglais-canadien, un milieu créé consciemment. L'aspiration et le besoin d'un canon "direct" a souligné – et continue de le faire -- une anxiété vis-a-vis les désirs (sexuels) soi-disant incontrôlables et apparemment opposés à son projet.

Cette dissertation soutient que le désir homosexuel a souvent été depeint comme pathologique, criminalisé et ignoré, et que l'étude de sa place dans la littérature écrite par (ou concernant) les auteurs canadiens gaies et lesbiennes a été tristement sous-examinée (sinon supprimé). Afin de rectifier la situation, cette dissertation refait l'écriture ainsi que *la lecture* de l'écriture de Sinclair Ross. Elle argumente qu'une appréciation de Ross doit réfléchir le discours qui circulait pendant les années de formation de Ross (et au-delà), surtout le discours qui prescrit une (hétéro)sexualité normative et qui contrôle les autres sexualités, en les étiquetant déviantes, ou bien criminelles.

La fiction de Ross, codée et "enfermée," revèle les configurations des identités, des sexes et subjectivités problematiques, surtout car ceux-la évoquent et troublent le désir (sexuel) "acceptable." La menace (ou la promesse) d'un Autre homosexuel, est supprimé ou mal representée en cours de l'évaluation critique des caractères fictives de Ross, peut-être basé en grande partie sur un malentendu de son exhibition littéraire de "l'armoire," soulignant un codage stratégique (pourtant, même si c'est subconscient et nécessaire) d'une "homosocialité mâle," comme c'est appelé par Eve Sedgwick.

Ross aurait pu rejeter autant qu'accepter les profiles psychosociaux de l'homosexuel au Canada au milieu du siècle, une notion clé dans cette dissertation. L'influence de sexologie et de la psychiatrie ne doit pas être sous-evaluée, pourtant ce n'était (et n'est) pas le seul discours formatif qui tournait pendant la vie de Ross. La trajectoire de l'écriture de Ross de 1934 à 1974, révèle une inquiétude continuelle et changeante à l'égard de la représentation d'une homosexualité qui n'est pas differenciée par une "confusion des sexes" -- par exemple, une "femme masculine" – mais plutôt par un narcissisme allégorisé et/ou un sens de déviance criminelle. La perception montante des contradictions entre ce qui était considéré sexuellement "criminel" – par exemple, l'homosexualité – et l'abilité d'écrire sur ce sujet avec précision (en tant qu'on est capable de le faire), a mené à l'inabilité des "homotextes" de Ross – sa représentation stylisée de l'homosexualité – de résister à la contradiction.

Informée des études gaies et lesbiennes aussi bien que la théorie féministe, cette dissertation illustre mon affirmation que l'écriture de Ross déroule des nouvelles voies d'exploration textuelle, et menace la fermeture avant terme de la compréhension critique de l'impossibilité de la subjectivité homosexuel dans sa fiction. Mes interventions critiques proposent qu'une compréhension des catégories instables du désir, de l'identité et de la subjectivité, sont requis pour comprendre les soucis de Ross a l'égard de "la différence homosexuelle" et les configurations changeantes de sexe et de la sexualité.

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I would like to thank my supervisor, Lianne Moyes, for her perceptive and generous assistance in both challenging my work and keeping me on track. In addition, I would like to thank Robert K. Martin, whose interest in *écriture gaie* provided me with a seminal focal point. The Département d'études anglaises has always provided me with both practical experience and intellectual stimulation, in having me teach courses which have contributed toward professorial apprenticeship; and in particular, the department secretaries, Michelle Hamelin-Braun and Johanne Simard, have always been helpful in getting me through the finer details. I would also like to express my gratitude to others who have, in various ways, contributed to this endeavour: Amaryll Chanady, Terry Goldie, John O'Connor, Patrick Holland, Janice Kulyk Keefer, Mary Nyquist, Alice van Wart, Alan Scheer, Allen Anderson, Greg Gorth, and fellow graduate students.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to my parents, whose excitement over my educational goals helped me when I would lose sight of what I was doing. That they are both no longer here does not mean, for me, that they cannot share in the fruition of my work. If I may borrow from Christopher Dewdney, what they have made has scattered into the world, and for that, the world has never regretted a minute of them. This work, as much as I, is part of what they have made.

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Chapter One

A Polemical and Political Introduction

In an examination of the methods of reconstructing gay literary history, Eric Savoy writes that "[t]he function of the gay literary historian is to trace not the anxiety of influence but rather *the influence of anxiety*, the strategies of the closet . . . which were subverted by a contrary desire for an affiliation marked by allusion, repetition, and other forms of intertextual gesture" (1992, 12). As both an examiner of and contributor to gay literary history, I feel compelled to preface my study of Sinclair Ross with a query into what is perhaps a representative mastering discourse disseminating what it is we *should* know about Ross, one of the most highly anthologized and studied Canadian authors of the 20th century. Since my work is very much concerned with the critical reception of Ross and how I seek to recast the understanding of this critical history, I want to begin with how the influence of Ross's own "gay anxiety" upon his work has often been misconstrued and misdirected by the critics who themselves have been influenced more by their own (often unstated) anxieties.

These anxieties reveal much as to how the scepter of a looming or abiding homosexuality evident in Ross's writing has indeed influenced (and has been reflective of) the broadly social need to keep Ross "straight," particularly in service of a national *heterosexual* literary tradition. The importance in foregrounding the resistance to a

homosexual reading of Ross arises from my own need to understand the body of criticism which has emerged and has, invariably and in some ways, influenced my own perspectives in this dissertation. One of the most recent of these discussions is Robert Lecker's essay discussing the promotion and canonization of Ross's 1941 novel *As For Me and My House*. Lecker argues that texts constructed as "classic," such as Ross's, are "absent" (176). Lecker's odd conclusion is premised on a rather evident supposition, that "[w]e pay more attention to the criticism of a classic text than to the text itself because the critical discourse has usurped the original work and become the central object of inquiry" (176). Yet the more any written work "recedes" into the past, it seems inevitable that the volume of commentary will eventually surpass the target text.

But even though any book forever enjoys a discrete historical location, the fact that it cannot be written again—the imputation of Lecker's logic—does not mean that it cannot continue to live, whether through new readerships or by way of critical (re)evaluation. Certainly, the wealth of criticism, on any subject, is itself a cornucopia of socially embedded contests and culturally embattled self-fashionings, amongst many other things. One need look no further than the continual re-imagining of the work of Shakespeare.

Of course, Ross is not Shakespeare, but rather a minor mid-century Canadian writer, if one accords status using public knowledge and purchases. Nevertheless, the criticism on Ross, primarily from 1941 to the end of that century, provides a fascinating glimpse at both the reimagining of one author's work (through, but not solely by, the largely academic critical response) *and* the socio-cultural trajectory bespeaking

circulating attitudes toward sex, sexuality, gender, desire, religion, race, work, and crime. Ross's work, including his justly canonized 1941 novel, is rich in all these ways. Contrary to Lecker's assertion, Ross's *As For Me and My House* becomes "absent" only if we believe that it should speak to its audiences in, as Lecker's unstated but clearly evident premise implies, one uncompromising and uncontested manner. It is, therefore, unsurprising and revealing that Lecker never states which critique he favours or what would make any text "present."

I have begun my discussion with another critic's view of Ross because, as stated earlier, the battle over what Ross's works could *mean* underscores the premise of my thesis, itself both a resistance to the normalizing impulse so common in Ross criticism and a response to the silencing of homosexuality such impulses demand. I argue most forcefully against the "absent" nature of Ross's fiction because such rhetorical moves suggest to me that an agenda to "disappear" Ross just at the moment when either *homosexual* re-evaluation of Ross or an understanding of Ross's "gay anxiety" upon his work has been initiated cannot be a mere coincidence. The recent backlash against Laura Robinson's interpretation of Lucy Maud Montgomery's Anne, of *Anne of Green Gables*, as possibly given to homosexual leanings, is a fine example of the public aversion to the possibility of subjectivities homosexual.[1] The possibility of homoeroticism in Montgomery's *Anne* becomes more contentious since it is an ostensibly pan-Canadian symbol, however fictive, who is being labeled a lesbian; in that Anne comes to stand in for the category of "nationalism," the threat to the heterosexuality of the nation becomes

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[1] Laura M. Robinson. "Bosom Friends: Lesbian Desire in L.M. Montgomery's *Anne* Books."

the unspoken core issue.

Perhaps the case for homosexuality in Ross's fiction is easier to make since his literature never achieved the public stature that Montgomery's did, and therefore he is not seen as being widely embedded in the national consciousness. However, Ross still circulates widely in universities, and it seems to me that considering his novel *As For Me and My House* to be in any fashion homosexual also poses, like Robinson's "lesbian" Anne, a threat to the *academic* sense of a heterosexual national literature.[2] But while it is certainly easier to consider Ross's writing as homosexual writing since he was gay, such sexual inclination, like Montgomery's heterosexuality, should not *necessarily* invite nor forbid certain interpretations of fictive work. Yet, at the same time, I argue that homosexuality is central to an understanding of Ross, and that any critique of his work should at least acknowledge that fact.

In my explorations of the centrality of homosexual desire in Ross's fiction, I will argue, in sequence, for three (interrelated) proposals: first, that understanding homosexuality in Ross must at least consider the social prism that is (modern) psychology, which most certainly influenced Ross's understanding of homosexuality, including his own; second, that critical responses, themselves historically beholden to the influences of psychosexual edicts prohibiting the consideration of homosexual meaning in Ross, resist readings of (homo)sexuality as it may have appeared in Ross's fiction; and

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ACCUTE Conference, 25 May 2000, University of Alberta, Edmonton AB.

[2] See Richard Cavell's "Felix Paul Greve, the Eulenburg Scandal, and Frederick Philip Grove," discussed later in this essay. Cavell links the critical impulse to suppress the possibility of Grove's homosexuality to a desire to preserve the status quo of heterosexual nationalism.

third, that a reading of all of Ross's fiction *requires* attention to homosexuality in its various guises since it is what Kaja Silverman calls "the homosexuality which structures authorial subjectivity" (340) and also, I argue, structures in turn the sexuality of many of Ross's fictive characters. I do not, however, undertake to reconstruct Ross's discrete historical moment[3]—although I do gesture towards that—but, rather and moreover, wish to reveal how his texts may have, and still do, articulate what I might broadly call a gay sensibility concomitant with homosexual desire

(i) The politics of it all

That I am now so adamant about situating Ross as a homosexual writer and a writer of homosexuality, I find it surprising, upon reflection, that I have actually come to write a thesis on him, given the academic disapprobation I have sensed and have outlined, in part, above. I had found that, in completing my M.A. at the University of Guelph, there was almost nothing to compel me to consider gay and lesbian studies, *despite* the fact that the

[3] In trying to locate Ross within his historical locale, it is difficult to ascertain *exactly* when, for example, Ross had read authors who may have influenced him and, so, had perhaps contributed to both his style and subject matter. For example, Ross has openly credited Claude Mauriac's *Dîner en ville* as having influenced his 1974 *Sawbones Memorial*; one might thus conclude that he read Mauriac's work within the years immediately preceding the 1974 novel, although that may *not* be the case as well. There is, in particular, little in the way of *Canadian* literature that is thought to have influenced Ross, beyond Martha Ostenso's 1925 *Wild Geese*; and although much critical hay has been made to place Ross in a Canadian literary tradition along with Frederick Philip Grove, Ross professes never to have read what would have been one of his supposedly literary forefathers (McMullen 1991, 8). As David Stouck, in affirming William French's argument, writes: "[I]n 1941 there was little critical apparatus in Canada to recognize a book's worth; standards and taste in fiction were largely imported" (Moss 1992, 7). Ross's own broad reading interests, along with his publication of his first short story and first novel in foreign markets, would appear to confirm not only international influences

university was (and is) very progressive on social issues. I was burdened by the notion that there was no place in academia for such studies, that indeed it was all an embarrassing secret, and that I should continue with my interest in Mavis Gallant. I was amazed, upon taking a self-motivated research course focusing on homosexual literature, that there was a strong academic interest in lesbian and gay studies, albeit largely in the United States. Writing on Ross had still not occurred to me; indeed, he was not even one of my favourite authors. I was merely excited by the fact that many people out there had broken the silence, and had been doing so for many years.

I make personal mention here because criticism of literary standards at the end of the 20th century seems more than ever to be freighted with political gestures, and I wish to bring to light how imposing such displays still are. These often-conservative attitudes, which frequently disparage explorations of otherness, commonly call attention to the recent impetus in Canadian universities to disseminate more inclusive syllabi. The attacks on academic attempts at encompassing non-representative literatures—those excluded from canonicity because of their presumed marginality—underscores an anxiety that perhaps the canon at issue has been usurped by "politically correct" critical contexts which threaten to "marginalize" the heretofore supposedly publicly-neutral text. Peter Dickson, in attempting to transform what he terms "the *absent* presence of queerness in Canadian literature into a more *manifest* or *embodied* presence," argues that "the Canadian literary canon seems to have no trouble incorporating homosexuality into its rarefied textual precincts, so long, that is, as it functions primarily as a means of re-

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for Ross but also for his contemporary Canadian readers as well.

eroticizing readers' fundamentally heterosexual love for their country" (6).

Missing from the status quo arguments is the fact that texts, such as Ross's fictions, have always already been "politicized" in their initial, largely formalist appreciations.[4] This type of criticism (and other related approaches contributing to its predominance and circulation), in professing "objective" disinterest, seeks to naturalize the values inherent in its own production, including interpretations wrought from and amenable to the values of the society it (once) reflected: white, male-oriented, and heterosexual. It cannot, then, be merely coincidental that just at the point wherein the discussion of Ross's fiction shifts, over the last twenty years, from formalist to, for example, feminist or queer critiques, that critics such as Lecker urgently foreground the issue of the "value" of *As For Me and My House*. The question to be asked of such critical verve, that Ross's text is "dead" (Lecker 181), is not just "why dead?" but "why dead *now*?"

The greater apprehension such critics display (beyond the anxiety described above) elides a deeper concern that the socio-cultural shifts in understanding may in part arise from or result in a concern with either (homo)sexuality or a politics grounded in identity/minority formations. That an attendant reconfiguration of "meaning" might thereby occur, bestowing legitimacy on previously excluded or marginalized textual interpretations, no doubt troubles those whose claims to impartiality and objectivity are revealed as little more than self-interest.

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[4] For an example of formalist (or New Critical) attitudes as applied to Ross's fiction, see Warren Tallman's "Wolf in the Snow. Part One: Four Windows onto Landscapes," in *Canadian Literature* 5 (1960), 7-20.

I would like to take a glance at the current climate in the Canadian political sphere. Although it is fair to state that gays and lesbians in Canada have made great strides since (then Prime Minister) Pierre Trudeau's decriminalization of homosexuality in 1969, the gains seem to have been replaced by a sense of complacency, that the battles have all been fought and that "identity politics" as a rallying point to achieve public if not legal legitmacy is a quaint notion belonging to radicalism. One need look no farther than the recent decision, in April 1998, by the Supreme Court of Canada which sided with fired gay Alberta teacher Delwin Vriend. The rancorous ramifications include an increasingly vocal response largely from the right-of-centre political spectrum, including academics and journalists, decrying what they see as "judge-made" law. These respondents, often underscored by a barely concealed hostility, buttress their claims as being founded in vaguely-defined "democratic values" concerning the "curtailment" of the "wishes" of the electorate as they may be voiced through parliamentary representatives. One wonders if the same reaction would occur if the same Supreme Court judges had, in most of their decisions, sided with the interests of those now complaining.[5]

The efforts to contain or suppress homosexuality have not changed substantially in so far as the disapprobation has only become more polite. My dissertation, in intervening in the highly-charged atmosphere of a medicalized homosexual past, also steps into the

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[5] As an example of visceral media homophobia, masking as concern for legal process, see George Kock's article "How Klein ignored his supporters," *The Globe and Mail*, 16 April 1998. For a retrospective account of the event, one (not unsurprisingly) tinged with condescension (yet another example of ongoing conservative vituperation), see the *National Post*'s "The flames of hatred were roaring," by James Cudmore, 6 April 2000.

prevailing milieu in which the issue of homosexuality is *still* being debated. Therefore, I think it would be an error to gloss over this debate, since it appears very likely that the category of homosexuality, in whatever form, will always remain a politically tinged issue.

(ii) Mapping Ross

It is the purpose of my thesis to attempt to locate and read Ross's fiction as it may have appeared to his contemporaries, since Ross invariably responded to the formative world around him, a world whose admonition of homosexuality provides no small clue in assessing the covert nature of homosexuality either as lived by Ross or as it may colour his fictive characters. It need be said that recovery of *exact* historical meaning is always an endeavour of approximation since, in this case, I did not know Ross as he lived and wrote; however, each of us has access to the same histories by which to construct a reasonable facsimile of life in Ross's era. Simply put, it would be an error to presume that what we know and think of homosexuality in Canada in 2000 might, in general, be the same as what Ross knew and thought of it in Canada in the 1930s. In any case, the importance of situating Ross thus is primarily to understand both his view of a site-specific homosexuality—Canadian, early- and mid-century—and how such regard may have informed his work.

If Ross possessed, as is likely the case, a view of the homosexual as "deviant" and of minority status, then it is important to try to attempt to approach his fiction *on those terms*. Although it might be argued that even biological understandings of sexuality as

innate and universal are in some ways socially constructed, I try to underplay the imperatives of such reasoning in order to approach Ross's writing not necessarily as he may have *intended* it—though that does come into play in my examinations—but moreover as it reflects how Ross may have both resisted and accepted the social and medical edicts surrounding what was known of homosexuality in his era.[6]

Therefore, I further preface my examination of Ross's work with a brief look in Chapter Two at the circulating discourses of sexology and psychoanalysis which deeply influenced the burgeoning medicalization of the field of "sex" at the advent of the 20th century. I explore these medical machinations at what is perhaps one of their most dynamic and formative moments, the turn of the century, using Willa Cather's short story "Paul's Case" as emblematic of the anxiety surrounding the (in)comprehension of this tide of information. In her focus on Cather's *O Pioneers!*, C. Susan Wiesenthal writes of the definitive influence of sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing, in that their theories and beliefs came to circulate as "common knowledge." The tropes of inversion, detailed as, for example, the "mannish lesbian," were, Wiesenthal explains,

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[6] Vernon Rosario's excellent introductory essay on "homosexual bio histories," in the anthology *Science and Homosexualites*, carefully distinguishes between the categories of invert/deviant, nature/nurture, and essentialism/constructionism, in order to reveal their discrete histories as binaries, and how each opposing term converges or shares similarities with another pair (for example, "esentialism" with "nature"). He also offers a succinct distinction between the theories of sexuality as essence or as social construction:

> Essentialist theories propose that homosexuality is a biologically determined, objectively detectable, erotic orientation that can be identified in all cultures and throughout history, albeit under diverse behavioral appearances and at different prevalence rates. Constructionist theories propose instead that "homosexuality" is a concept and a phenomenon that arose relatively recently in Euro-American cultures to describe a specific type of person and that person's erotic interest in others of the same sex. Homosexuality is thereby theorized as historically and

"pervasively disseminated throughout the cultural imagination—via newspaper caricatures, anti-feminist tracts, and sensational as well as 'high' literature" (45). Yet concomitant with sexology came the rise of psychological explanations of the social and moral role of "sex" and "sexuality." (It is worthwhile to remember that Krafft-Ebing began his career as a forensic psychologist.) It is within this North American social temperament that Ross was born, shortly after the publication of Cather's seminal short story.

The social deployment of psychoanalysis merged in many ways with the social and moral reforms which sought to keep pace with an increasing industrialized, fragmented and often-warring world, and it is in this environment that Ross began writing and publishing, in 1934. Living in an urban environment, Winnipeg, Ross undoubtedly had greater access to literature and news less likely to reach the small Saskatchewan towns from which he hailed. Though I believe it necessary to locate Ross, I do not wish to assert that his environment overwhelmingly *determined* him, especially in that he may have actively tried to reshape or resist it (as much as he may have accepted parts of it), in either his daily life or his writing.

Rather, I think it more productive to look at how the ensuing critical reaction helped (and helps) to shape both our understanding of Ross's fiction, especially as such analyses naturalized the historical understanding of (Canadian) literature, and any erotic impulses contained therein as *necessarily* heterosexual.[7] In Chapter Three, I argue that

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socially contingent. (6)

[7] See, again, Dickinson's and Cavell's works for the intersections of nationalist imperatives and heterosexuality in Canadian literatures.

establishing Ross within the Canadian canon depended on determining how he might be useful in reflecting or resolving normative heterosexual engendering, even when depictions of sexual "otherness" may arise.

In my ensuing examination of Ross's fiction—Chapters Four, Five, and Six—I attempt to resist the history of formative heteronormative discourses while understanding that previous critical examinations have made an indispensable contribution which inevitably helps to shape my own interventions. It is also unavoidable that I lean on some of the discourses of psychoanalytic thought and critique (although I most often try to refrain from it) as it has been deeply insinuated in modern comprehension and, in any case, has (limited) uses.

The trajectory of Ross's early fiction, as discussed in Chapter Four, engages issues of sexual and gender "determinism" that the title of Ross's first story, "No Other Way," promises—and, I argue, delivers upon. However, throughout his prairie-based fiction, Ross depicts gender as driven by its "grounding" in nature but conflicted by the superimposition of the social realm. Ross's own writing, as a product of that realm, instructs in that his attempt to sketch a supposed heterosexual environment reveals conflicts of its own, largely in how characters' performances of their gender and social roles become vastly confused. The promise of "no other way" reveals itself as subversively ironic as Ross's characters unwittingly betray their ascribed social roles and related heteronormative erotic investments, as much as Ross (perhaps also unwittingly) gives in to an odd yet consistent pull toward the non-normative.

With *As For Me and My House*, the subject of Chapter Five, Ross further

complicates normative expectations concerning gender and sexuality. In his first novel, Ross more forcefully delineates an emerging gay textuality, conflating the trope of sight with insight, in order to represent what I call an allegory of homosexual self-regard or narcissism. Using the Bentleys to highlight the internal contradictions of prescriptive heterosexuality, Ross, I argue, both acknowledges and resists psychiatric discourses of sexuality—especially homosexuality as inverted self-regard—in order to essay how the paradox of an assenting yet contesting textuality might allegorically constitute sexual "difference."

Finally, in Chapter Six, I examine the remainder of Ross's fiction, stressing how the enforcement of social norms, during and after the Second World War, served to underscore the erotic investments in male/male friendship and camaraderie, especially as the psychopathology of many of these relationships evince a narrative deviance. The allegorization of difference, so successfully deployed in *As For Me and My House*, is strained however; Ross's coding of homosexual deviance comes to demonstrate that the writing of homosexuality cannot bear the weight of the heterosexuality it uses as a narrative mask. Ross's last short story, "The Flowers that Killed Him," as an example of presumed artistic failure, demonstrates that the stress placed upon a continued allegorization of homosexuality can only result in deviance, at both the level of story and narrative crafting.

Since all narrative structures, as David Buchbinder and Barbara Milech observe, "participate in and mediate various cultural discourses, including those encoded in the sex/gender system," these structures inevitably privilege "the culture's dominant sexual

orientation, namely heterosexuality" (67). Yet despite such privileging enjoyed by the overweening "heterosexual narrative," Ross demonstrates how to make fruitful use, as it were, of even the most prohibiting medical projects determining model sexuality.

Chapter Two

Medical Mappings

> That even so-called classical inverts are not entirely free from some paranoid traits is quite obvious on even superficial observation. Having encountered hundreds of homosexuals, some of whom were prominent in artistic, philanthropic and other fields, I have never found one who, on closer observation, did not show paranoid traits. They are all oversuspicious, "shadowy," and mistrustful. [...] I have felt for years that this behaviour was engendered by our civilization, where homosexuals are treated as outcasts. However I am convinced that this is only partially true. Most of these traits are due to anal-sadistic fixations and regressions. (13)
>
> A. A. Brill, a prominent Freudian, 1940

Sometimes, the most profitable manner by which to understand psychoanalytic discourse is to let it speak for itself. Brill's pathologizing will appear to the modern reader as laughable. Or will it? One does not have to look far to find people who still, for whatever reason, continue to adopt such arguments because they speak now, as they did then, to the fortification of a heterosexually-dominant social order. Brill proceeds from a position which views homosexuals as *outside* society, as though they could somehow come to be constituted as social subjects (in whatever form) in a bubble. The circularity of Brill's argument depends, however, on maintaining this enforced distance so that any aberrant behaviour may be understood as antisocial. Having *pre*scribed the

parameters, Brill is free to situate people and their erotic investments using the criteria such yardsticks demand. The result of Brill's creativity is that the outcasts, dwelling in the margins, come to create—and are therefore responsible for—the paranoia, which characterizes them.

I want to look momentarily at the margins that likely informed Ross's conceptions of what "counted" as desire, and how this helped to shape the admissible (narrative) expression in early twentieth century North America. While I do not wish to suggest that Ross-the-author be read solely *through* the pressures of and resistances to then-circulating discussions of (homo)sexuality, such psychosocial discourses—the mutual interests of social reform and psychology—provide (generalized) historical maps upon which to cast Ross's texts. The result will be, I hope, to prompt new approaches to the machinations of desire and sexuality at work in his fiction, of which this study is but one.

It is difficult to identify *exactly* how or to what extent evolving social moments may have affected Ross, especially in his formative years, and it is not my goal to act upon such surmise (though perhaps this may, from time to time, occur). In understanding the social locales of Ross's stories and novels, I want to call attention to how the comprehension of asymmetrical genders or sexualities might inform either a broadly or narrowly defined classification of "homosexuality"; in turn, I hope to underpin my arguments with the understanding that Ross's fiction was likely "in tune" with circulating discourses concerning sexuality, while simultaneously demonstrating the realization that modern categorizations, since retrospective, can never accurately fit or designate historically discrete social and (homo)sexual practice, either lived or intuited by Ross.

In this chapter, I wish to call brief attention—brief, because a thorough examination is outside the scope of this thesis—to the problematics of early-twentieth century sexology and psychiatry, and the attendant rise of moral reform and purity movements, specifically as they come to construe the category of "the homosexual."[8] From this ground, I will look at a somewhat emblematic fiction which succinctly addresses these issues, Willa Cather's "Paul's Case." My use of Cather is not meant to suggest that she directly or indirectly influenced Ross (though it is not unlikely that her writings were known to him); rather, her use of the social to explain the sexual results and the conflict it incurs resembles a not dissimilar conflict evident in Ross's early prairie writings, as noted above. Also, Cather's "aesthetic of indirection" (O'Brien 1984, 598) in many ways mirrors Ross's allegorization of homosexuality as such writing is both the vehicle and subject of a concealed but abiding homosexuality. Locating Ross in the atmosphere informed by various strands of social and moral reform, with its attendant embracing of the tenets of psychology and sexology, I will highlight the importance of situating Ross and his fiction in this "medicalized" atmosphere while accenting the possibilities of Ross's resistance to such discourses.

(i) Ellis's inverts, Freud's couch (potatoes)

> From the end of the nineteenth century, sexologists sought to subject a wide area of jurisprudence to the natural law of desire, thus emancipating the immanent law

[8] For a more thorough examination of Freudian and Freudian-inspired work on sexuality, see Arnold Davidson's "How to do the History of Psychoanalysis: A Reading of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*," in *Critical Inquiry* 13 (1987): 252-77.

> of sex from a legal system ultimately grounded in the assumption of transcendence. [...] As sexology developed, it contrived to decontrol large areas of sexual life. Yet, in so far as it withdrew from the overt regulation of sexuality, the state transferred its power to the plethora of psychiatrists, psychologists, sex therapists, and social workers who, armed with the new doctrines of sexual science, became engineers of the autonomous "realm of sex." (14)

Lawrence Birken aptly summarises the foundational weight of sexological theory, at the advent of the twentieth century, on desire and its multi-faceted abundance. Practitioners of sexology drew attention to the (problematic) diversity of sexual desires in order to assert a scientific authority for the position that homosexuality should not be considered a crime but a congenital (thus involuntary) physiological abnormality. In his study *Sexual Inversion* (1897), Havelock Ellis argues that "inversion"—the reversal of sex roles—is an innate, inborn condition, and that, therefore, there was a need to dissociate the category of "homosexuality" from pathology.

Other sexologists, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, came to the field equipped with a background in another emerging jurisdiction, psychiatry. As the author of *Psychopathia sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing focuses on non-procreative sexuality in an effort to classify markers of what was medically known as sexual perversion, such as sodomy. His construction of homosexuality-as-inversion depends, as Harry Oosterhuis explains, on "a physical or psychological polarization and matching of male and female elements," adding that psychiatrists (again, such as Krafft-Ebing) "identified inversion with degeneration and its associated 'inverse tendency' toward dedifferentiation" (72).

The threat of a presumed "dedifferentiation" inherent in much sexology literature lay in naturalizing "inversion": that the constitution of the invert may be the result of the attraction and melding of male and female elements in one person suggests either the potential for a person to lose defining masculine or feminine characteristics essential to a patriarchal society or the wakening of a bisexuality potentially dormant in all, one that might be acted upon. In either case, the implied peril was the conceivable swerve away from reproduction and the maintenance of a (morally) healthy family.

It is not surprising, then, that the Western societies which embraced social reform movements also embraced the scientific study of sex in order to strengthen the ebbing potency of religious morality which had been losing ground to new "objective" systems of knowledge. But for such reform to occur, sexuality had to be lodged within the realm of the social, and homosexuality in particular must be made to a matter of moral fibre, a faultly *desire* that could be overcome. In reshaping society's understanding of the role of sex, psychologists such as Sigmund Freud played a key role. If homosexuality could be viewed as *arrested* psychosexual development—that is, the incomplete formation of a normative heterosexuality—it would be suitable for treatment.

If, as the argument goes, *everyone* was capable of making a homosexual object choice, they could also be deterred from making that selection. Since a same-sex object choice was not to be understood as a determination accompanied by gender inversion, moral reformists could stipulate that there was no natural or innate reason for the abberation. Such "degeneracy," formerly lodged in the realm of biology, was appropriated and installed within the province of the social, thus becoming a matter of

criminal abasement. In this manner, the Freudian revolution erected in part, as Rita Felski argues, "a seemingly impenetrable barrier between the modern view of sexuality as an enigmatic and often labile psychic field rooted in unconscious desires, and the work of nineteenth-century sexologists such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis, with its emphasis on the physiological and congenital roots of human erotic preferences" (1).

What was once the promise wrought from self-affirmation as a homosexually sentient being changed, in tandem with the move from sexology to psychoanalysis, to the threat of a moral menace whose thwarted desires were potentially criminal. Therefore, the literature on the (emerging) category of the homosexual shifts from a narrative of the sexual self-discovery as an invert but still a part of "society" to a medical chronicle detailing impeded heterosexual desire. The "discovery" of homosexuality was initially liberating in its appeal of constituting natural sexualities, both homo and hetero. However, the recognition that a state of being was biologically grounded paved the way for the medical and juridical use of such knowledge, with the irony that homosexuality, since non-procreative, eventually came to be conceived as "against nature," both morally (as a "vice") and psychologically (as a "pathology").

It is misleading, however, to think that those materially affected by such thinking were altogether "produced" by such discourses in that they may have unwittingly and uncritically absorbed the tenets promoted by rehabilitative therapists. As Jeffrey Weeks warns, "these definitions could be challenged and transformed as much as accepted and absorbed. This suggests that the forces of regulation and control are never unified in their operations nor singular in their impact. We are subjected to a variety of restrictive

definitions, but this very variety opens the possibility of resistance and change" (95). Indeed, if an initial reaction to the slow discovery of one's possible homosexuality was fear, efforts to circumvent anti-homosexual edicts were at least a likely reaction to that fear, as might be an effort to suppress such desires.[9]

(ii) Fictive reflections: a "Case" study

Perhaps one of the finest North American fictive reflections marking the ambivalence in deciding upon the acceptance and challenge that Weeks notes is Willa Cather's short story, "Paul's Case" (1905). It cannot be said with any certainty that Cather was indeed commenting on sexological or psychiatric understandings of homosexuality, but her story might, at least, be congruent with her disapprobation of widely-circulating Wildean aesthetics which, in turn, can be read as a commentary on and contribution to the day's circulating views of inversion, and social pathology and moral ethics, especially those concerning homosexuality.[10]

In her scathing critique of an 1894 touring production of Oscar Wilde's play *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Cather writes that the playwright cannot adequately describe

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[9] Erin Carlston, in her study of the American medical community between the wars, also cautions against attributing too much power to ideology by assuming uncritical attitudes as monolithic: "[I]t would be wrong not only to assign medical ideology a determinative role in shaping the lives and identities of homosexuals, but also to characterize that ideology as monolithic." Carlston writes that, during the 1930s, newly defined sexual behaviours were subject to conflicted and divided medical and psychiatric opinion; with this in mind, Carlston says that we must "look at the ways in which [medical ideology] undermines and contradicts itself, lays itself open to (mis)interpretation, and/or makes itself available to strategies of resistance" (177).

[10] Part of the following critique has been adapted from my unpublished 1995 essay, "'A Little Satan Philosophizing on Calvary'? Aesthetics, Capitalism, and the 'Homosexual'

motherhood, "a thing which no man can ever realize, which a man of Mr. Wilde's ethics and school and life cannot even conceive. To hear Mr. Wilde on that subject is like hearing one of the very little satans philosophizing on Calvary" (1970, 91). After Wilde's much-publicized imprisonment the following year, Cather again writes of him. In an article entitled "The Aesthetic Movement," Cather focuses not on Wilde's homosexuality but, rather, his apparent inability to be sincere: "He has in him the potentiality of all sin, the begetter of all evil—insincerity. He thwarts the truth and tricks it, buys it and sells it until he loses all perspective, moral and artistic." Cather concludes that this insincerity is "the sin which insults the dignity of man and of God in whose image he was made" (154).

In these reviews, Cather foregrounds her belief in the role of aesthetics in maintaining "sincere" moral values. Wilde's great sin, apparently, is to be ringleader of a movement that has the presumably sinister capacity to appropriate Christian ethical values. Wilde's apparently empty aesthetic is a product without value; its appearance on the literary and theatrical markets is dangerous because its consumption can only lead to immorality and unethical behaviour, culminating in all those "little satans" of insincerity. The true aesthetic, Cather implies, is the one that is in service of the "truth," one expressly enmeshed with the productive capacity of Christian and (patriarchal) family values, all in sync with the turn of the century capitalism.

"Paul's Case," appearing ten years later in Cather's collection *The Troll Garden*, pursues these issues. Although Cather again confronts the specious qualities of "degenerate" aesthetics, she also subtly foregrounds the title character's apparent

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Reading of 'Paul's Case'" (6 March 1995, Université de Montréal).

ambiguous concern with "the thing not named."[11] According to Sharon O'Brien, Cather's is an "aesthetic of indirection [which] suggests at once the lesbian writer forced to conceal and the twentieth century writer aware of both the inadequacies and the possibilities of language" (1984, 598). Rather than search for clues in order to assert a definitive meaning, O'Brien writes that we "need to examine the dialectic between what is named and what is not, rather than assuming that what is not named is the 'real' text" (598).[12]

It is this very dialectic which I want to call attention to in my forthcoming discussion of Ross, who was born shortly after *The Troll Garden* appeared. The "space between what is named and what is not" heavily influenced, in the fin de siècle, anxiety about the emerging (and often conflated) discourses on sexuality, sexual pathology and psychology, by the institutions of burgeoning capitalist economies and the *reproductive* family.[13] It is tempting to understand the story as a study in the temperament of an

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[11] Cather's important comments on verbal moods in literature, as discussed extensively in the works of Sharon O'Brien, are from the essay "The Novel Démeublé" in the collection *Not Under Forty*. It reads, in part: "Whatever is felt upon the page without being specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact or thing of the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself" (50).

[12] Deborah Carlin also warns against asserting that "considering Cather as a lesbian writer [will] not only illuminate unexamined or contradictory aspects of the texts, but [will] also constitute the repressed *meaning* of the texts as well" (20). Also, Bonnie Zimmerman cautions that there is a danger in attempts "to establish a characteristic lesbian vision of literary value system. . . . In an attempt to say *this* is what defines lesbian literature, we are easily tempted to read selectively, omitting what is foreign to our theories" (214).

[13] I do not wish to elide either the general or specific distinctions, as to how these institutions functioned there may have been, between Canada and the United States and Britain. On the other hand, Canada's position as a political, cultural and social amalgam of the other two countries is indisputable (although its discrete history definitely suggests

emerging homosexual pathology, especially since the title readily lends itself to a clinical viewpoint. Claude Summers writes that "the very title of the story, with its medical and legal overtones, is suggestive, for in 1905 discourse on homosexuality was couched almost exclusively in terms of criminality or psychopathology. The protagonist, the title implies, is a fitting subject for a psychological or criminal case history" (109). Summers presumes that Paul *is* a self-aware homosexual: That the character of Paul commits suicide neatly fits into the category of "case closed" for Summers, who writes that "the cause of Paul's unhappiness and suicide is not his homosexuality but his inability to integrate his homosexuality into real life" (110).

Is Summers's portrait of a pathologized Paul, whose unnameable identification as homosexual is a perfect fit for a sensitive youth with aesthetic desires worthy of Wilde's Dorian Gray, out of sync with what Cather herself may have understood as either "inversion" or "arrested heterosexual development" (or combinations thereof)? Do Cather's "elisions" arise from necessary evasiveness about Paul's sexuality, couched within his artificiality; or, rather, is Paul's "unspeakable nature" part of a much larger issue concerning the prescribing natures of social and moral reform and their related pressures in redefining homosexuality as not inversion but vice? Or, most likely, does

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that such "intermixture" was neither totalizing nor monolithic). Mariana Valverde, in her study of moral reform in English Canada at the turn of the century, writes that Canadian class formations in urban English Canada, attendant with its socio-economic baggage, "were to a large extent adapted from English and American sources." Valverde also cautions that "[i]t would be impossible here to detail all the forms and channels of English and American influence on Canadian social and moral reform," adding that Canadian tended to define themselves "not so much positively but by way of a differentitation—from the Mother Country, first, and, in the twentieth century, from the United States" (16-17).

"Paul's Case" call attention to the interrelation between all these not-so-discrete categories?[14]

In that Cather criticizes her protagonist while affording him a fair measure of sympathy suggests both an acceptance of and resistance to the "prescription" of Paul as a "case." In some ways, Cather's loosening of her recondite rectitude—an almost virgin aesthetic—is enough to allow for a note of sympathy for the beleaguered Paul. For example, O'Brien notes that the pictures in Paul's room "embody the grim, repressive patriarchal values of the national religion of financial success, the Protestant ethic allied with a patriotic capitalism." The one reminder of his mother, the picture of the lambs, "offers him only the inadequate nourishment of a feminized Christianity" (1987, 283).

The overarching discourse of the three pictures—patriarchy, finance, and Christianity (or, the intertwined imperatives, respectively, of heterosexuality, (re)production, and moral integrity)—is a comment on the incompatibility of an aesthete like Paul with the larger world. What Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms Paul's immoral "feminine love of artifice" (1989, 63) may be censured by Cather, yet that the "other" Paul—the one of sublimated ambiguous desires?—must also bear this burden, Sedgwick notes, is made to appear unfair. The "thing not named" signals Paul's *innate*

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[14] Wiesenthal writes that Cather's avoidance of writing of loving friendships between women

> was the one central aspect of the contemporary discourse of sexulity which Cather could not fully address, because it involved not merely an indirect, artistic inversion of her culture's metaphors, myths, and theories, but entailed, rather, a direct and necessarily polemical authorial entry into the heartland of the sexologists' "frontier" territory, that twilight and controversial no-woman's land separating socially acceptable female companionship from illicit same-sex love. (61)

homosexuality as it figures as (feminine) inversion; it is the vapidity of his aesthetic outlook which, according to Sedgwick, envelopes his homosexual pathology. Cather suggests that Paul's biologically-based pathology, expressed as a somewhat hysterically-inspired aestheic, requires a guiding moral force, perhaps the school's tribunal which determines that Paul is a psychological "case." Although Cather may feel that Paul needs some kind of "corrective," she also fears that dissecting Paul's self-serving false *aestheticism* would also involve correcting his concomitantly inseparable *homosexuality*, however obliquely understood by either the author or society at large.

(iii) Sinclair's case

In her cultural and historical examination and reimagining of Cather's fiction, Marilee Lindemann writes that Cather should not be reproached for failing to imagine a political solution to Paul's dilemma; Lindemann's goal, rather, is to "investigate the complex interplay of oppositionality and anxiety that animates [Cather's] fiction" (7). Yet it is the reimagining of Cather's work as political that is in many ways unavoidable since Cather's is an intervention, however slight, in her era's discussion of sexuality and its meanings (amongst other things). Understanding the operations of acceptance of and resistance to those historically discrete (and often unfriendly) analyses of homosexual desire also necessarily involves the modern analyst in political positioning as well (as mentioned above in my discussion of Lecker). Therefore, my own intervention, in investigating Ross's own "interplay of oppositionality and anxiety," becomes one that focuses his largely heterosexual plots which are themselves undermined by Ross's

pervasive and insistent troubling of such "heteronarratives."[15]

When Ross first began publishing his fiction, in 1934, homosexuality in Canada, or in North America in general, did not have a public face or presence, in so far as it was defined as deviance, largely through psychological determinations which had by then come to supersede sexological ones.[16] In Canada, as in Britain and the United States, morality and social science practices were not separable. Mariana Valverde observes that the "regeneration of the individual through personal purity went hand in hand with science, both theoretical and applied. [...] Doctors, while primarily in the secular realm, had by the early twentieth century managed to claim jurisdiction over many ethical issues, particularly those relating to sexuality" (44-45, 47).

Certainly, organizations such as Canadian Purity Education Association, the Methodist Board of Temperance and Moral Reform, and Presbyterian-influenced Moral and Social Reform Council of Canada shared a belief that social and moral reform could transform Canadian society. Although their influences should not be overestimated,

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[15] Judith Roof's "heteroideology of narrative" speaks to the reciprocal relationship between narrative and sexuality which tends to produce "stories where homosexualities can only occupy certain positions or play certain roles metonymically linked to negative values within a reproductive aegis" (xxvii). I have shortened her meaning to the term "heteronarrative."

[16] I would caution that research into the Canadian experience regarding this "takeover" by psychiatric discourse is, since scarce, not conclusive, though I think it a fair assumption. Chris Waters argues, for example, that the embracing of Freudian theories in the US occurred because of "American optimism about the possibility of transforming individual character—an optimism that shaped the unique American appropriation of Freud" (176). This attitude, he says, was largely lacking in Britain since that country was not devoting scarce Depression post-war resources to the reclamation of the homosexual offender, and its medical doctors maintained a continuing allegiance to the work of Ellis. See Gary Kinsman's *The Regulation of Desire: Homo and Hetero Sexualities*, on the emergence of sexualities in Canada prior to and during World War Two (see also Chapter Six), and

neither should they be discounted. Ross's own mother, for example, clearly followed the edicts of her Unitarian church. It goes without saying that Ross was raised in and began writing in an era quite inimical to the idea of "aberrant" sexualities. But if we are to understand Ross's texts as revealing of socio-cultural information about mid-century Canada, we must also look at how the discontinuities inherent in the spectra of his writing paradoxically resists and accepts the imposition of heteronormative discourses then circulating.

Although there is no "monolithic" Ross, examinations of his work which speculate as to what it "means" must also reflect on how such meaning-making reifies and stabilizes ideas about what counts as sexuality and desire. The suggestion of incoherent desires (that is, homosexuality), in particular, will naturally antagonize socially acceptable discourses because these "other" desires are seen to threaten normative institutions with destabilization. And although the identification of a formative homosexual or queer identity[17] in mid-century Canada cannot, for example, recuperate with any *exacting* certitude desires "of a kind not natural"[18] within Ross's work, it remains important to

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Valverde, especially the chapter "Moral and Social Reform," 44-76.

[17] I am making an important distinction between "homosexual"—a term rallying the interest and self-identification of those who desire members of the same sex and who realize, positively or otherwise, the socially transgressive nature of such desire—and "queer"—an anti-identitarian stance embracing the energies of homosexual social contravention and a non-specific politics of difference in order to oppose, in part, sexual regulation. For an expansive yet concise exploration of this distinction and its problematics, see Steven Seidman's *Difference Troubles: Queering Social Theory and Sexual Politics* (1997), especially pages 146-159. I favour the appellation "homosexual" to describe Ross's work and his own positionality, even though I understand that the two terms are often used interchangeably.

[18] I am drawing attention to John Sutherland's homophobic attack against Patrick Anderson, in *First Statement*, in 1943, wherein Sutherland accuses Anderson of essaying

study both the manner in which writing appears not to maintain heteronormative coherence *and* how the pull of homogeneity was (and is) effective in both Ross's writing and the ongoing critical canon constituting Ross studies.

I concur, therefore, with Scot Bravman, who writes that "queer cultural studies of history must also look at the relations between texts and the contexts of reading and writing in order to pursue a critical assessment of the role of queer fictions of the past in historical processes themselves" (31). Is Ross's a historical moment (or moments) in which the prohibition of multiplying forms of desire within fictive depictions of sex and gender (no longer rallying around the privileged term of a heterosexual phallus) cannot be sustained? Does Ross conflate the duality inherent in the idea of a covert homosexuality with desire in an attempt to reorder an external world to internal specifications? Is any attempt at portraying a homosexual subjectivity automatically subsumed within an aesthetic of art (and here I am thinking of the artists portrayed within Ross's writing)? Moreover, how has critical reaction to Ross dealt with the idea of "other" sexualities once such positionalities become impossible to ignore?

Certainly, considering that many of Ross's stories are psychological portraits, I would add that unconscious (homosexual) desires and identifications therein may not always, as Kaja Silverman states, "follow the trajectory delineated for them in advance, and that they sometimes assume forms which are profoundly antipathetic to the existing social formation" (2). My critiques, in the next chapter, are directed to looking at whether or how critics have constructed Ross to keep him on a "straight" trajectory

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a literary representation of "some sexual experience of a kind not normal." See also

always inevitably in line with the tradition of Canadian critical discourse. I in no way wish, however, to indict these critics for "failing" to imagine, like Cather, solutions to the politics of Ross's plots; rather, I am operating from the necessity of teasing out meanings (which do not adhere to the dicta of the tradition of our criticism) in Ross which these writers may have unwittingly or unknowingly elided.

Again, part of the problem lies within understanding that there is a difference between understanding homosexual duality or covertness in Ross *and* how, in his historical moment, Ross may have intended it; this burden, in turn, is compounded by the notion that available discourses espousing heteronormative interpretation further fracture or obscure any attempts to look at Ross apart from prescribed methods of viewing. Biographical accounts, for example, which read Ross directly into (and out of) his writing ascribe a certain intentionality which may indicate more of a current understanding of how such things might be, rather than grasping a socio-cultural historical specificity (which is, in itself, never completely recoverable).

In reading Ross against the straight mind's flushing out of a recognizable "deviance" (which it does in order to contain it), I find little in the way of available discourses which critiques the foundational weight of a compulsory heterosexuality informing Ross criticism. Asking how one might go about reading a work of an author discovered to be heterosexual is instructive, in that such an apparent impossibility reveals how heterosexuality as a category forces its required binary opposite, homosexuality, to prove or define itself and its interests against the "norm." Rather than attempt the

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chapter three.

fruitlessness of such "proof," I want to ask that we might consider that, if Ross were not gay, would this then discount queer readings of his work? What has the moment of the discovery of Ross's homosexuality meant to criticism? Does all Ross's work become a closet because of *this* fact? Do critics now simply filter Ross through a sieve of that "straight-forward trajectory" because deviations cannot be contained or imagined within the acceptable canon of thought?

It would seem to be the job of the gay or lesbian or queer critic, then, to have to work more overtime: to speak to the presumable majority heterosexual audience in ways amenable to their understanding of the ordering of the world (which includes critical discourses), while simultaneously undertaking a different way of reading and criticism which must necessarily rupture those very regimes. Efforts to explain Ross with, for example, psychoanalytic theories, without *first* looking at the overwhelming heteronormative thrust of the structures and critical structuring of such theories, can only result in a prescriptive, foreordained reinscription of this heteronormativity.

Chapter Three

The Normalizing Imperative of the Critical Reception

"Did you get married?"
— W. A. Deacon, to Sinclair Ross,
4 April 1946 (*Dear Bill* 216)

Within the social context of mid-century Canada, William Arthur Deacon's question is not surprising in its presumption. Ross's response also appears quite uncontroversial; he clarifies, in his letter of 15 April 1946: "No, I didn't get married. Afraid I'm destined to be a grumpy, solitary old batchelor [sic]. The ones I want don't want me—though I will say I don't work very hard on it" (*Dear Bill* 217-18).[19]

A reader's interpretation of this exchange depends very much on what she or he might know (or knew) of Ross, the private figure. Prior to Keath Fraser's public outing of Ross in the March 1997 issue of *Saturday Night*, Deacon's question might not have seemed untoward or surprising for many as the automatic postulate of heterosexual predisposition circulates unabated. Yet now that Ross's homosexuality is common knowledge, the irony of both Deacon's question and the suggestive duality of Ross's

[19] Retrospective interpretations of the figure of the bachelor often read claims of being resigned to an unmarried state as code for homosexuality. Coincidentally, the back cover of 1941's *As For Me and My House* features an ad for a book entitled *The Bachelor Life*, by George Jean Nathan. The promotion makes reference to the bachelor as a "gay dog," but it would be erroneous to overdetermine its use here. I am anticipating this very point, as it is this kind of ahistorical rendering of certain words which crops up in Valerie

evasive and sexless use of the pronoun "one," reflects how the world of Canadian critical letters, from Deacon through to Fraser, has consistently written up and command(eer)ed a "Ross" situated firmly within a heterosexual imaginary.

This critical rendering of Ross has, I will argue, always interpreted his writing as unabashedly "straight"-forward. As important as it is both to understand Ross as a gay man and to open his writing to biographical critiques which may draw upon an author's sexuality, I think it crucial to look at how the straight mind in Canadian critical discourse has prescribed understandings of Ross—especially the much-examined *As For Me and My House*, in particular—as being about anything but homosexuality. Robert K. Martin, in his essay on the question of an "*écriture gaie*," writes that "the sexual significance of writing is not simply a matter of sexual content or of an author's overt sexual commitment (or orientation), but also of the work's engagement with a culture's literary ordering of the world" (1993, 282). In this chapter, which engages the history of the critical reception of Ross, I will maintain that such ordering has, until very recently, communicated overwhelmingly "straight"-forward accounts of Ross's work. Even recent examinations of Ross which (ostensibly) favour an supportive reading of (homo)sexuality—Fraser, Valerie Raoul, Timothy Cramer—demonstrate how Canadian culture's literary ordering of Ross's world continues to represent, despite close attention to subtext and nuance, both the homosexuality of the author and the ostensible homosexuality within his fiction as (unintentionally or otherwise) either a pathological or sexual misgiving.

Since most of the criticism on Ross overwhelmingly concerns his canonical novel

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Raoul's reading of the novel.

As For Me and My House, it is perhaps inevitable that I will give it most attention (though I will discuss at length, in chapters four and six, Ross's other, largely ignored, fiction). Much of that criticism has been helpful in at least drawing attention to Ross, especially since his inclusion in the New Canadian Library in 1957, though such notice has on the whole been restricted to university syllabi.[20] Despite the welcome regard and ongoing critical fascination, however, I find much of what has been written, especially concerning sex/gender ambiguities, rather problematic. In my own judicial intervention in the field, I want to reveal, through a selective reading of the criticism on Ross, that the patterns of analysis belie (perhaps unwittingly) a repetitious engagement with establishing Ross, within the Canadian canon, as reflective of normative heterosexual engendering, even when attention to sexual "otherness" is at issue.[21]

I examine the writing on Ross in a chronological fashion. My grouping of the writing into sub-sections is not an attempt to superimpose facile labelling on discrete works but, rather, to reveal how critical shifts reflect the external changes (then-) occurring in Canadian society. Though early thematic criticism is useful in establishing a "ground" for probing Ross's texts, I avoid dwelling on these examinations because they

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[20] For a discussion of the canonization of Ross's first novel, see Robert Lecker's "The Rhetoric of Back-Cover Copy: Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*," in *Making It Real: The Canonization of English-Canadian Literature* (1995); and Morton L. Ross's "The Canonization of *As For Me and My House*: A Case Study," in *Figures in a Ground: Canadian Essays on Modern Literature Collected in Honor of Sheila Watson* (1978).

[21] In his essay on the German born author Frederick Philip Grove, Richard Cavell argues that Canadian scholarship on the sexually ambiguous Grove has been "unswervingly normatizing" (1997, 12) in its efforts to "nationalize" the author's literary status; the result is that "the overall thrust . . . displace[s] [Grove's] *sexual* difference onto his *national* difference, a difference that is then 'resolved'" (1997, 13). Although I am not engaged in examining such nationalizing in Ross, it seems to me that Cavell's perceptive

are, by now, largely familiar. The title of Donald Stephens's 1965 essay, "Wind, Sun and Dust," succinctly and aptly expresses this oft-repeated attitude. In later expositions, there are more socially revealing commentaries, though at times the essay at hand does not deliver on the suggestiveness promised by its title. For example, Robert Thacker's 1984 paper, "'twisting toward insanity': Landscape and Female Intrapment [sic] in Plains Fiction," might appear to indicate an inquiry with a feminist theoretical colouring; but Thacker relies more on Stephens than he does on other (then-) current social debates. Even as recent as 1994, we find, in Ann Barnard's "A North American Connection: Women in Prairie Novels," more of a occupation with the centrality of the natural world than with "open[ing] a door to new perceptions of gender" (28), a comment which closes rather than opens the essay.

Of course, the prairie is central to much of Ross's writing, and forgoing the importance of its formative significance of it would be a serious omission. Indeed, since Ross lived in an era of social surveillance of sex/gender boundaries and prohibitions against their trespass, it is not unlikely that much of what the author himself understood about "society" was rooted (to use an appropriate term) in an essentialist understanding of admissible gender roles. Invariably, all critics, including myself, must in some fashion display an awareness of the reflection of the natural world in Ross's writing. That said, it is cause for concern to note that many writers on Ross nevertheless remain beholden to unspoken edicts which dictate either what a discussion of sexuality in Ross should entail or what kind of examinations of engendering are admissible given the historical location

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contentions might easily apply to Ross.

of Ross's writing.

I want to further preface my own insertion in the critical process. In order to anticipate critiques which may accuse me of failing to address adequately my own historical positioning, I want to engage this sort of charge through an my own enactment of it. To that end, I will look at another modern critic of Ross, Peter Dickinson, especially as he uses *other* critics to support his contentions. This brief exploration will, I hope, demonstrate the very kind of inevitable limitations inherent in Dickinson's and, more pointedly, *my own* arguments regarding both the impossibility of ever "restoring" the exact era of the subject at hand and the (dare I say desirable) impetus to use other critics whose interests may not necessarily parallel our own.

In her critique of 18th century British male authors who produced epistolary fiction in a presumed female voice, Madeleine Kahn proffers "narrative transvestitism," a process whereby

> a male author gains access to a culturally defined female voice and sensibility but runs no risk of being trapped in the devalued female realm. Through narrative transvestitism the male author plays out, in the metaphorical body of the text, the ambiguous possibilities of identity and gender. (6)

Kahn uses Defoe and Richardson as exemplars of men who engaged in such transvestitism as a rhetorical strategy in order to destabilize more normative meanings ordinarily found therein. As such, these male authors favour "a dialectic of display and concealment," calling attention to "the complex negotiations between self and other that structure both the novelist's art and the reader's response" (11).

Dickinson takes Kahn's paradigm and presses it into service as a twentieth century Canadian model for Ross's novel, using Kahn's notion of the dialectic of display and concealment to open up "a cross-gender space of liminal minority gay identification" (18). In turn, Dickinson interprets the text (within a selective community of readers) as being a "homosexual fantasy" (19). Dickinson's reading effectively collapses Ross into Mrs. Bentley and then Mrs. Bentley into Philip, engaging in a play of mirrors which results in "homo-narcissis[m]" (20): Ross's own looking becomes fixed on Paul Kirby as the true object of desire.

The dilemma inherent in Dickinson's use of Kahn involves, in the first instance, a displacing or replacing of historical concerns. Kahn's paradigm might not find such easy (temporal) transfer because we cannot know if Defoe's and Richardson's concerns had anything to do with purported destabilization, however involved they may have been with display and concealment, although that may certainly have been a possibility. Indeed, this "narrative transvestism," forced from an examination of a different historical context, may not be helpful in at least approximating a social understanding of a bygone era since the *tools* of the critique are themselves historically discrete in their location. And this, in turn, also applies to retrospective encounters with the homosexuality which may have informed Ross's novel.

Dickinson might be read as engaging in a kind of intentionality, that, fantasy notwithstanding, one can actually discern Ross, or more particularly, Ross's homosexuality, in the text: Dickinson feminizes Ross as (a desiring) Mrs. Bentley (a gay man's soul in a woman's body) in order to "reach" the true object of his desire, Paul.

This results in a critical verve not unlike "triangulation," in that Dickinson, leaning on the Freudian-inspired homosexuality-as-narcissism complex, ends up with a critique which really does not locate in the novel any kind of homosexual subject, beyond mining the subtext which, with the application of Freud's Oedipal complex,[22] reinscribes homosexuality as a kind of pathology. Furthermore, Dickinson appears to misconstrue such narcissism, intimating that Ross is effectively writing to himself *of himself*, more of a masturbatory, isolated textual/sexual event that does not even involve an exterior object choice to reflect upon and so internalise, a point to which I will return.

So too is Dickinson's postulate, resting on the elision of genders, not without other complicating intricacies. It cannot be known if Ross would have had in mind a minority gay identification, as Dickinson's argument intimates, since he has read Ross into the characters of the novel as being expressive of cross-gendering, understood in mid-century Canada as a desire to *be* the opposite sex, and so, homosexual. His critique entails the risk of too much shorthand; his resultant end-run around history importantly forgets to include the idea that "gay," within the homosexual fantasy Dickinson ascribes, might be found outside tropes such as cross-gendering, that it indeed existed in not so covert ways as an emerging though not stable identity.

I will now return to my own positioning. I do not fundamentally disagree with what Dickinson writes; indeed, I agree with much of it and find it useful. Because I too face the same accusations of abridging histories in my critical examinations, I can only assume that I may be submitted to the same sort of critique I have just essayed. This does

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[22] See the previous chapter for my critique of Valerie Raoul's position concerning

not require much elaboration because such *mea culpas* tend to be rather self-evident. But because I am a critic, like those I am about to examine, I do not assume that I am "beyond" the faults I find in the arguments since they constitute the heritage upon which I draw and of which I have become part.

That said, I want to return to what I have to offer as a critic: a more salient consideration of Ross's own *writing of* homosexuality (rather than a reading of Ross-the-homosexual into the novel), which shows how he may (consciously or not) have drawn upon the circulating discourses which formed his view of either a possible or actualised homosexuality. Consider, briefly, the rendering of Vickers by the narrator of "One's a Heifer," published shortly after *As For Me and My House* (and discussed in the next chapter). The adolescent narrator views Vickers as *seemingly* "other" but, insofar as Vickers may have represented what an actualised homosexual may have looked like or appeared to be, so too does he remain a man always not complete or fully understood, and perhaps more so to us than to Ross.

I would like to preface my analysis by beginning with David Stouck's prefatory comments to a recent book of essays on Ross's canonical *As For Me and My House*. Stouck writes that the essays collected therein represent "fifty years of commentary on the book and, in the range of critical approaches, constitute something like a fifty-year history of literary criticism in Canada" (1991, ix). While this comparison of writing on Ross to the larger field of Canadian critical endeavours should not be read as (metonymically) analogous, the suggestive nature of the parallel spurs, in part, this revaluation of what has

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Oedipal triangulation and homosexual desire.

been written and, moreover, *not* written, namely, thorough analyses of the play of gender and sexuality in Ross's texts. During those fifty years leading up to Stouck's 1991 observation, only one critic had advanced (though almost abstruse in tone) a reading of homosexuality in Ross—Fran Kaye in 1986—but even then, the significance of her essay has been roundly ignored.[23]

I want to turn to a closer look at the trajectory of assessment of these fifty years, to examine how a given Ross critique—particularly, though not exclusively, those concerned with issues of sexuality, desire and gender—situated the subject of its concern. In doing so, I will question why any impulse to read queer/homosexual positionality in Ross has been either elided, disregarded, or self-censured—even when there was no apparent reason to do so. I take as self-evident that heterosexuality, as regulating and inflecting all discourses of desire, literary or otherwise, depends on a notion of homosexuality as abject[24] in order to retain an illusory binary dominance. From this I submit that critical writing on Sinclair Ross often reveals a history of heteronormative response reflective of conservative positions in the institutions from which it writes; but ones, I will add, which

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[23] Morton Ross, in 1991, merely notes that "Frances Kaye argued [in 1986] that Ross used George Sand and Frederic Chopin as models for the Bentleys" (1991, 9). The following year, Marilyn Rose, in her study of silenced constituencies in Ross, notes briefly that "some might make a related case with respect to Philip in *As For Me and My House*—whom Frances Kaye, at least, has convincingly seen as latently homosexual. His foreigners, then, could be seen as representing or even standing in for, marginalized groups whom, for one reason or another, Ross has chosen not to foreground in these novels" (98).

[24] Judith Butler writes that "the notion of *abjection* designates a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality. Indeed, what is foreclosed or repudiated *within* psychoanalytic terms is precisely what may not reenter the field of the social without threatening psychosis, that is, the dissolution of the subject itself" (1993, 243). I draw upon Butler's discussion of the medicalized nature of homosexuality to suggest the

reinscribe the straight mind at the heart of understanding, determining and upholding difference—between gendered distinctions, homo and hetero, psychoanalysed and "normal"—as the prime factor in socio-cultural ordering. I will conclude by framing the ironic discord which informs Ross's writing, especially as such friction attends to issues of desire, (homo)sexuality, gender and identity which speak from the queered margins rather than a normalizing centre.

(i) "She is pure gold and wholly credible"

Although it was not the first critique of Ross, Roy Daniells's estimation of Mrs. Bentley, the diarist of *As For Me and My House*, has been taken as the ground or starting point of much ensuing critical measurement. But rather than wondering whether Daniells is correct or not—and most have argued against his position that Mrs. Bentley is "pure gold and wholly credible" (vii)—I want to scrutinize the context of the comment, and what it heralds. What has been critically neglected is that Daniells's assessment arises not from an evaluation of Mrs. Bentley, as an isolated reading of the caption, above, might indicate, but of Philip Bentley, her husband. The passage reads, in part (but more fully): "But for all [Philip's] limitations as a character, he is somehow right for the story. No one else would bring out his wife's qualities so well. She is pure gold and wholly credible" (vii). In his description of the centrality of Mrs. Bentley to the novel—"she it is who engrosses the reader's interest and regard" (vi)—Daniells ascribes these qualities to her, it would seem, *through* (his reading of) Philip, a reading which reinforces a

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position of *abject* (as a noun) as a compliment to the categories of subject and object.

comprehension of her as a supplement to her husband.

This perhaps is not surprising, considering that creation of meaning (and, thus, subjectivity), even as recently as 1957, most often occurred at the site of a totalizing universality of experience wrought by and through discourses of male (hetero)sexuality. Of this ubiquity, Monique Wittig writes that the "consequence of this tendency toward universality is that the straight mind cannot conceive of a culture, a society where heterosexuality would not order not only all human relationships but also its very production of concepts and all the processes which escape consciousness, as well" (28). I must add here that I am not suggesting that the discourses of heterosexual "omnipotence" were ever untroubled; rather, what I wish to establish is that the literary criticism which artlessly and characteristically engaged such discourses was largely unquestioned, and that its interpretative bent was widely accredited.

However, it should be clear to anyone acquainted with the histories of Canada in the years in which Ross wrote that a (hetero)masculinist understanding of how society should operate predominated. This is conspicuously detectable in early reviews of Ross's first novel, which underscore the impression of overwhelming sexism operating within the straight mind in Canadian critical discourse. In one of the earliest reviews of *As For Me and My House*, in 1941, Stewart C. Easton writes of Ross's authorship of Mrs. Bentley that "perhaps only a man could have done it. No woman could have seen herself so clearly, analyzed the pity and the tenderness and the dislike, and yet kept it free from sentimentality, balanced and complete" (18). So too do we find William A. Deacon writing that Mrs. Bentley wins freedom "by *rare* feminine wisdom and self-control" (9,

emphasis added).

Other critics note how Ross treats "a sexual theme with restraint, so that although his picture is complete it never becomes dirty" (Davies 4), and that he successfully handles a theme "which easily could have degenerated into sordid sensationalism" (McCourt 98). But beyond these moral evaluations, virtually required of critics in the era, cracks appear (and likely unwittingly so) in the critical struggle over just who *As For Me and My House* is about: Philip or Mrs. Bentley. While attention has focused on the "good as gold" comment, Roy Daniells's subsequent significant glance, in the same essay, at gender difference has slipped by; he writes that "it might be said that the two of them make up a single more complex character" (vii), though this split is attributed to and formative of "complement." Nonetheless, might this be rationalized as Daniells's way of accounting for and understanding (what later critics were to note more openly as) Philip's and Mrs. Bentley's gender incongruity, in that through such "complementarity" their gender roles are either diffused or fused, depending on the circumstance?

Certainly, just three years later, in his study of alienation and isolation in five Canadian novels,[25] Warren Tallman encounters the problem of getting the two Bentleys straight, so to speak. He aims to single out the *male* protagonists of each novel, "letting their lives suggest the details which make up the study" (5:7); yet, in his discussion of Ross's novel, unlike the other four, he alternates between "protagonists" (that is, the Bentleys), and forgets that one of them is not male, a shift which is never flagged or foregrounded. For example, of the desolation in the novel, Tallman writes that it "recurs

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[25] *As For Me and My House; Who Has Seen the Wind?; The Mountain and the Valley;*

on the pages of Mrs. Bentley's dairy as outward manifestation of inner desolation felt by her husband" (5:14): is this another instance wherein (as Daniells has said) "the two of them make up a single more complex character"?

Mrs. Bentley's primary function, Tallman insinuates, is scribe, principally of the inner life of her husband; she is ever alert to explicating his conscious and unconscious appetites (including the libidinal ones she rarely fulfils), and thereby relegates herself to a supporting role—again, as a supplement to Philip. Tallman finds that the novel is "a projection through the medium of Mrs. Bentley's remarkably responsive consciousness of the despair in which her husband is caught" (5:15), and he places Ross firmly behind this writing intelligence, "build[ing] up her account of an artist" (5:15). Tallman's argument reveals that he has retained Daniells's gold standard, in that Mrs. Bentley, exhibiting the sentiment of "good as gold," demonstrates her value as a referential object, whereas Philip, privileged as the subject, embodies the real, circulating currency.

Did Tallman think a discussion of Philip to be incomplete only because of Mrs. Bentley's unmistakable figuring in the novel, and that discussing her, *through* Philip's presence, was so common and "natural" as not to require editorial comment? Or did the critical discourse of the time not provide Tallman with the tools to explain how Mrs. Bentley eluded his grasp as a being separate from the existence of her husband? Just which of the two Bentleys possesses what Tallman suggestively terms "the desire to prevail that drives self on its *strange* journeys toward fulfilment" (6:43, emphasis added)?

W. H. New, in 1969, appears to have resolved this dilemma by foregrounding the

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Each Man's Son; and *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz.*

ambiguity of the novel's end, shifting radically from the concrete absolute of Daniells's "gold standard" to state that it is "ambivalence itself which is desired" (27), a technique Ross uses to create "the ironic tension which raises the book from a piece of 'regional realism' to a complex study of human responses" (31). New's essay signals a move away from a strictly essentialist understanding of Ross's "man [sic] in nature," the most recent example then being Margaret Laurence's 1968 introduction to Ross's *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories* (1968), in which Laurence writes that she finds mimetic correspondence between the infertile land and a man's "recurring sense of impotence" ("Afterword," 1991, 132), (though she never develops this interesting intimation of emasculation).

New's "web of viewpoints" (27), which underpins his view of duelling irony taking place in the reader's (mis)apprehension of that gold standard, is nevertheless grounded, as it were, in juxtapositions of Ross's use of what is dry, such as dust, versus what is wet, such as the rain, to signal paradox and contradiction. However, he merely gestures to the ambiguities he mines in examining the psychological motivations of both Bentleys (such as his interpretation of Mrs. Bentley's desire for "Philip"—baby? Or adult?—as expressed in the last line of the novel), subtly proposing that any resultant ironies may be rooted in a misunderstanding of nature-as-determinant but also that such errors are perhaps inevitable, given the circulating discourses circumscribing and informing his comprehension of the social.

The irony that New notes appears concurrently with a growing emphasis on the socio-cultural implications of Canadian literature. Susan Jackel, in her 1969 study of

prairie literature, examines the new stress on individualism within family structures in mid-century Canada, and Sandra Djwa considers how, during the same period, the religious imagination was codified in the "patriarchal prairie family" (44). Yet it is Northrop Frye who develops the theme of irony with special attention as to how, in the Canadian societies essayed in novels such as *As For Me and My House* and *The Mountain and the Valley*,

> it becomes easier to assume the role of an individual separated in standards and attitudes from the community. When this happens, an ironic or realistic literature becomes fully possible. This new kind of detachment of course often means only that the split between subject and object has become identified with a split between the individual and society. (237)

Frye indicates, in speaking of subject and object, not a male/female dichotomy but a separation of the individual from society, which, when placed alongside the radical cultural movements of the late 1960s, assists in ascertaining how criticism on Ross began to see Ross's fictional characters as psychologically complex agents who were not as deterministically bound to the land as previously thought.[26] The governing trope of essentialism began to give way to the privileging of the idea of the socially constructed and psychologically independent individual.

It is important to note at this juncture, however, that this development in criticism began to impose upon Ross's writings, becoming ever more "seasoned" as the years pass,

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[26] Frye is careful to note that the separation of which he speaks does not indicate a total break. He qualifies his view: "The social group is becoming external to the writer, but not in a way that isolates her [or him] from it" (237).

an excess of historical signification; that is to say, re-examinations of Ross in the early 1970s begin to exhibit the tendency to engage in universalizing (though with discrete foci) modes of then-current socio-cultural production. Perhaps such a tendency was inevitable, though, especially taking into consideration the predominance of heterosexuality as a governing societal discourse which, like any discourse attempting to retain circulation and dominance, is inclined to universalize and ahistoricize its production of meaning.

(ii) Barren woman, fertile man

Provocative discussions about the place of women in North American society in the late 60s and early 70s, combined with the rise of the acknowledgement of how people are socially situated and concomitantly constructed, helped to foment a critical backlash of sorts in Ross criticism, one that took particular aim at Ross's Mrs. Bentley, the narrative consciousness of *As For Me and My House*. A quartet of essays—Laurence Ricou, Wilfred Cude, John Moss, and David Stouck—focuses on the psychological complexity in *As For Me and My House*, and particularly on how Mrs. Bentley is (apparently) a very active agent in the ruin of her husband's life. Using the critical figuration of the "unreliable narrator," the four focus on Mrs. Bentley's "hidden" (self-) deceptions in order to castigate her for the moral failure they find at the core of the novel.

Ricou, initially stating his admiration for Ross's art, goes on to reprimand the diarist, an indication that the aesthetic of the novel, and its *subjective content* in particular, should (in this instance) be distinguished from its subject *matter*. Ricou

reconstitutes, in a fashion, Mrs. Bentley as a "real woman," relying for his argument on essentialist archetypes in order to associate her with a psychologically warped "mother earth." In identifying Mrs. Bentley's nature as "the prairie internalized" (81), he associates her subjective "landscape" (81) with the negating aspect of a cruel and relentless dry prairie wind that is "the agent of oblivion" (83). Her arrogance and deliberate hypocrisy (84) are, according to Ricou, emblematic of the aridity of the Bentleys' lives and "the dryness of the people" (New 28, qtd. in Ricou 86), rendering *her* physically and intellectually infertile, unlike Philip, who is merely unable to comfort others.

The dark inference that Mrs. Bentley is an emasculating woman arises from Ricou's contrast of "vertical" and "horizontal." He writes that the "bewilderment of being vertical and exposed is an essential factor in the characterization of Mrs. Bentley and Philip. The geometric figure is inevitably implicit in the attempt to discover self" (82). Yet if Mrs. Bentley is the landscape internalized, with her "wind and dust" blowing down false fronts, then she, as that "agent of oblivion," is the one making the vertical become horizontal, especially as this may indicate a form of figurative castration. Ricou adds that she "usurp[s] Philip's role," rendering Philip "dominated" (85); in emasculating him, we are given to understand, she topples, in her attempt to appropriate his role, the edifice of privileged male subjectivity. However, Ricou well understands the *biological* impossibility of attempt, and in this light his shaping of Mrs. Bentley as a vituperative mother earth—whose psychological *modus operandi* is "agent of oblivion" (83)—becomes ever more clear: her biological *destiny* as "woman" must be highlighted so that

the "threat" she poses remains publicly visible and open to (male) surveillance and continued subjugation. Her only remaining avenue is to live *through* Philip, who, blown down as he may be by his wife's "stormy nature," nevertheless remains a required element. Ricou reinforces the male/female binary, latent within his reconstitution of social engendering as intimately connected to biological determinism .

Ricou's critical approach recalls Frye's deliberation, in *The Bush Garden*, that certain Canadian literature is beholden to a "garrison mentality," though in Ricou's case the adversary found at the fort's (literary) door, a woman, results in a literalization of the call to "man the barricades." Despite applying the label of a barrenness to each member of the couple, Ricou discerns only Mrs. Bentley drying up like her garden, yet another symbol of her withering element. Ironically, perhaps, Ricou does not consider, within his essentialist ascription, the creative side of this childless "mother nature": Mrs. Bentley's diary, as a potential and personal creative act—one not requiring Philip or any man—might at least bear cursory study. Philip, on the other hand, continues to paint and fathers a child. Ricou thus distinguishes Mrs. Bentley by locating her identity "through Philip's drawing" (88), again reviving the notion that a woman's "thirsting" subjectivity can only be satisfied by way of affiliation with or through the creations of the male artist.

Wilfred Cude extends Ricou's brand of argument with a thorough rehabilitation of Philip, a man besieged by his wife. Cude substitutes Daniells's "good as gold" with a die of Mrs. Bentley as "an alloy incorporating baser materials" (7), a woman who, "when she creates, she inadvertently destroys her creation" (11). In a sarcasm-laden essay embroidered with misogyny, Cude obtains his argument by overplaying Mrs. Bentley's

(apparent) inability to have children, as suggested by "the stillborn Bentley baby" (11), implying that not only was the dead baby a result of the failure of a woman's body but that such "inadequacies" constitute Mrs. Bentley's natural, innate and biological disposition. She embodies the garden she apparently neglects, "a victim to her sense of values as much as a victim to the drought and the wind" (11).[27]

Cude's portrait of the diarist bears a sharp similarity to his rather sexist rendering of a docile and passive Judith West, a rival of Mrs. Bentley for the affections of her husband. Of Philip's good looks, Cude remarks: "No wonder the gentle Judith can yield up her chastity to him. [...] This Philip Bentley is no inarticulate cold fish: he is really something else" (12). Evincing a critical counterpart to Cude, John Moss also views Mrs. Bentley as the agent "weakening [Philip's] capacity to endure," labelling her "an unfortunate creature" (1974, 155). In his study of isolation in English Canadian fiction, he alternately praises and attacks the dissembling Mrs. Bentley, though the praise is little more than an attempt to appear balanced. Moss more fully develops Frye's and New's attention to the ironic split in the novel; of Mrs. Bentley, he notes "those characteristics which create the ironic tension between the subjective and objective functions of her role as recording consciousness" (155). Yet within this consciousness, Moss finds that "she remains unaware that her bitchiness more than her conscious duplicity has been largely responsible for [her and Philip's] individual isolation from each other, from what each of

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[27] Cude intimates, in a footnote to this passage, that her intent is purposeful and malicious: "As the geraniums fall victim to her sense of values. She carelessly leaves them out on the windowsill in the fall, and they are nipped by the frost" (18).

them really is, objectively, and from the world around them" (153).[28] Moss supposes that an objective stance can be ascertained or, more likely, that *his* objective view of Mrs. Bentley's subjective "bitchiness"—a definitively female ascription—as adequately and summarily undermining a weathered Philip.

In moving away from ascribing "blame," and in focusing upon Philip, David Stouck, in his 1974 essay (prefiguring Keath Fraser's 1997 study of Ross), seeks to re-establish Philip at the core of the novel, although he does briefly note Mrs. Bentley's "power to castrate is still sharply voiced" (1974, 145). Stouck, in touching upon some of Ross's other fiction as well, draws the reader's attention to patterns of psychological accountability. In a discussion of Philip, for example, not only does Stouck submit that Philip's artistic imagination is narcissistic but that his "aversion for his mother extends to all women and accounts for the narrator's hopeless situation" (145).[29]

In flirting with psychological assessments, Stouck further asserts that Mrs. Bentley, lacking a first name, plays the role of mother and wife, since both Philips, adult and baby, are "bastards." That this line of reasoning implies that Mrs. Bentley would also be a grandmother to baby Philip is not discussed, revealing that psychologically-based surmising often overextends its capacity for sound contention. This becomes increasingly evident when Stouck asserts that Philip is self-absorbed (147), and through his desire "to

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[28] Margaret Atwood, in her 1973 essay "Ice Women vs. Earth Mothers: The Stone Angel and the Absent Venus," examines how women in Canadian literature represent "the culture of potential denied," especially as such women are often sterile or stone- (angel) like, rather than fully-rounded (characters). She asks, "*Are* there any real women? Or rather, are there any women in Canadian literature who appear to be leading normal married lives, having children who are not dead?" (237).

[29] Morton Ross, in his discussion of the canonization of the novel, calls Stouck's

imitate his father's sin and through the perverse logic of self-love, [he] is inevitably drawn to Judith who resembles him; his son is born of a narcissistic union" (148).

Moreover, I think that this play of mirrors, wherein a self-image becomes the object of desire, reflects the figure of the homosexual man who, in Freudian psychoanalysis, is obsessed with auto-eroticism.[30] I might also point out that this study of homosexuality-as-narcissism (however dated and contentious) was certainly available to critics, such as Stouck, as an analytical tool, embedded as it was in the collective psyche and vernacular. And despite the arguable worth of the application of Freudian analysis to literary fiction, Stouck's suggestiveness leads him to a dead end; Philip's "distaste for women" (146) is not explored in terms of the old psychiatric model of homosexuality as signifying, at its formative root, a fear of women.[31]

Did Stouck himself fear institutional strictures likely forbidding what would then be such bold examinations in 1974's Canadian universities? Did the idea of a gay Philip equate with an apprehension of causing upset within the accepted canonical critical discourses? Rather than follow the trajectory of an inquiry which may have escalated the normative pressure attendant upon Freudian theory, Stouck takes the "straight"-forward path. He imagines Philip's desire to be directed at what is the only acceptable object of the straight mind in Canadian letters, a woman, such as Judith. Stouck suggestively concludes with an observation of "Ross's use of a narrative voice which is external to the

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comment "a Freudian misprint" (1978, 194).

[30] For a more complete analysis of Freud's theories of pathological narcissism, see Kenneth Lewes's sympathetic treatment of the issue in *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Male Homosexuality* (especially pages 72-76).

[31] See my discussion of homo-narcissism in chapter five, wherein I examine the

psychology from which the novel has been created" (150): Stouck does not really clarify if he means Philip's or Ross's psychology, though perhaps in his elision he means both.

(iii) Erotics of the straight mind

The path which might have led Stouck to a different enquiry is travelled by Robert Kroetsch, who, in his1978 essay, considers the notion of the (presumably male) fear of women with an erotics of space. [32] Kroetsch's conceit of trepidation underpins his deliberation of a female erotics synonymously and suggestively giving rise to a fear of male emasculation. His corollary to an external penis signifying that which is "expendable"—and thus potentially emblematic of a physically vulnerable prairie explorer—is the "internal, eternal" vagina (22), a symbol of things more tangible and sedentary. Kroetsch deconstructs the signifier that is the penis, noting that it "verges on mere absence" (22), thereby proposing that its existence relies on a suppressed female "lack" (of a penis), which, in turns, means the vagina, a "mystery" defined as "a space that is not a space" (22). Kroetsch's expanding man simultaneously evinces external space—the world—which concurrently encompasses the transcendent and the universal

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application of Freudian theories to Ross's work.

[32] Despite rising gay and lesbian activism (and Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau's 1969 decriminalization of homosexuality), the situation of the homosexual in the Canadian critical imaginary did not extend, by the time Kroetsch's essay appeared, beyond ghetto publications and the odd drama or novel. For examples of literary "activism," see *The Body Politic*, a journal founded in 1971; John Herbert's play *Fortune and Men's Eyes* (1967), which in part examines the "perversions" of the Canadian penal system; and Scott Symons's *Place d'Armes* (1967), a homoeroticization of the burgeoning Canadian nationalistic impulse (of which Michel Tremblay's 1973 play, *Hosanna*, has been

and subsumes all differences and all distances.

On the other hand, Kroetsch assigns the female to an always contemplated past, a static sameness that is "the book," a closed item signifying "[t]he having spoken" (22). He intimates that the female realm of the internal, the private and the *signification* of ideas—not the expression of the ideas themselves—cannot hope to avail itself of the benefits of the male realm. He writes, "Most books contain the idea of world"; but he adds that, "Not all contain the idea of book" (22), contending perhaps that female self-consciousness and awareness, because not male, can never achieve the completeness of being-in-the-world, a badge worn only by men. Kroetsch's audience is itself rendered male, it seems to me, inasmuch as this is yet again a *male* inscribing female erotics. Foremost, his is a male celebration (of "making love in a new country") and determination of female sexuality: his critique effectively *overwrites* any independent (female) subjectivity one might otherwise contemplate existing within his (idea of) "female book."

The writing of the west, Kroetsch's new country, depends on an *unknown* intercourse of space and book. The question he repeatedly asks, then—"How do you make love in a new country" (22)—might be better written: What kind of new love is being essayed? If Mrs. Bentley is "pure talk, pure voice," and Philip "pure silence" (22), then the leading assumption must be that traditional roles have been reversed, or at least rescinded. The male "right" to possession of women can only occur now through "transgression" (22); if a woman such as Mrs. Bentley is capable of "contain[ing] the

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interpreted as a Quebecois counterpoint).

space [and] speak[ing] the silence, then she will be feared and if approached, must be reluctantly confronted" (23).

Since there appears to be no reason why this confrontation might be undertaken by another woman, Kroetsch idealizes the writer as male, since it is the man who orders the world that the woman statically embodies in "book form." Although the writer of the diary which constitutes *As For Me and My House*, one of the two books Kroetsch considers here, is clearly female, the controlling consciousness, at least, must then be male (which Ross is). Does Kroetsch propose an elision of Ross with his scribing creation, not only to indicate an unbridled male presence but to suggest simultaneously that Ross's (hinted at) homosexuality places him within and without the book? The essentialist nature of Kroetsch's horse/house (male/female) analogy, envisages the relation of women to or, rather, *through* men, but Kroetsch further complicates the comparison: "Philip Bentley is unhorsed into housedom" (23). But, not unlike Stouck, Kroetsch does not follow up on the insinuations of these (potential) gender-reversals he sets up.

Skirting the issue, Kroetsch goes on to describe the Bentleys' vacation at the Kirby ranch and, specifically, how this return to nature causes Mrs. Bentley, in her retreat from chaos, to retreat also from her aspirations to assuming a male role. But, too, at the ranch, Kroetsch finds that Laura Kirby represents a symbolic androgyny: she is a woman "who exists prior to all coupling" (24). But rather than pursue the implications of a "mannish" woman apparently unburdened by gender role expectations, Kroetsch merely locates her as a sexed body marked as female but not by female*ness*. He does admit, however, that

traditional models of making love—of writing the heterosexual tradition—are no longer adequate to the task at hand, "having been replaced by models of another kind. What that kind is, I've only begun here to guess" (27).

Despite his gesturing to reformulations of (the aforementioned) "unknown intercourse" to mean, potentially, sexual congress of a kind not literarily represented, Kroetsch's real desire, I think, is to (re)assert the historical pattern of male heterosexual love by *writing his own* un-self-critical erotics of space. Although he writes of the "fear of woman as the figure who contains the space, who speaks the silence" (23), before this woman or *any* woman can speak to this silence, Kroetsch answers with his own text. Similarly, Kroetsch sees Mrs. Bentley running back to the house after looking into the chaos, with her "binary categories collaps[ing]" all around her (24), but does not explore the potentially creative possibilities arising from the rubble of such collapse. So too does Kroetsch beat a hasty retreat to the motif of the dance, "the one occasion where men and women might freely 'act' together" (24). Despite his signalling of the likelihood of homoerotic pleasures, he does not venture into *that* chaos; instead, he takes pen(is?) in hand and writes, like Stouck before him, a "straight"-forward conclusion.

In her 1984 study of Kroetsch's *Badlands* and Ross's *As For Me and My House*, Jeanette Seim writes that Kroetsch, in his "fear of women" essay, "creates a sexuality of textuality" (99). She appropriates Kroetsch's *male* "fear of women" by locating a "*women's* fear of women. It is Mrs. Bentley's fear of *female* space, text, that prevents her from 'making,' 'giving birth' to a legitimate text" (103). Rightfully, Seim goes on to note that Ross's novel "moves from patriarchy to patriarchy" (104); but in her quest to prove

the immoderate nature of the male (including male critics of *As For Me and My House)* world, Seim asserts that the attention *in language* to references male "impl[ies] a self-cancelling activity on Mrs. Bentley's part" (104). In other words, Seim argues that Mrs. Bentley's inability to *narrate* using tools other than those available, such as the naturalized and all-encompassing pronoun "he," renders her very story as being about "a woman's fear (yet need for) form, definition, her flight from naming, calling into existence" (105). In a valiant effort to get rid of all prior "illegitimate" readings and restart critical assessments, Seim deletes Ross-the-author, leaving instead Mrs. Bentley's yet to be discovered "secret" diary (113).

It is this thread of the "secret diary" which Pamela Banting subsequently questions. Her reading of Kroetsch's essay subtly addresses not only Kroetsch's commandeering of the diary form but Ross's as well. In asking if masculine writing is an attempt to appropriate the feminine text, Banting reads *As For Me and My House* as "a text of desire because . . . its subject is that of the desired Other, and the erotic tension shows up in the language" (34). Using Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* to support her contention, Banting goes on to assert that "this struggle of the desiring self with language . . . makes [Mrs. Bentley] the artist" (36); and it is this artist, furthermore, who finds that her text "begins from a thwarted attempt to find a *direct* erotic relation to the man" (37). Because the only means by which Mrs. Bentley expresses amorousness is (written) language, she finds (or the reader finds) that *unmediated* expositions of desire are not possible. Banting notes that this struggle with language "accounts for a great deal of the ambivalence associated with this book" (35).

The discrepancy between word and intent underscores how Ross's particular ambivalence might be read as deviating, or more suggestively as "deviant" desire. But an avenue exploring how the ambiguity surrounding descriptions of Philip's "otherness" as possibly signalling "deviance" is not travelled. Banting's does not say how Philip comes to occupy a position of "Other," especially considering that being Other signifies marginality: does Banting mean, rather, simply the other person? Banting omits, too, a consideration of Ross as Mrs. Bentley's controlling (authorial) consciousness, a contentious and relatively unexplored point in an essay purporting to explore the pleasure of female textual erotics. She does question Ross's authorship in so far as his writing is "under erasure" (31), but she neglects to suggest why it might be that we should pay attention to Ross beyond the fact that he is male. Does she too follow the presumption of the straight mind, that Ross's investment in the novel, and in his diarist in particular, was that of male *heterosexual* authority? Or does Banting imagine that since such authority is either omnipresent or obvious, it does not require additional attention?

(iv) Risk of chaos

Other responses to Kroetsch include John Moss's 1982 reading of *Badlands*, which contains within it a take on gender in *As For Me and My House*. But although he eschews "fixed notion[s] of gender" (1982, 87) and "recognize[s] the unusual possibilities of representing opposing concepts of reality in terms of male and female gender" (82), Moss acquiesces to the notion that heterosexual desire does follow from chromosomal sex roles. He sets up a binarized notion of sex in order to demonstrate that Mrs. Bentley

transgresses her biologically ascribed sex role, further making a parallel between what he sees as the feminine (form, intuition, pattern) and masculine (linearity, logic, progression), both with attendant theoretical paradigms: the feminine is structuralist and the masculine is existential and phenomenological (84).

Beyond the evident problematics of ascribing a gender to theories, Moss does little to deconstruct the binary he relies upon; rather, he appears to have merely updated his earlier 1974 account of Mrs. Bentley as cuckold. Although he suggestively locates Philip as not possessing "the sufficient requirements of his gender to sustain the existential role she imposes on him" (85), Mrs. Bentley is, in the end, "usurp[ing]" him and living *through* him; Moss writes, "She needs to see him as an artist-hero in order to make sense of her own life, to make the mean conditions of their lives yield meaning" (85). Moss does make the interesting claim, however, that Mrs. Bentley's hoped-for structural transformation nevertheless depends on a "fixed notion of gender" (87), resulting in a continuing friction between the stereotypes she holds close and the gender instability she (unadmittingly) plays out.

Moss uncovers this gender turmoil elsewhere: the "affinity between Philip and Judith is reinforced by their similar defiance of gender conventions, while still being fully representative of their sexes, a point made manifest in their eventual affair" (89). A disruption of normative gender roles cannot transcend, it would seem, the biological "duties" attendant upon the demands of heterosexual reproduction, and so Moss intimates that the idea of "fixed gender" is freed only in so far as it will not trouble compulsory differences required by the necessity of (heterosexual) procreation. Frank Davey's 1983

look at sexual imagery, however, appears to underscore the anxiety likely arising from a consideration, such as Moss's, of ambiguous engendering. He displaces the possibilities of sexual otherness by essentializing the nature of all sexual feeling, locating it symbolically in the instinct of animals: "Sexual feelings are almost impossible to these characters, except through the symbolism of animals" (171). That such "impossibility" may represent the inadmissibility of homosexual feelings, or "other" feelings," results here in a rather overdetermined symbolic relationship, one which tacitly denies other avenues of human desires.[33]

Richard Cavell, writing three years before Davey, looks closer at the "impossibility" of desire, and does manage to find interesting correlations among humans. He writes that it is "the area of the erotic that euphemism functions most explicitly, revealing an undercurrent of relationships that are not spoken of directly at all" (1980, 27). But perhaps what was also not spoken of directly at all in Canadian letters were homosexual relationships; the subcurrent of Cavell's argument appears to strive toward new erotic possibilities in Ross's writing, but rather than guide us to an exploration of a Philip/Steve coupling, we get, instead, Mrs. Bentley/Steve. But finally, in 1983, John Ferres clearly argues for the prospect of homosexuality in *As For Me and My House*. In his essay on the men in Ross's novels, he briefly states that

> [a]s for the men in Ross, Oedipal overtones—their failure in heterosexual love, their need for mothering women, the lack of adequate father figures in their youth, for example—are present in the principal male characters, and

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[33] See the next chapter for a brief discussion of the dangers of the overdetermined nature

> may conceal a latent homosexuality which Ross does not overtly confront until *Sawbones Memorial.* (2)

There is no elaboration on this point, however, safely couched as it is within medicalized discourse, and within a journal which enjoyed both a very low profile and a short career. It is not until Fran Kaye's 1986 essay, then, that there arrives a fully developed discussion of the ramifications of gender instability in Ross's battling couple, who are audaciously compared with real life "role models," George Sand and Frederick Chopin. Kaye unmasks what has only been broadly established by Ferres, stating that "Philip's emotional and sensual passions are for other men, first for the father he idealizes and then for the boy Steve, who so quickly usurps Mrs. Bentley's place as Philip's companion" (103). Rather than read the allusion of an attraction to Steve as Mrs. Bentley's wished-for desire, as Cavell had done, Kaye interprets as it as Philip's.

In the light of criticism on Ross to this date, Kaye's formidable move appears bold, if not radical, especially since the author of the piece was still alive.[34] But perhaps, considering the changes in Canadian society in general—the increasing attention to the AIDS epidemic and its concomitant attention to homosexual lives, for example—the timeliness of Kaye's essay (now, at least) seems punctual. Nevertheless, the essay, despite its forthright announcement, leaves unanswered subsequent questions surrounding

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of the relationship between physical spaces and human beings.

[34] I do not wish to intimate that an author's sexuality may have anything to do with an interpretation of the sexuality of one of the characters in her or his works. However, given the still-controversial nature of the issue of homosexuality and the associations made through proxy, I would not underestimate, if I may generalize somewhat, the Canadian public's ability to (want to) make such an association (between Ross and his novel, in particular).

Philip's homosexuality beyond those *inferred* by the Sand/Chopin parallel itself; one wonders if Kaye's assumption of Philip as a gay man could have been made without reverting a parallel both outside the novel and safe within a distant history. Additionally, Kaye appears to locate Philip's homosexuality strictly with the family romance that is the Oedipus complex, only in this instance the implications appear to be generational; the linking of homosexuality with incest and a form of "paedophilia" is not investigated, and for this reason alone Kaye's assertion becomes troubling.

Regardless, it is important to note that both Ferres's and Kaye's works have been ignored since their respective appearances; neither of the arguments have been subsequently examined by any critic. Much overlooked, too, is Deanne Bogden's astute 1987 examination of how patriarchal discourse and its logical necessity of subjugating women reflects upon how the often examined short story "The Painted Door" is likely welcomed. Bogden writes that there is "simply no dramatic interest in the story unless that dictum [respecting women's subordination in sexual relations] is in some way contravened; and in order for it to *be* contravened, author and reader must first mutually accept the validity of patriarchal constraint on female sexuality, at least for the purposes of 'enjoying the story'" (21).[35]

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[35] In the same year, Kenneth James Hughes's essay on the signs in the short story "The Lamp at Noon, writes of the "sex role code": "that of Patriarchy in the form of Paul, who wishes to maintain a male dominance over a subordinated female, and that of a democratic Ellen, who wishes to have a relationship of equality with her husband" (173). Hughes explains that for each, maintenance of their respective codes conflicts with their love for one another, and he calls this "the double-double bind" (173). Of Ross's ideology, he concludes that Ross "asserts the values of democratic relations in the family and, by extension, in the larger society. . . . [H]e does not demonstrate the superiority of democracy over patriarchy, so much as assert it" (174). In tandem, Hughes does not

She does not, however, in determining how such enjoyment is atemporal and universal, consider that patriarchal constraints of 1987 may be quite different from 1939's. However, Bogden constructively indicates, I think, that such atemporality and universalization are naturalized by patriarchy, and what has changed is merely our understanding of it. Bogden's work forcefully proposes that oppressive discourses are deeply imbricated in readings of Ross; the enjoying reader accepts and "presupposes a universal human condition derived from male life experience and an aesthetic effect derived from male reading experience" (21). Similarly, J. M. Kertzer, in part drawing on Seim's earlier essay, advances Bogden's contentions, in stating that countering the patriarchal model "means to explore illegitimacy, understood as an infringement of law and legality. It requires, not a transference of control from male to female, but an abandoning of control through an encounter with unnamed chaos" (118).

Might this "abandoning of control" mean an abdication of heteronormative discourses and response? It is, I believe, in the very mention of chaos that the idea of homosexuality, the ineffable and unnameable figure in Ross's writing, finds representation. Criticism, by the time Kertzer writes in 1988, has progressed from ignorance of the issue, to perhaps a *cultivated* unawareness, to the implicative temper of abandoning legitimacy—that sanctioning constitution of the straight mind in Canadian critical history?—in favour of the heretofore unstated.

(v) Ross on the couch: Fraser as Freud

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follow up on the possibilities arising from this, so much as he asserts that the fact of it

Within the ongoing Ross criticism in the 1990s, there arises a discernible impulse both to collapse Ross into his fictional characters and to ascribe a kind of biographical impetus. Perhaps this inclination arose from Ross's admission to John Moss (in a 1973 letter not made public until 1992): "I do remember, very distinctly, thinking 'I'm writing blind,' just as a pilot sometimes flies blind, for I was trying to *be* Mrs. B., to enter emotionally into a situation in which I had never been" (qtd. in Cude, in Moss 1992, 60). In her reading of Ross's life, Helen Buss writes: "From Ross's comments concerning his own life, one can see that his intense involvement with his mother was similar to the emotional attachment between Mrs. Bentley and Philip, an education in realizing the self by living through the significant other" (50). Buss is careful not to read Ross as either Philip or Mrs. Bentley,[36] though she does advance the idea that Ross's writing as a woman, through Mrs. Bentley's diary, allows him to "avoid accusations of unmanliness" (51).

While biographical forms of criticism are valid, the elision of Ross's consciousness with a fictional one leads to the murky waters of psychoanalysis. Buss herself avoids this by being careful to locate Ross's novel as in some ways being a sociological document of the 1930s; she picks up on earlier allusions to Gustave Flaubert (Godard 1981, Cooley 1987) but does not venture to state that Ross might have been thinking: "Mrs. Bentley, *c'est moi!*" But considering Ross's near statement to this effect (in his letter to John Moss), the possible ramifications of Ross's life on his work are enticingly meaty.

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exists.

[36] In any case, it appears that Ross identified most closely with the character of Paul Kirby. See David Stouck's "Sinclair Ross in Letters and Conversation" (Moss, ed. 1992).

Foregrounding this shift to explore psychological motivation is Beverley Mitchell's astonishing 1987 examination of Mrs. Bentley's "clinical depression." The medical diagnosis undertaken went as far as to include actual professional opinion. Mitchell reports that "in the spring of 1985, Mr. Kenn Cust, Head Nurse in the forensic unit at Alberta Hospital, held a clinic on Mrs. Bentley with his staff, examining the symptoms which she presents in her journal. Their diagnosis was that she showed evidence of a paranoid state and psychotic depression—and their prognosis was a full-blown psychotic breakdown" (217). This prognosis simply reveals, however, the importance of locating psychoanalysis as a discourse which presumes it knows what counts as normal in order that deviance may be not only prescribed but, in the case of Ross, inscribed.

Before moving to a discussion of the two recent explorations of the psychology of Ross and the fictional characters of *As For Me and My House*, it is important to look briefly at the historical antipathy between gay and lesbian theories and psychoanalysis. Writing in 1972, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, reject Freudian psychoanalysis since it, as a form of capitalist-inspired social control, attempts to repress non-normative desires through the encoding of a given language of the family (especially as the family is viewed through the lens of the Oedipus complex). In the same year, Guy Hocquenghem attacks the tradition of the psychoanalytically-inspired notion of homosexual deviance by questioning the motivation of its framers: "What is described is at the same time constructed: we only find in the Oedipalised homosexual libido what we have put there in the first place. In this sense, the

analysis of homosexuality is at the same time the construction of the whole family romance, where it will have to go on living whether it likes it or not" (81). Wittig extends Hocquenghem's argument, in 1980, stating of Jacques Lacan, that he "found in the unconscious the structures he said he found there, since he had previously put them there"(23); and, in speaking of the experiences of lesbians, gay men, and women, Wittig avers as to how their testimonies "emphasise the political significance of the impossibility that lesbians, feminists, and gay men face in the attempt to communicate in heterosexual society, other than with a psychoanalyst" (24). Even recent efforts at rehabilitation of a heterosexually-favoured psychiatric model of (sexual) health admit such bias. Laura S. Brown, a lesbian therapist, writes that gays and lesbians still undergo psychiatric measure by the use of heterosexist template, which has been used "in the past to demonstrate our pathology and, more recently, to affirm our normalcy. Or we are simply categorized as an interesting variant of human experience, equal but still separate and always marginal." This tendency, she argues, "robs psychology of much of its ability to understand human behaviour" (303).[37]

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[37] I realize that the commentary from the 1970s likely reflects a marked reaction to the disapprobation of homosexuality which was prevalent up to the time the authors made these remarks, though I believe that such critiques—especially since their "targets," such as Freud, remain quite influential—are still in many ways valid and very important. Certainly, not all lesbians and gay men denounce the possibility of the utility of psychoanalytic theory; even Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her blistering critique of Kaja Silverman's psychoanalytically-inspired study of Henry James, despairs that "[p]sychoanalytic thought, damaged at its origin, remains virtually the only heuristic available to Western interpreters for unfolding sexual meanings" (1993, 74). But, again, as the example of Brown suggests, engagements with such theory tend to look at ways in which it can be reclaimed or renovated. See Lewes' *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Male Homosexuality*. For differing theoretical approaches concerning the application (or lack thereof) of Freud to (homo)sexuality, see especially the writings of Leo Bersani and

These criticisms affirm the need to contemplate the ways in which psychoanalytic discourses collude with heterosexual ones. So too is it significant to consider that these discourses were predominant throughout the years of Ross's writing and upbringing, years in which homosexuality was understood either as anti-social or as deviance, and was not sanctioned in any way by Canadian jurisprudence. Invariably, it is easy to conclude that any unbiased depictions of homosexuality, let alone positive ones, would not have made it into print; or if they did, such writing would be either heavily censored or accompanied by a claim of socio-medical purposes.[38]

Putting Ross on the couch may have the utility of probing how heteronormative discourses had helped to shape his day-to-day existence, his fiction, and the critical response to it. (And I will argue that the two examples of criticism which have in part psychoanalysed Ross do not attempt this.) Rather, could Ross, although writing within certain naturalized boundaries and conventions, be understood outside such practice by utilizing Michel Foucault's now-standard explanation of "reverse discourse," that homosexuality spoke "often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was *medically disqualified*" (101, emphasis added)? Looking into Mrs. Bentley's "void" in the manner in which Ross may have looked into the similar chaos of queer desires or

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Judith Butler, Silverman's *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, as well as Michael Warner's cautionary essay "Homo-narcissism, or Heterosexuality," in Joseph Boone and Michael Cadden's *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism* (1990). Thomas Domenici and Ronnie C. Lesser's anthology *Disorienting Sexuality: Psychoanalytic Reappraisals of Sexual Identities* (1995) is a particularly rich source for rehabilitative approaches.

[38] Some literature with homosexual themes did circulate in North America, though availability was problematic, as was the case of *The Well of Loneliness*. See Roger Austen's *Playing the Game: The Homosexual Novel in America* for a history of

"some sexual experience of a kind not normal"[39] has the potential to question and reveal the machinations of the straight mind of Ross criticism while simultaneously locating manifestations of homosexual subjectivity.

I will demonstrate this need through my reading Keath Fraser's psychoanalytic rendering of Ross's homosexuality as pathology. To call Fraser's *As for Me and My Body* biographical criticism (or even a memoir) requires overlooking the conjecture which bears the weight of Fraser's rhetorical "proof."[40] Additionally, the restricted glimpse we get of Ross's life—no history of friends or former lovers—concerns mostly the years in Vancouver when Ross, his health in decline, suffered from debilitating physical and mental ailments.[41] Fraser's text becomes a kind of doctor's office: Ross appears on the

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homosexual literature in that country.

[39] I am drawing on John Sutherland's homophobic attack against Patrick Anderson, in *First Statement*, in 1943. Sutherland's accusation of Anderson's literary representation of "some sexual experience of a kind not normal" (4) is telling of the circulating disapprobation of homosexuality. David Leahy writes that Sutherland's musings serve as an important cultural marker "of the pervasive social phenomena and discourses that psychosexually interpellated, colonized, and regulated homosocial relations between men in Canada and the rest of the Western world in the 1940s and 1950s" (133). See also Robert K. Martin's "Sex and Politics in Wartime Canada: The Attack on Patrick Anderson," in *Essays on Canadian Writing* 44 (1991). See also footnote 87.

[40] Fraser liberally uses conjecture—"seems" and "perhaps" are the more popular manifestations—wherein unbridled speculation runs in excess of sixty uses, not counting his reverting to the evasive second person—"you feel"—in the core arguments surrounding *As For Me and My House*. The result is often a recreation of Ross's history, as this example attests:

> And I've sometimes *wondered* if Jim's story about his father's fall wasn't an elaborate protective fiction he or his mother had worked up or embellished to cover something deeper, *perhaps* to do with some bodily abuse of him as a child he *may have experienced or simply perceived.* (82-3, emphasis added)

This surmise is set up in order that Fraser might then diagnose incestuous child abuse as having befallen a young Ross (83).

[41] In a letter to *Saturday Night* (May 1997), after the publication of an excerpt of Fraser's memoir, one of Ross's biographers, John J. O'Connor, adds clarification about what can

cover with a hospital band on his wrist; and inside, Ross-the-patient makes an appearance only to confirm the doctor's diagnosis.

Fraser's psychoanalytic rhetoric, wherein the conclusions sought are prescribed by the questions asked, demonstrates exactly the problem with such inquiries: a certain set of questions must be asked in order that, inductively, analogies and gross generalizations may be dressed up as reasoned or reasonable argument. Fraser attempts to anticipate and thereby diffuse the possibility of ensuing criticism both by shifting the burden of proof for what he does not know elsewhere and by stating that what he is writing is merely a parallel to any analysis: "Biography is supposed to complement, not define, the body of work. And a memoir's no place to parade one's ignorance of French theoretical fashion" (65). (Elsewhere, he refers to critical analyses of Ross's work as "gossip" (62).) This misleading point neatly side-steps Fraser's own use of psychoanalytic theories which have become invisibly intrinsic to modern lexical discourses.

If the "question" that is Ross becomes one of Ross's *subjective self-definition*, then Fraser's biographical approach ironically denies this possibility, as perhaps most biography does, since the notion of "self" is constructed upon surmise as well as fact, and it becomes arguable as to whether one's own definition of another is any more valid than someone not known to the author. Yet if the closest thing to autobiography that Ross essayed is his fiction, then Fraser's appropriation of the fiction to *fit* his biographical

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be known. He writes:

> The implications of Ross's failing health and daily dependence on mind-altering drugs are more significant than Fraser suggests, accounting as they do for so many of the hallucinations, delusions, fantasies, confusion between dream and reality, and blurring of memory and fiction to which Fraser alludes. (12)

musings also usurps any agency that Ross may have. The result is that the medium we encounter is solely Fraser's. It becomes most urgent, then, to audit what constitutes or informs the surmise. And it is that Fraser lets psychological imputation co-opt the "subjective" realm of Ross's life, thus rendering any notion of (Ross's) self-definition as always already framed within the medical terms set by Fraser-as-Freud.

Fraser makes use of Freudian theoretical discourses, which arise from and play to the straight mind, in his attempt not to better understand Ross but to pathologize the homosexuality which he sees as having retarded the dramatic development of much of Ross's writing (89). Fraser knows that he requires some kind of directive and authorial recognition in order to elevate himself as authority. Quoting from John Lehmann's biography of Christopher Isherwood (38), Fraser intuits that Ross, who had also read the book, was somehow signalling to him to do likewise and become biographer. Fraser thus finds he is able to ascertain that Ross was "at least relating autobiography, to a fellow writer whom he would like to impress enough (as I imagined it) for him to take note" (36); that Lehmann's book "had possibly prompted him [Ross] to speak out" (38); that Ross "might well have decided it was high time to fill in some of his own details of sexual encounters à la Isherwood" (39); and that Ross "seemed so earnest that I know all about his intimate life" (39). Fraser wonders: "Was he daring me to find him out?" (39), and concludes that Ross indeed was.

The biographical parallels between Ross and his writing, and *As For Me and My House* in particular, are dispensed with quickly, after Fraser cleverly attempts both to downplay and to play up his ensuing critique: "[A]ny attempt to read it the way I believe

it [*As For Me and My House*] needs to be read will make it seem far more complex than it appears on the surface to be" (43). What follows is an interpretation which quickly founders under the burden of speculation: Ross's mother is associated with the disapproving Mrs. Bentley, who in turn is identified with Ross (46), who in turn becomes Benny Fox in *Sawbones Memorial* (47). Ross is identified throughout the critique with Philip Bentley (see especially 19-20) and, by turns, with baby Philip (64), with Ross's father (51, 82), and later on, Steve (85), while Mrs. Bentley later changes into an "anti-Mrs. Ross" (51). Therefore, following these links, Ross is (and is not) his mother, his father, Philip Bentley, Mrs. Bentley, their infant son, and Steve. Fraser sums up by saying this house of mirrors is "not stretching it by much," adding that he knows "of no other Canadian novel in which the self of the author is quite so completely the centre of attention" (64).

But what is more troubling is Fraser dissembling of Ross's sexuality in order to find a "cause" for the novel's apparent dramatic failure. According to Fraser, Ross fails to make the homoerotic imagery "*matter* with respect to the plot," with the consequence that "Mrs Bentley and the author misread Philip's character and misjudge her own." The result is "a dramatically unsatisfying resolution"(53); the novel "fails to evolve the way its 'signals' suggest it might have if the truth of Philip's nature were voiced and his last real hypocrisy dealt with" (54). This deliberation is misleading not only in that the story would not be the one we have now, but in that Fraser's hypothetical surmises obtain a punitive and ahistorical assessment of Ross for not, in 1941's Canada, giving the reader a more candid and less sexually ambiguous Philip.

To help purchase his explication of Ross, Fraser foregrounds Ross's body as knowing more than his mind (37), and then makes this determination analogous to the text as knowing more than its author (57). Having equated the body with the book, Fraser is then free to liken Ross's infirm, pathologised *homosexual* body with the "artistic failing" (56)—that *homosexual* ambiguity—that is the book itself. What happens then is that Ross's aesthetic failure becomes intimately related *not* with Ross's artistry and *all* the factors that may have contributed to such failure but to a failure caused by (and that is) the figure of homosexuality.

Aside from portraying Ross as pessimistic (15) and narcissistic (23)—we are never shown any other side of Ross—Fraser uses terms such as "inverted self-deprecation" (10), which recall psychiatric labels of homosexuality as inverted self-regard. Though careful to locate himself as a circumspect married heterosexual, Fraser liberally sexualizes all of Ross's relationships with others—we never know if Ross is able to relate to people on other levels. These constructions of a rampantly promiscuous—and therefore dangerous—homosexual contributes to anti-homosexual repression. Hocquenghem cautions of the dangers of such ascription:

> The appearance of a recognisable or avowed homosexual directly results in an unreasoning panic terror of being raped among those around him. The tension in the confrontation between a homosexual and an individual who consider himself [sic] normal is created by the instinctive question in the mind of the 'normal' individual: Does he desire me? (55)

And apparently, Ross did desire Fraser, who surmises: "I think he hoped to discover *I* was

gay," stating that Ross "never quite came to believe that I, and any other male in whom he might be physically interested, were quite so straight we couldn't be tempted by the pleasures available in a male body" (18).

Fraser's positioning of himself, and "any other male" Ross might be interested in, as "straight" bears two interpretations: that Ross was only interested in heterosexual men; or, more likely, that Fraser's straight mind cannot conceive of Ross, a gay man, as having any other interest in men other than sexual. As Hocquenghem concludes, "[a]s if the homosexual never *chose* his object and any male were good enough for him. There is a spontaneous sexualisation of *all* relationships with a homosexual" (55, emphasis added).

One of Fraser's own obsessions is Ross's penis, the size of which he is sure to let the reader know, having seen it himself (40). In confirming Ross's stated admiration of his "big prick," Fraser can then tacitly identify a homosexual "threat"—Ross did desire Fraser, remember—as emanating from a narcissistic homosexual body, divorced as it is from the mind, concerned only with the gratification of desires symbolized by the penis. Since Fraser has stipulated that the body knows more than the mind, and that the body bears association with the text—*As for Me and My Body* is the finger which points—Ross's text has becomes *dis*eased as much as his own body is psychologically *diseased.* And the cure? It would appear to come from Fraser himself, telling us not only what is wrong but also prescribing the remedy (60, 79).

Since Fraser has "disappeared" both the author and his mind from the discussion, he cannot be said to be critiquing Ross but a book which belongs to the menacing homosexual body; here, the straight mind of this piece of Canadian literary criticism finds

its true target. Fraser moves from calling *Giovanni's Room* "overtly homosexual" (can a book be overtly heterosexual?) to reifying Benny Fox, a presumed Ross substitute, as the affected wreckage of his smothering, vindictive mother. In his reading of the put-upon, effeminized Benny, Fraser takes for granted that such effeminization does find a homosexual correlative; that this "environmental damage" (47), as foiling a normative masculinity (read: heterosexuality), somehow always results in homosexuality is a stereotype not questioned but, rather, tacitly reinforced.

Fraser never makes discrete the categories of homosexuality, incest and paedophilia,[42] problematically moving from one to the other in the last section of the memoir. In building a case for Ross-as-paedophile, he hesitates: "I'm not suggesting Jim's infatuation with 'boys' was quite an underage one" . . . but then proceeds to do just that: Ross "did have a curious tolerance for clergy and others accused in the press of abusing children" (80). This section, overflowing with hedging words, betrays Fraser's inability to grasp the homosexual nuances in contextualized uses of the word "boy." Ross's use of the term comes to mean, in Fraser's book, "what I took to mean" a near or pre-pubescent adolescent (80-81).

The only successful characterization is, according to Fraser, Doc Hunter in *Sawbones Memorial*: "And ironically he's straight, no underlying homoerotic yearning that one can detect to retard dramatic development, a kind of politically incorrect doctor

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[42] In his book *Ethics and Sex*, Igor Primoratz makes important clinical distinctions between paedophilia, ephebophilia and pederasty. He distinguishes paedophilia, in its "narrow sense" (134), by its primary concern with an attraction to pre-pubescent children; the other terms refer to (post) pubescent adolescents. Additionally, his clarification of the discrete nature of such terminology highlights the arbitrary nature of ages of consent, and

who isn't above taking advantage of women patients" (89). Going beyond his by-now unmistakable view of homosexuality as a pathological and figurative retardant, Fraser mines new territory, suggesting in his playful tone that abuse of women in the medical arena is merely a moral failure wrought by those who, we are lead to infer, do not agree with Fraser's own "politically incorrect" textual doctoring.

(vi) Reinscribing Oedipus

It would be an oversight not to discuss the perception that I am perhaps demanding of Fraser a "correct" reading of Sinclair Ross, that Fraser should not be taken to task for not providing a more positive critique. Indeed, Fraser may have reported exactly what he saw and heard; "family imprinting" (11) may indeed be evident in Ross's work. However, I would further contend that I have read Fraser not for something called "truth" but for his own "imprinting" or exhibition of the straight mind as he reads Ross.

If I may again bring to mind Robert Martin's comment regarding a "work's engagement with a culture's literary ordering of the world" (1993, 282), I would say that Fraser's classification reveals the fallacy that homosexuality, as an unsanctioned discourse, can only be revealed through its symptoms, that its presence, as far as Fraser's version of "Ross" is concerned, can only occur through self-authorising medical discourses like psychoanalysis. Homosexuality in Ross is not even afforded the luxury of becoming a *motivating* subtext, one which might reveal formative gay subjectivity in its discrete locations within (Canadian) history. For Fraser, it is the homosexual body that

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the importance of puberty as a line of definitional demarcation.

has ruined the text with which it exists coterminously, the author and his mind having gone absent.[43]

Signalling the commencement of post-revelation Ross studies, Valerie Raoul, in the Spring 1998 edition of *Canadian Literature*, locates Ross's influences in the French diary-novel of André Gide, focusing on "the comparative context of the diary-novel as a genre" (14). In describing the "fascination of Ross's text," Raoul inveighs "the need to assess not only what the main characters realize about their own sexual orientation, but also what their partner can be assumed to know about it, and whether they know what (or that) their partner knows" (14). This "need" apparently arises from the recognition of a homosexual subtext which Raoul argues "appears as textually overdetermined" (15).

Raoul underpins her argument, however, by referring to Fraser's memoir, stating that it has "put into question all the preceding studies [of Ross], by speaking openly and directly for the first time about Ross's homosexuality and its bearing on his most famous novel" (13). She, like Fraser, doubts Ross's initial claims not to have realized the possibility of a homosexual subtext in his work, and then proceeds to locate this subtext within the family romance of the "oedipal family" (16). Her engaging promise of an examination of "gender as masquerade and reproduction as counterfeit" (16) gives way to casting Ross and his characters on the couch. This attempt to stabilize the text with an application of an unquestioning acceptance of (heterosexist) Freudian psychology, with its attendant historical resonances of the pathology of homosexuality, simply reinscribes the straight mind as the governing discourse of Ross criticism.

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[43] See also my review of Fraser's book, "As For Fraser and Ross," in *Canadian Literature*

Raoul's literalizing of many ambiguous passages in Ross in order to force the subtext results in a simplification of the issue, signalling a normative response not unlike "We all know what that means." Raoul favours, moreover, a somewhat ahistoricizing deconstructive approach, wherein words, dislodged from their discrete (and temporally prior) material contexts, become signifiers in a realm of the free play of meaning. This, combined with the mining of subtext, results in some overdeterminations. For example, Raoul conflates descriptions of Steve, as an "adolescent boy" (18), with "young boys," "young men," and Philip's need for men (20), making no discrete allowance between them.[44] Mrs. Bentley's observation that Philip "likes boys" is thus dislodged from context so that any and all references to "boys" cannot subsequently mean anything else. Raoul then goes on to state (relying on Fraser) that to stand with one's hands on another's shoulders is "a gesture that Ross recognized as typically homosexual" (19), when in fact Ross's (retrospective) comment recognizes that Philip's gesture is, *in that instance*, inspired by his desire to touch Steve.[45] Philip's inability to dance is given to signal his avoidance of his wife, when in fact she cannot dance either.[46] Ross's use of "queer" is

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159 (Winter 1998).

[44] Perhaps for the sake of variety, Raoul uses a number of synonyms to suggest Philip's desire for other males. But in light of Fraser's argument for Ross-as-paedophile and Raoul's use of Fraser's arguments, I believe that careful attention to terminology is urgent, if not essential.

[45] Fraser writes that Philip's "possessive (and repetitive) hands on Steve's shoulders, as Jim told me, 'is a very homosexual gesture.' ('I knew it was when I wrote it,' he assserted, contradicting a later claim)" (59). I have read this as meaning that (assuming Fraser's reporting is both accurate in its recall and not meant to be semantically ambiguous) Philip engages in a *specific* behaviour with Steve, not that this is indicative of *general* homosexual gestures. Certainly, that such a gesture may indeed be "typical" or possess a certain subtextual currency, as a practice, among gay men is quite unfounded.

[46] Philip says: "I suppose, if I knew how, we could dance a little just ourselves out here"

also removed from its cultural context (20, 22) in order to signal not feelings of strangeness but presumed homosexuality. The overwhelming directive demands that any word's meaning must contain a subtext which is the "true" story.

The trajectory of this critical verve, one bespeaking Raoul's "need to assess" or Fraser's search for a "cause" for dramatic failure, fails to address from whence the need arises *unless* we understand that the impetus for the evaluation resides in *suspicion* and the negative historical freight such distrust embraces. The question being asked of Ross, then, does not concern what the text reveals so much as what it might be *hiding*. This inexpressiveness stipulates an interrogation bearing the weight of accusation rather than inquiry, one that rhetorically dresses up a need to assess with a negatively-flavoured charge not unlike "Are you not a homosexual?" This subtle casting of aspersions recalls Leo Bersani's charge of "pervasive cultural aggression that commands us, first of all, to say who we are and, second, to give our answer in the terms furnished by the question" (56). Bersani, in speaking of the skepticism surrounding examinations of the etiology of homosexuality, perceptively writes that "[s]ince the very question of 'how we got that way' would in many quarters not be asked if it were not assumed that we ended up the wrong way, the purpose behind the question has generally been to learn how we might best go back and right the wrong" (57). Certainly, a fixation with Freudian doctoring

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(Ross, 1993, 64). Mrs. Bentley cannot dance either, nor can Paul: "His dancing was about like mine" (1993, 128). Raoul errs in reporting (23) that Paul can. (Although I use a 1970 version of the 1957 original New Canadian Library reprint, I am here referring to the 1993 version of the 1957 text, which Raoul uses, since it corrects "if we knew how" to agree with 1941's "if I knew how." Of course, the irony is that, in terms of what we come to know of Mrs. Bentley and her poor dancing ability, the text would be more clear if Ross had used "we.")

offers many prescriptions to right the wrong.

Of course, it is incumbent upon any critic to construct a cohesive argument, and Raoul's reading of the subtext is in many way meritorious. But when Raoul states that the accumulation of these "innocuous" references is "insistent" (19), she fashions this insistence in order that the characters may go on in the essay to fit the straightjacket constructed by the Freudian psychology. Indeed, she states (relying on Fraser) that Philip's "narcissistic identification" with a younger self coupled with the absence of a father (19) not only "reflects Ross's own experience, but corresponds to the conventional Freudian pattern for male homosexuality, as does Philip's desire to relive his own life through a younger version of himself" (19-20). Raoul uses the "oedipal family" (16), "conventional oedipal model" (21), and "patriarchal oedipal triangle" (24) not merely as emblematic of the family in Ross's text but as underlying the very critical structure of her "t(ri)angle" conceit. The questions have already been asked; all that remains are finding patterns to reach the conclusions demanded by the interrogation.

Raoul guides the reader to Kenneth Lewes for critiques of Freudian theory (27), intimating that an examination of the Oedipus complex's potential problematics is not to be found in her own paper. But even Lewes, who is an adherent to Freud and avoids anti-Freud theorists in his work, admits that fully elaborated forms of the theory "are extremely complex and ambiguous. Their mechanisms are not straightforward and unidirectional, and the relevant component forces undergo a bewildering variety of transformations, repressions , and conversions into their opposites" (78). Tellingly, Lewes go on to state that the "only way we can continue to maintain that heterosexuality

is the natural resolution of the Oedipus complex is further to complicate its mechanism" (80).

Jonathan Dollimore offers a more succinct synopsis, with which I concur, of the complex's internal confusions. He writes:

> It could be argued that the susceptibility of psychoanalysis to being so imaginatively rewritten constitutes a limitation rather than a strength in that a theory which offers so little internal resistance to such diverse appropriations loses its force as theory. If so the historical challenge becomes again almost though not quite logical: rewritten thus creatively, the Oedipus complex becomes so multivalent an allegory of desire and its vicissitudes that it loses not only its original normative power but, inseparably from that, its explanatory power. (203)[47]

But such multivalence works in Raoul's favour, since anything can be read into and out of the complex. Rather than examining the contortions of homosexual desire as it may appear in Ross, what is rendered is a parody of homosexual desire which plays to Raoul's literary paradigm of angles, tangles, triangles, curves, and bends. In entangling Ross's characters in a multitude of "t(ri)angles" (13), Raoul essays rampant libidinal desires which, for them to work, depend on an economy of heterosexually-defined sexual difference found in the Oedipus complex.

Not only does Raoul blur distinctions between (homo)sexual *genitally-based* desire

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[47] Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit offer a similarly-themed argument:

> Freud's theories of desire perform a certain violence against the very order on which their exposition depends. And perhaps the only guarantees we have of their "authenticity" are the agitations, and doctrinal uncertainties and mobility by which they are irremediably exposed as passionate fictions. (vii)

and homosexual (self-)identification, she elides the complex as homo*sexual* triangulation which, in turn, is conflated with Sedgwick's homo*social* one. This, however, is a paradigm Sedgwick is careful to distinguish from solely same-sex genital interest and experience, in that no element of the pattern set by male homosociality "can be understood outside of its relation to *women* and the gender system as a whole" (1985, 1, emphasis added).[48] But Raoul presses on, writing that "a homosocial unit is created by Paul, Philip and Steve sharing a tent at the ranch" (23). This speculation follows the suggestion that Mrs. Bentley may be attracted to Judith and to Mrs. Bird (22)—is this another homo*sexual* triangle?

Because Raoul's open interpretation favours the endless play of signification, much of Ross's text is up for grabs. Philip's room in the parsonage, as an emblem of the closet, expands to include the parsonage itself, and in turn the bookstore that the Bentleys will inhabit (25); the closeting of all space intimated by this stretch renders the concept useless. Rectangles become triangles (26) not so that anything might be revealed about the homosexual subtext but so that subtext might be "inverted" to "fit" (and favour)

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[48] Sedgwick's now-familiar definition reads, in full,

> that concomitant changes in the structure of the continuum of male "homosocial desire" were tightly, often casually bound up with the other more visible changes; that the emerging pattern of male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality was in an intimate and shifting relation to class; and that no element of that pattern can be understood outside of its relation to women and the gender system as a whole." (1985, 1)

Sedgwick goes on to consider the possibility of female homosociality, but concludes that it has already been constituted by the continuum of various relations and bonds between women. This "apparent simplicity—this unity" among women, she states, "would not be so striking if it were not in strong contrast to the arrangement among males" (3), making it definitionally clear that male and female homosociality differ as much as male and female homosexuality.

Oedipal triangulation,[49] which again depends on a sexualisation of all relationships with homosexuals. Raoul appears to evoke potential homosexuality not to examine its thematic value or socio-cultural manifestations but, rather, to play to a notoriously shaky theory which has historically depended on disapprobation of its medicalized subject. Her favouring of triangulation, derived from Freud, reveals an investment in paradigms of the straight mind, which betray again and again their stake in understanding homosexuality only in so far as it may secure the foundations of heterosexual discourse. Moreover, a reliance on Fraser's conjecture as "fact" is troubling in that repetition of such conjecture establishes a worrying precedent for future Ross studies.

(vii) Everything new is old again

As the first of "future Ross studies," Timothy R. Cramer's 1999 essay embraces Fraser's and Raoul's theoretical attitudes (knowingly or otherwise) and, as a consequence, he dismisses the possibility of a "homotextual" subjectivity[50] in *As For Me and My House*

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[49] C. A. Tripp, in *The Homosexual Matrix*, reveals the absurdity often wrought by trying to force an understanding of homosexuality through using an application of the Oedipus complex. He writes:

> [I]t is still widely believed that a boy turns out to be homosexual when he identifies with his mother and becomes effeminate [...]. Or maybe he is really heterosexual after all, but is in love with his mother and wants to stay true to her, so he gives up all other women. Or simply by loving her too much he can have his sexuality prematurely aroused at a time when it has nowhere to go but toward other boys. Or if she is a mean mother, he comes to hate her, ever afterward disliking and distrusting all women. Or whether he loves her or hates her, on discovering she has no penis he develops a "castration complex" that forces him to turn to other males in a need for sex-with safety. (78-9)

[50] I draw on Jacob Stockinger's "Homotextuality: A Proposal," in *The Gay Academic* (1978) to define the homotext as one in which there exists "a dialectical tension with a hostile envirnoment" (139), regardless of what one might make of authorial intentionality.

in favour of, it would appear, "discovering" homosexuality as it may occur through an examination of ambiguity. Relying on a close reading of the novel, Cramer makes a clear case for Philip's gay desires; the manner in which he does, however, is both tentative and apologetic, coloured by a dramatic flair for overstatement and the hypothetical. The title of the essay itself, "Questioning Sexuality in Sinclair Ross's *As For Me and My House*," suggests either that it is sexuality which must be queried or that it is the category of sexuality that is questioning someone or something.

This titular ambiguity is symptomatic of Cramer's somewhat equivocal critical attitude. In exploring the likelihood of critical approaches which tend to universalize all sexual meaning as heterosexual, Cramer writes that this attitude "stems from the cultural phenomenon that once we have categorized someone as homosexual or gay or lesbian then that is all we are capable of seeing" (50). Cramer correctly intimates that this phenomenon is dependent upon, as I pointed out earlier using this assertion of Hocquenghem's, a "spontaneous sexualisation of all relationships with a homosexual" (55), especially as the reinforcement of "dominant heterosexual/abject homosexual"

This environment's tension is derived from the concurrent resistance to and acceptance of (literary) heterosexual normative discourses; concomitantly, the notion of a character's (possible) homosexual subjectivity may be assumed. "Homotextuality" might be, for example, revealed as (but not restricted to) a text's "ambiguity." Stockinger's edifying conclusion is worth quoting in full:

> "Homotextuality" is not so much a way to read texts as a way to reread them and to measure once again the disparity between the reactions that were implied or imposed and the substance that is really there. To that extent, the success of this proposal will not be measured by the acceptance of its title or even its principles but rather by the degree to which it enlightens mainstream and minority critics alike about past critical methods and the textual realities of literature. It does not propose that we fabricate significance where there is none; it seeks rather to *lessen the likelihood of facricating insignificance* where there really is *significance.* (148,

results. He rhetorically faults other critics for not seeing "the possibilities inherent in the novel when Philip's sexuality is called in to question," specifically the nuances which "directly relate to a gay or lesbian meaning" (50).

But Cramer's insistence on Ross's narrative ambiguity, one encompassing sexuality as well, ironically works against his premise. In his refusal to argue for any *specific* locations of homosexual identity, Cramer tacitly endorses a queer theorist position eschewing such specific sites in favour of a more generalized libidinal economy. In qualifying Philip's homosexuality as being *merely* a possibility (51), one that Philip himself is not likely aware of (52), Cramer uses homosexuality as generative of *possibility* but never in itself an *actuality*. Relegating homosexuality to a generative signifier, strictly a *fiction*, creates an atmosphere in which denials of a historically-located homosexuality can occur.

His reliance on Fraser's "factual" memoir (49, 50) prefigures his own reading of Ross into the novel, especially as it "puts the author in the unique position to explore publicly and safely feelings of intense love and desire for a person of the same sex, a love and desire that, for whatever reason, *cannot be returned*" (52, emphasis added). The oddly-phrased semantic elision of the person "telling the novel" with the author, suggests that Ross is loving Philip *as* Mrs. Bentley—again, a gay man trapped in a woman's body (though it becomes comical to imagine that Ross is mourning the loss of the love of a fictive creation). Of course, we may divine that Philip may represent someone Ross knows and longs for, but the lack of research into who this might be reveals that Cramer,

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emphasis added)

like Fraser and Raoul, is interested only in the *manifestations* of a problematic homosexuality—that *safe* and distant homosexual *fiction*—and not in any *thorough* biographical account which may more fully disclose the subjective nature of Ross's (homo)sexual feelings.

Although Cramer rightly asserts that Ross may "like so many others in mid-twentieth century North America, believe [that] a 'faulty' family configuration is a major cause of homosexuality" (53), he revives the spectre of the Oedipal triangle in order to explain Philip's (and Ross's) "sexual difference" (53). But even then, he does not get the prototype of homosexual-inspiring "dominant mother/absent father" correct, stating that Philip's mother is merely "shameful" (53), but not the domineering type that the psychological model requires. Like Raoul, he believes that this "fits into a pattern that suggests sexual difference," and that as a result of a "'faulty' family configuration" (53), Philip comes to view female relationships as "hindrances." However, that this supposition—Philip is "so indifferent when it comes to women" (54)—does not prevent his affair with Judith West is a contradiction Cramer cannot square. He quotes from Kaye to support a contention that Philip is emotionally and sensually attracted to other men (55), namely his (dead) father and Steve, though Cramer does not confront in any way the sexual aspect of the equation, an oddity in an essay apparently concerned with "questioning sexuality."[51]

The dramatic finale to Cramer's paper, in which he speculates on the dismal future that awaits a closeted Philip, recalls Fraser's own conjecture that Ross's novel achieves "a

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[51] Admittedly, Kaye does not make this attempt either.

dramatically unsatisfying resolution" (Fraser 53), and that the novel "fails to evolve the way its 'signals' suggest it might have if the truth of Philip's nature were voiced and his last real hypocrisy dealt with" (54). Given Cramer's—and Fraser's, and Raoul's—dependence on critical discourses formed on the basis of the straight mind, which either serve to pathologize or fail to locate homosexuality, the truth of Philip's nature cannot *be* voiced since it is not truly the subject of any of these critical inquiries.

(viii) Irony and homosexual subjectivity

I believe that these heteronormative orderings of Ross's writing, and *As For Me and My House* in particular, has rendered his texts as closets in which homosexuality is as safely fictional as much as the author is safely dead. The closet is always a construction of heterosexuality, since homosexuals, though living out a possibly antagonistic relation to society, do not see themselves thus enclosed, by which I mean, *bracketed off* from society at large (or, if they do, it is done so through the violence of prescribed heterosexual identities). Closeting, as David Van Leer observes, results in the ascription of homosexuality as "an internal problem of self-knowledge rather than an external one of social intercourse" (597). Casting homosexuality as a closet, as a private *internal* activity (and, as such, a "problem" forced upon the homosexual), allows the straight mind to ignore the socio-cultural context of homosexual subjectivity and those who may rise up against such elision: if homosexuality can be maintained as a "fiction," only evident in what it *signifies*, then its material manifestations can always be denied. In this way, the very novel that is *As For Me and My House* comes to be viewed, if I may extend my

analogy, as Ross's closet, a book wherein homosexuality might be read, duly noted, then placed safely back on the shelf.

This bracketing off and suspension of homosexuality arises precisely because, as Eric Savoy argues in his examination of queer irony, it is never the subject of the straight mind. Anticipating (in his discussion) van Leer's critique of Sedgwick, Savoy writes that "to theorize homosexuality as an epistemological crisis not susceptible to resolution is, if not to elide the 'gay man,' at least to shift *academic attention away* from that affirmative [gay studies] position" (1994, 138, emphasis added). I would draw on Savoy's argument to suggest that examinations, such as those discussed above, are necessarily predicate themselves on the denial of any homosexual subjectivity that may be evident in Ross, since to privilege that subjectivity would bestow upon it a legitimacy not currently evident within Canadian literary institutions.

I will return again to the uses of irony in Ross to explain how the duality inherent in this rhetoric gesture works against homosexual identity and subjectivity. Savoy writes that "irony is constituted by an arch doubleness that collapses binaries, fragments coherence, undoes subjectivity. Irony's power lies in its ability to undo, to disperse rather than to locate" (1994, 139-40). Again, this dispersal is most clearly evident in Fraser, Raoul and Cramer since they are, so far, its strongest proponents. Fraser, in collapsing Ross with the characters in the novel, can then easily manipulate and match up even the most disparate associations. Of course, the irony that Ross wrote "*like* a woman" can then become the irony that Ross wrote "*as* a woman," leading to reification of the (sexologically-derived) stereotype of the gay male as a "female soul in a male body."

This enlists Ross in performing a kind of narrative drag, one that is analogous to his acquired female soul—a deterministic notion of equating homosexuality with a desire for the marker of femaleness attendant upon having a female soul: a woman's body—and which plays upon an essentialist notion of sex and gender as always biologically site specific. And since Ross's own homosexuality—simultaneously signified by the diarist Mrs. Bentley, or her husband Philip, or Steve, or Paul—can be said to cohere everywhere, it then coheres *nowhere* in particular.[52] Rather, it serves as a kind of free-floating signifier, a wand that Fraser uses to bestow, as he sees fit, biographical "meaning" upon the characters as they parade by in the novel.

Raoul similarly collapses Ross-the-author with Mrs. Bentley the diarist, beginning with the assertion that since "a mediatory pre-text is conspicuously absent in *As For Me and My House*" the result is "a straightforward case of suspension of disbelief" (15). But the trajectory of this line of argument becomes clear in the assignment of a literal consciousness to Ross's fictional diarist: "Mrs. Bentley never recognizes that she has produced a novel" (15). But Mrs. Bentley is fiction; she neither can nor cannot be made to have this recognition (unless it were part of the novel); however, Ross, turned into a stand-in for Mrs. Bentley, might. Additionally, Raoul interprets the absence of a narrator, editor or auditor from Ross's work as a sublimated desire to be identified *in* the text. Again, Ross must be enlisted as not writing *like* but *as* a woman, enabling Raoul to position Ross within the novel, moving him from point to point on her triangle.

Or, rather, it is Ross's *homosexuality* that is suspended and freely moved from

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[52] Savoy writes, "[B]y diffusing homosexuality to locate it *everywhere*, it ceases to cohere

point to point so that the always-fragile Oedipal triangulation might work: homosexuality, by remaining in permanent antithetical suspension, shores up heterosexual identity. In a manner similar to Fraser's equation of the body and text, Raoul uses homosexuality (the emblem of Ross's body) for what it can signify in the novel (the text) and, hence, in her essay. This manipulation of authorial subjectivity uses the author's homosexuality to draw him into the text (again, a gay man in a woman's body). But once that has been accomplished, that specific subjectivity is either dismissed or is accessed, with the result that a parody of homosexuality takes place, a Keystone Kops version of Ross's characters unwittingly sleeping with one, then the other, or whoever else might be placed on a point in the triangle. The irony of showing "inversion as the right angle" (26) is wrought at the reconstitution of fictional characters who serve no purpose in the novel except that they play, like puppets, to anti-homosexual tropes such as the Oedipus complex. The conclusion which follows is that these machinations cannot result in any edification of homosexual subjectivity but must engage the relentless *denial* of it in order for the argument to work. There are no homosexuals in Raoul's or Fraser's or Cramer's—indeed, any of these—essays [53] because they cannot exist in delineations formed on the basis of the straight mind in critical theories.

Having foregrounded the limits of critical thinking delimiting Ross, I wonder if indeed my own analyses are inflected by strategies entailing the "straight mind." After all, having grown up, as most children do, as heterosexual, could I ever hope to escape

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anywhere in particular" (1994, 136).

[53] See Robert Martin's assessment of Sedgwick's *Between Men*: "[T]here are no gay men (let alone lesbians) in *Between Men*" (1994, 126).

that mental environment? Likely not. But I also must clarify that I do not wish to suggest that *being* heterosexual is detrimental, an accusation I risk in discussing *certain* critical attitudes. That said, I hope to demonstrate through my own forthcoming critiques of Ross's fiction that my resistance to the "regimes of the normal" *necessarily* engages the straight mind, as it inevitably must; my homotextual critiques are as much engaged in "the world" as are Ross's homotextual fictions.

Chapter Four

Short Fiction before 1945

When Ross's writing made its public debut in 1934, considerations of "gender normativity" or a possible homosexual subtext resounded nowhere in public discourses, except perhaps in more oblique and specialized fashions, as evinced under the rubric of psychologically measurable "deviance." The women and men living and working on the prairie which provides the (rural) setting for all Ross's short fiction prior to 1945 were likely more concerned with the land. In the academic field, the study of English-language fiction, as practiced in (and imported to Canada from) American and British universities, was an emerging field not specifically given over to questions of gender role adherence and marginal sexualities.

The "grounding" of Ross's early short stories in the prairies find, in these modern times, an especially ironic correlative in the discourses (re)examining the "grounding" of sexuality in the early part of the 20th century. Psychoanalysis and sexology, as discussed earlier, were both formative of and contributors to the enforcement of social norms concerning the understanding and "display" of sexuality, especially as it was (and still sometimes is) rationalized as undisputed human essence.[54] within this framework,

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[54] Vernon Rosario offers a succinct distinction between the theories of sexuality as "essence" or as "social" construction. He writes:

Essentialist theories propose that homosexuality is a biologically determined,

"desire" means desire for the opposite sex, and gender is strictly and indivisibly associated with biologically denoted sex, the "ground zero" of desire and social gender expression.

Ross's literary sites of desire are indeed very much grounded in the land: in the first instance as formative and revealing of the psycho-social characters of the men and woman who work the land and come to internalize and reflect its often harsh nature; in the second instance, as revealing of an essentialist understanding of the sex/gender system.[55] In this chapter, I wish to explore how Ross's literary representations of both instances, as they may occur simultaneously in his stories, underscore acceptable narrative discourse—what is in plain sight—while being suggestive of other (then-emerging) sex/gender configurations—the perversion of sight.

(i) (Un)familiar gender roles

Ross's first published story, "No Other Way," appeared not in a Canadian "little

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objectively detectable, erotic orientation that can be identified in all cultures and throughout history, albeit under diverse behavioral appearances and at different prevalence rates. Constructionist theories propose instead that "homosexuality" is a concept and a phenomenon that arose relatively recently in Euro-American cultures to describe a specific type of person and that person's erotic interest in others of the same sex. Homosexuality is thereby theorized as historically and socially contingent. (6)

[55] Stockinger, in his study of homotextual space, perhaps exemplifies such essentialist understandings. He contends that the open countryside, as a possible space for the marginalized homosexual, is as likely a place which offers freedom from oppression as is closed (closeted) spaces, since "it marks both his [sic] ostracism and the chance to recuperate his 'unnatural' love in nature" (143). Yet the importance of such comments, especially as they may apply to Ross's prairie characters, is that such "grounding" of sexuality, as problematic as it may seem to those who favour accenting socially influenced determinations of behaviour, were more likely than not constitutive of how

magazine" but in England's *Nash's Pall Mall*, in October 1934. The story's title, signalling an inclination to determinism, grounds what may have been, for Ross, the social imperatives of locating and understanding sex, sexuality, and gender as derived from a naturalized edict of "biology as destiny." And through this brief reading of the story's title, I wish to contend that Ross invariably draws upon the then-circulating discourses of a circumscribing and conservative nature that likely shaped his imaginative life.

Ross's early stories, written and published prior to 1945, are all located within the prairie landscape he personally experienced, and thus likely reflect his understanding of familial farm life, especially the ways in which such an existence entailed the curbing of one's emotional and material desires. Hatty Glenn, the main character of "No Other Way," invites the reader's compassion, in so far as the omniscient narrator sympathetically frames Hatty's emotional upheavals and associates her with a lack of a more captivating feminine physical "abundance" and social essence. Yet Hatty appears also to call contempt unto herself, passively assuming that, for her, there is no other way but to endure the drudgery of farm life that has greatly reduced her physical attractiveness and hardened her demeanour. Her husband, Dan, having spared himself years of hard labour, remains handsome and aloof, thereby drawing (and coyly responding to) the attentions of the undertaker's wife, the glamorous Mrs. Bird.

Ross's subversion—likely unintentional, though nevertheless suggestive—of the codes accentuating (and intensifying) easy gender identification begins here, with his first

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Ross himself may have understood (his own) homosexuality.

story. As Hatty works the turnip field, the wind whips "her light print skirt close around her legs, and the tattered sleeves of Dan's old sweater flap[s] crazily in the wind" (24). Hatty's male drag, though perhaps born of necessity, highlights an inversion of traditional farming roles allocated according to gender normativity: Dan either shuns or avoids manual labour and prefers to be housebound, whereas Hatty works the fields. Her drag literalizes the masculinist claim to "wearing the pants" in the family, although her appropriation does not extend to financial control.[56] Ross perverts stable gender coding within a naturalized setting that is farm life: Hatty performs the necessary work; in turn, Ross enacts this coding within permissible narrative form, with the result that he effectively demonstrates how willing society—within (and likely without) the story—is to forgive transgressions such as Hatty's as long as maintenance of the *semblance* of the family unit is *seen* to be (literarily) upheld.[57]

But this is an incomplete family—there are no children, though Hatty's progeny is commensurate with the fruits of her labour: she grounds her affection in the farm, which bestows the material wealth her husband controls. That they are productive at least in a

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[56] I do not wish to suggest that because Hatty wears men's clothes her gender is *totally* construed through the clothes she wears. As Judith Butler argues, "[D]rag is not unproblematically subversive. It serves a subversive function to the extent that it reflects the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of effecting that exposure. But there is no guarantee that exposing the naturalized status of heterosexuality will lead to its subversion" (1993, 230). It might be argued, then, that Hatty's drag is ineffectual because her husband is still very much "in charge" and that no one, in any case, associates her with being a male so much as she is ridiculed for not being more of a woman, a slight yet important distinction.

[57] In Ross's one novel from this period, *As For Me and My House*, the diarist Mrs. Bentley understands very well the prohibition against a woman doing a "man's" work, and so is careful not to let the neighbours know that she has been doing maintenance work

capitalist sense appears to be a sufficient display of conforming to a productive role; and since such capability adequately serves as compensation, they are forgiven for not being *re*productive (in so far as no one in the story appears disturbed by their childless state). Hatty's irritation at not being attractive to her husband therefore must remain secondary to her love of the farm, if they are to project success as the *representation* of a family. Hatty does protest: "For nearly all of the twenty years that [i.e. that she is a woman] was what she had been trying to make Dan realise" (28); however, her remonstrations are rather weak. Her biological destiny as *essentially* a woman—that she *approximates* one—keeps her closely tied to the natural realm of "mother earth." In my contextual use of "essentially," however, I purposefully want to play upon its contingent nature, recalling its hedging synonym of "more or less" or "just about." This imprecision suggests that she has misread her determinism—that "no other way"—and has unwittingly and paradoxically taken on, in part, a man's role. Ross links her role as (male) labourer with the social expectations inherent in being gendered female, and Hatty's revealed self-doubt and inner conflict underscore the formative rumblings of gender trouble.

The subversions that are Hatty's gender uncertainties find substantiation in her reprimand that she wants Dan to realize "that his chore*boy* was a woman" (28, emphasis added). It would seem Dan does not want to facilitate this recognition. His aversion to what Hatty's gender confusion (signalled by both her masculine bearing and "manly" job) may prescribe, likely results in the placing of his affections with Mrs. Bird, a woman marked by discernible, established gender coding, namely feminine attire. When the two

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Philip should have done.

Glenns attend a dance, Hatty's recognition of Mrs. Bird occurs, tellingly, not through facial identification, but through clothes. Through the crowd, Hatty first sees not another woman but "one dress so beautiful that she choked. Red satin, flashing through black lace like points of fire. When she was a little girl she had dreamed about growing up to be a fine, handsome lady and wearing just such a dress" (30). This attention to the *signals* which presumably constitute gender clarity foregrounds the idea of gender as performative, indeed not unlike a thing one wears.[58]

Hatty, compelled to perform neither binarized gender role with any resolution, finds solace in what are apparently the unspoken comforts inherent in an adherence to (biological-based) gender determinism, underscoring the idea that there is "no other way" for her, neither agency nor transformation. However, her sentimental attempts to discern what she actually feels about her husband undercuts this false solace. She presumes that her intellectual endeavours might actually speak to an idealized feminine "warmth" she feels she lacks, but this enterprise leaves her susceptible to an encounter with peculiarity. Ross repeatedly uses the word "queer" to describe Hatty's ensuing unease in an undone resolve to assert herself in front of Dan. I will not take the word out of context to denote "homosexuality"; however, "queer" does find currency in its use as signifying otherness (which, of course, may nevertheless signal a historical understanding of homosexuality):

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[58] In writing about gender performance and drag, Judith Butler might have indeed been writing about Hatty: "To the extent that gender is an assignment, it is an assignment which is never quite carried out according to expectation, whose addressee never quite inhabits the ideal s/he is compelled to approximate." Butler adds that drag "serves a subversive function to the extent that it reflects the mundane impersonations by which heterosexually ideal genders are performed and naturalized and undermines their power by virtue of effecting that exposure" (1993, 231). Might Butler's definition of gender be

Hatty senses that she is beside herself, paradoxically coherent as a person yet estranged to "natural" feeling. Although Ross may have used "queer" as psychological shorthand for Hatty's strangeness, it does find a correlative as marginality, as well.[59]

The peculiarity of her strange feeling—to act not on "instinct" (27) and fight with Dan—"had never happened before" (26), and in an effort to understand it, Hatty assumes that within herself there must be a latent feeling of love for her husband. Consequently, Hatty determines she must face the threat she believes exists in Mrs. Bird and so she accompanies Dan to the dance. Yet Hatty soon realizes she is out of her social depth: "As if trailing [Dan] to the dances would be of any more use than the nagging! As if anything that she could do would make any difference!" (31). The dissipation of both an impetus to rivalry and a need for social grace reveals that Hatty's queerness derives its formative energies in her concentrated and perpetrated misunderstanding of the roots, perhaps, of gender confusion. Might her dream to be a "handsome lady" sublimate a desire *for* that lady? Is the strangeness she feels another Ross shorthand for the literally and *literary* inadmissible sign of homosexuality?

Her social discomfort melts away after the dance, in the stable at home, where she is "soothed by the warm, drowsy quiet"; there, she milks the cows, "her fingers gripping the udders with firm, capable intimacy," finding that "[t]his is where she belonged" (32). Nevertheless, the feeling of strangeness returns upon going to bed and finding Dan asleep, with an expression of "quiet, manly firmness" (32). Her ensuing "queer uncontrollable

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extended to parallel Ross's *narrative* "performances"?

[59] The use of "queer" appears selectively elsewhere in Ross's work: in *As For Me and My House* (1941); "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" (1947); and "Jug and Bottle" (1949-50).

thoughts" (32) she interprets as an unwarranted but abiding love for him; but, I would warrant, this sensation arises rather from jealously in seeing that Dan—the man with "the square, massive shoulders, and the smooth, young face" (27)—has, unlike herself, achieved compatibility (or at least a truce) with his socially ordained gender role. True, Ross is coy about the reasons for Dan's affiliation with Mrs. Bird: Dan's public flirting with her may be his own attempt to conform to a heterosexually prescribed social role, one which serves him publicly and privately. But despite his aversion to labour, he has profitably utilized his more intellectual abilities to manipulate the farm's increasing fortunes, commensurate with his ability to project a stature as "manly" and, thus, in control. Hatty's struggle is not with the passions of others but with her own disquiet in having forged a life on the peripheries of the socially "acceptable"; she continually runs after stray cows or displays social ineptitude at the dance, suggesting that she is on the verge of being out of control.

When, in the climactic instance of surrendering control, she finds herself contemplating suicide before the well, Hatty again relies on "some defence instinct, born, perhaps, of a little unconscious vanity" (34) to shore up her belief that this vanity had given way to habit. Her deterministic belief that "[t]his was the only way" (34) underscores her apologetic prayer (with its nod to biological essentialism), that she hadn't been "a better *woman*" (35, emphasis added), when she is actually feeling sorry that she, in thinking of her relation to Dan, had not been a better *wife*. Her self-castigation, in her presumed failure in her biologically and socially assigned roles of "woman," "female," and "feminine," conflates with her social-role abjection: she has also failed in playing

"wife." Her ensuing attempt to goad Dan into chasing the loose cows—"I'm only your wife" (35), she proffers without any real conviction—results in his sneer, darkly revealing that he quite clearly understands that she has failed in *all* roles: social, biological, and (reproductively) sexual. Hatty tries further to bait Dan, calling on him to "be man enough" (36) to do the farm work she undertakes, but he simply ignores her. When she decides to disregard the cows and return to the house—the female realm—she asserts that she will show Dan "that she could play the lady too" (36). Ross's use of "too" calls forth the suggestion that she has already engaged in playing the role of "the man," though Ross likely means to speak to the idea of Hatty's willingness to be a "refined woman."

But does the use of "too" also mean that Hatty thinks she could play the role of "lady" *as well as* or as *good* as the housebound Dan? Has Dan, in not fully playing his assigned gender role as tiller of the soil, forced Hatty into assuming the role, again, of "wearing the pants" while he plays the paradoxical position of "lady of the house"? And does this reveal that Dan, in his transposition of traditional male and female (gender) roles, has desires other than those sanctioned? Nell's husband, George, in the story "Nell" (1941), while not a (representationally conflicted) "(wo)man of the house" in the manner Dan is, possesses features not dissimilar to Dan's. A "neat sharp-looking fellow" (50), he is also "slight and good-looking, with fine, rather delicate features that in contrast to [Nell's] own big bony face made him seem adolescent still, even a little effeminate" (51). Clearly, the subtext evokes an identification with (sexual) otherness which may be read as homosexual, in the case of either spouse, and Ross essays the couple as perhaps a more marked version of Dan and Hatty.

Nell, awed at her husband's fastidiousness, understands that their marriage arose (like Hatty and Dan's) from economic and not romantic desires: "Some of the neighbour girls had hinted he would have never married her if she hadn't come in for her father's farm and threshing outfit" (51). George's marriage is an arrangement which apparently favours him, since he (again, like Dan) is the one who chiefly controls the financial strings. Nell, physically similar to Hatty, complains too that her husband ignores her, that her husband treats her with (comparable) disdain, spending every Saturday night in town playing cards with other men.

Compelled to help provide for the family by working the farm, Nell possesses or has thereby *come to possess* masculine attributes which outweigh even those of her husband. The blending of acquired cross-gender (male) signs—her masculinity—with biologically determinate "natural" ones—her biology-as-destiny—renders Nell, as it were, "essentially" confused. She is "a tall, spare, raw-boned woman, with big hands" (49) who is physically weathered by work. Nell and George's son, Tommy, bears corporeal resemblance not to his father but to Nell's own "loose rangy build" (49). That Tommy is perhaps more feminine than she would like summons, in Nell, "a dull unformulated kind of ache, always with her" (50).

Or does this "ache" indicate that Nell fears that her son is, like her, *masculine* but only through an *appropriation* of such masculinity? Tommy, in other words, may resemble a male but his gender attributes are not "naturally" occurring, as they would be in a more essentialist understanding of sexual "grounding." Nell's woes appear to arise from her surveillance of (the lack of) masculinity around her, especially as she passively

serves as a filter for it: we read the perversion of masculinity (and all that that may portend) through her (visual) translation of it, suggesting that her insight, that "unformulated ache," is not a misreading but a reading that cannot see straight.

Nor do other sightings of Tommy find agreement: George remarks to Nell that when the boy sleeps, "he's the very spit of you" (50), though a shopkeeper later remarks that "such a fine big fellow Tommy's getting to be—the very image of his dad" (53), but a dad whose "rather delicate features" render him "a little effeminate." Tommy appears to embody a variety of gender attributes: in the private sphere, Tommy's parents agree that he resembles Nell, the masculine woman, whereas in public, social convention dictates, it would seem, that Tommy be understood as deriving or inheriting his most essential biological features—physical appearance—from his paradoxically feminine father. In the manner that prairie society "forgives" Hatty's transgression as long as a *semblance* of a family unit is maintained, Nell's family, because it at least *appears* to be a family, gathers social approbation.

Such esteem might, conversely, mask the public's anxiety about how it (the public) perpetuates the "lie" of familial "normalcy" in order to suppress the contingent otherness it so desperately needs. What the family "looks" like recalls George's attention to Tommy's looks, an observance which compels Nell to interpret George's "spitting image" remark, oddly, as a call to modesty. To that end she resolves to ensure that the bedroom is dark before undressing:

> She had never thought much about looks till then, neither Tommy's nor her own. But at night now, if George was already in bed, she blew out the light before

> undressing, so that he couldn't lie watching her. And Tommy she was forever harping at, telling him to brighten up and be like other boys. George himself was such a neat, sharp-looking fellow. It was a dull unformulated kind of ache, always with her, that Tommy hadn't taken after him. (50)

In this rather puzzling paragraph, the narrator moves swiftly from the idea of attractiveness, to modesty in undressing, to an invocation for Tommy to be like other boys, to George's natty (yet dandy) appearance as somehow signifying role model emulation, to the regretful (re)affirmation that Tommy didn't take after George.

Ross's multifocal paragraph tries ardently to skirt the arena of sexuality, leaving us with an image of an undressed Nell. Ross diverts our attention from the idea that her own attempt at modesty is perhaps characteristic of what does *not* take place in the bedroom, that she may not think she is "woman enough" for a husband who conversely seems not to appear "man enough." She transfers her unacknowledged corollary—that her own husband may not "be like other boys"—to Tommy; but an image of George-the-man interrupts, resulting in that "dull unformulated kind of ache," that Tommy does not appear to be taking after him. Or is it? Might it, in the end, be that she aches because he takes not after one or the other but *both* of them, socially caught as he is (and they are) between the gendering imperatives of masculine and feminine, neither of which are visually exact? Certainly, if we are to believe the shopkeeper's judgement of Tommy's resemblance to his father, Nell's jagged train of thought might be better understood as an effort at self-deception.

As a perpetrated perversion of insight barring greater exploration of otherness,

Nell's story might be understood as indicative of the mobilization of heterosexual narrative, the only discourse available to Ross, and one which effectively shuts down further inquiry: Nell's internal narrative snarl appears to signal Ross's putting on narrative brakes. Judith Butler questions these circulating heterosexist discourses as being closed to further investigation. She asks: "Which possibilities of doing gender repeat and displace through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation the very constructs by which they are mobilized?" (1990, 31). If Ross mobilizes *literary* constructs to signal Nell's *internal confusion*, he succeeds in coding gender confusion through an imitation of random thought; the internal confusion of Nell becomes the literary mark—that very paragraph—of gender inexpressiveness.

Nell puts aside her perplexity and takes it upon herself to make the unusual decision to go into town with her husband. She imagines that George might call her a "bitch" (52) for doing so, and indeed he appears displeased with the notion that she may be impinging on his evening of fun. A creeping tone of misogyny, here masked as realism, come to evince (in Ross's narrative patterns) characterisations of women who, as dissatisfied complainers, do not measure up to a male standard of make-do stoicism. Nell and Hatty are somewhat naive in their lack of worldliness yet both are often reduced to ciphers of unwarranted and distressed *needy* woman. Mrs. Crane, the shopkeeper's wife, is "a fat, ageing woman, with dry red hair like a cheap wig, and small eyes peering coldly through her automatic smile," whereas her husband is "a tall, benevolent-looking man" with a pleasant demeanour (53). Ross's realism certainly plays to a rather non-idealized version of prairie life, but the small measure of sympathy afforded characters such as Nell

or Hatty is spare compensation for the underlying point of view that women passively and inwardly, if not actively, make unfair demands upon their husbands.[60]

In tandem with her discomfort with her (stingy) husband, Nell is uncomfortable in the company of other women and avoids them. Tommy, meanwhile, whimpers and clings to her skirts, and refuses to go alone to get candy; she threatens him with the possibility of George's retribution, but ends up accompanying him to the store anyway. Nell, apart from feeling socially awkward and disenfranchised, finds herself restricted to the role of consumer when in town. There is nothing for her to do but shop at Crane's, the locus of activity for women whose husbands have dropped them off on their way to the male domains of cards and drinking. When the dawdling Nell says that she "couldn't afford to make Mrs. Crane impatient" (54), the word "afford," in denoting both social mores and economic happenstance, comes to signify how deeply consumerism inflects Nell's limited social strata. Even then, it is George, not Nell, who controls the purse strings, suggesting that, though not visibly conspicuous, his influence is pervasive. This is but one instance by which he can express his distaste for her by manipulating the institutional codes which place him as arbiter of family socio-economic needs and related desires.

Indeed, George's disdain for his wife culminates in his driving off home without her and Tommy. Though Nell tries to save face by suggesting to the concerned store clerk that George's conduct was all a mistake, she privately understands that his actions stress the supposition that he would likely rather be without both her and Tommy. Ross,

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[60] This recognition aside, the danger in simplistically labelling Ross as misogynist colludes with the stereotype of (Ross as) a homosexual as woman-hating, although, too, an allowance must be made for that possibility (a point I will return to shortly).

with the purposefully contemptuous and neglectful characters of George and Dan, appears to draw from the catalogue of the "woman hating" man, whose social dominance over women converges deftly with the more potent then-circulating (and medically-certified) stereotype of the "woman hating homosexual," as an intricate part of (coded) gender confusion. He counters this, however, with a rather sympathetic narrative thrust favouring the women as perhaps a compensatory measure, but one which ironically reinforces the negative homosexual stereotype. If these (somewhat feminine) men might be said to be in any way expressive of Ross's disdain for feminine gay men, it would be a conclusion indicative of Fraser's specious argument (discussed in the previous chapter) concerning Ross's personal (unmet) subliminal desires for "the 'long lean' body he confessed was his ideal man" (41).[61]

(ii) Hysterical women and sexed nature

Ross attenuates his narration of gender and related desires in the comedic tragedy of "A Field of Wheat" (1935). Martha, the locus of the story, senses that the almost ready-to-harvest crop will yield major economic gains, and so imagines a more genteel life for herself and her children. She is drawn by the allure of the wheat, "the best crop of wheat that John had ever grown; sturdy, higher than the knee, the heads long and filling well" (67). The wheat, understood as her *husband's* creation (and not as a joint family effort), is unmistakably phallic; Martha's admiration of it—and hence, her husband, John, we are given to imagine—leads her to stroke "the blades of grain that pressed close

[61] Fraser writes elsewhere in his memoir that "the obsessions of the author's body tended

against her skirts, luxuriant and tall," while noting that "[i]t was John who gave such allure to the wheat" (67).

The natural world, gendered masculine, which Martha admires, conjoins with John's intimate control of the land. The conception of desire and what is understood or counts as desirable plays to the supposition that men control, if not create, all forms of desire; it is only for women like Martha to stand by and either admire it or hope to touch or taste the fruits of it. She resigns herself, like Hatty or Nell, to the determinist notion that she must passively follow the male dictates of the natural world, and that she must not challenge the "natural order." She knows that even in bad times "there was nothing else but going-on" (68).

Yet that she comes to express that her own desires have not been fulfilled renders her ominously dangerous, at least in terms of narrative developments. She plucks a blade of wheat, "her eyes travell[ing] hungrily up and down the field. . . . Three hundred acres ready to give perhaps a little of what it had taken from her" (68). The natural realm, in that it will not (yet) yield to her—in divesting itself of both its economic potential and her husband's affections—goes on to mount a protest, symbolic of the force of the uncontrollable and unslaked (masculine) desires she cannot hope to share in. John, a "slow, unambitious man," pays her scant attention: "She could sweat, grown flat-footed and shapeless, but that never bothered him" (69). Her existence does not inform or colour John's world, intimately related as he is to the fertile earth; she can only watch and support.

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to repeat themselves in the fictional patterns of his mind" (79).

The children too share—though non-comprehendingly and naively—in this sensual world. Joe, stripped naked, accuses his sister of "peekin'" at him (70); Annabelle, in analysing a poppy, is "bitten deeply [by] the enigma of the flowers and the naked seed-pods," not yet having discovered that the surface attraction of the poppy and its reproductive aspects go hand-in-hand (70). Frank Davey mines this "surface attraction" for its symbolic meaning, stating that Nipper, the family dog, is the "animal symbol for unrepressed sexuality in this story" (173), and that Nipper is similar to Joe in their "irrepressibility" (174).[62] Davey does not, however, explore the potential consequences of assigning an *active* sexual nature to an eight-year-old, though he interestingly links the eventual death of Nipper (and irrepressible sexuality?) to the crushed wheat. This symbol of phallic failure does not portend weakened male power but rather suggests that Martha's "greedy" social and material desires upset "natural" balance; the result is that her attempt to impose her will is a perversion, again, of "natural order."

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[62] In her examination of Willa Cather's prairie in *O Pioneers*, Marilee Lindemann writes that Cather sees "[t]he land itself . . . imaged in contradictory bodily terms." Furthermore, she says that the novel, in rendering sight and gender elusive, cautions that *O Pioneers* "suggests . . . the subjective and often duplicitous character of the gaze as well as the shifting nature of 'bodies' and the unreliability of the evidence they present. It also exposes the overdetermined nature of the relationship between physical spaces and human beings" (39). Likewise, I would argue that the "obvious" reading of Ross, of which Davey's is an instance, has its merits but risks such overdetermination in its attention to what I have mentioned, in my critique of the story, as "surface attention." Sharon O'Brien makes more forceful connections in her reading of gender in Cather's novel, as she sees the author criticizing "the power relationship between a male protagonist and a feminine landscape that informs the traditional American pastoral, in which nature is an object—either the virgin land to be raped or the bountiful mother to be sought—against which the male self is defined" (1987, 434). Although "A Field of Wheat" does not have a male protagonist, O'Brien's comments concerning nature as an object to be manipulated are germane to Ross's story, though the land in the story is also gendered male.

The storm brews sensually, "muffled, still distant, but charged with resolution, climaxing the stillness [with] a slow, long brooding heave of thunder" (71). If we understand the event using sexual premises, especially as it may signal male retribution, how is it that such unleashed (male) sexuality comes to be a destructive rather than positive force, crushing not only Martha's but John's (another male) hopes and desires? This paradox intimates that nature is at odds with itself, as the sensuality of the wheat and life on the ground is conquered by the climaxing nature of the storm. The overarching implication, rather, is that a woman's attempt to control nature—her wish to benefit materially from the bounty of the land—is kept in check by the unleashed force of what cannot be controlled. Ross tacitly submits that the capriciousness of nature does not allow any one sexual meaning to settle, that the order of human society—here, the nuclear family—is an *artificial* order superimposed. The darker inference is that nature "naturally" ordains a heterosexual reproductive order by "grounding" sexuality, yet at the same time questions such order by wiping away its more boastful (material) traits. And a third hypothesis, and the one I favour in this essay, is that Ross's conflation of (male) phallic wheat and the biologically deterministic "mother earth" from which it arises denotes a confused and, moreover, self-conflicted narrative engendering: the dominating climax of the storm, depicted as unabashedly male, effectively destroys the conflict and insists, in a manner, that the couple begin again keeping in mind their subjection to the natural order.

Martha finds that her own will is subservient to this order: "[S]he had will and needs and flesh, because she was alive," but she is ultimately impotent against the

immateriality of the aspects of (a) nature beyond her control. She attempts to give a discernible human form to the incorporeal storm, perhaps in an effort to better anticipate what she forebodes; she wonders: "[H]ow rebel against a summer storm, how find the throat of a cloud?" (75). She then tries to appropriate and internalize that fury itself in her hopes to rebel against her husband, "that she might release and spend herself, no matter against whom or what, unloose the fury that clawed within her, strike back a blow for the one that had flattened her" (75). But her inability to find this release—John quietly mourns his loss in the stable, and she, seeing this, changes her mind—suggests that she cannot appropriate nature, gendered male, nor can she, gendered female, hope to subdue male sexuality.

Her retreat is immediate, and she turns to wonder at her family's material prospects. However, Annabelle, the as-yet unsocialized and uncultured younger woman, "breathless and ecstatic" (76), continues to find wonder in nature, pointing to the beauty of the retreating clouds in the eastern sky. She, like her disconsolate younger brother, cannot fully appreciate the adult world of sexual mores and prohibitions; she marvels at the purity of experience, ignorant to the ramifications of what nature—in terms of both "man-made" desires and repression—has now wrought.

A storm of a different season occurs in Ross's later story, "The Painted Door" (1939). A childless couple, John and Ann, expect a winter storm as John prepares to travel to his father's house, five miles away. Like his namesake in "A Field of Wheat," this John too is a "slow, unambitious man" (94) who does not fully appreciate his wife's desires for a more comfortable and socially engaging life. Anticipating the internal storm

to come, the narration reflects the potential for psychological turmoil. John says to Ann that she is not like herself—like Hatty beside herself?—and Ann, in turn, merely notes that the sun's rays ironically seem to "shed cold" (94). After John's departure, the silence of the sunny yet cold exterior world is personified as "lurking outside as if alive, relentlessly in wait" (96).

There ensues, in Ross's narration, a subtle shift to the vague and amorphous, as the free indirect discourse alternates between what Ann says, what she thinks, and what the narrator may be observing. Thus, when Ross writes, "Always it was there" (96), we cannot be sure what "it" is exactly, since there is no clear referent, although "it" is at least some configuration of Ann's various desires. Ross displays a tension in the narration, moving from an objective stance, to a more subjective psychology, and finally to Ann's spoken words, which, one might think, are her "real" thoughts. The combination of these free the narration from both strict omniscience and interior monologue, opening up a space wherein adherence to a discernible narrative "meaning" is tenuous.

The attenuated imprecision in narration parallels Ann's (repressed) desires, especially as such libidinal fervour comes to be freed when John departs, leaving Ann to reflect upon the soon-to-visit neighbour, Steven. In lieu of rebellion, Ann finds a comfort in persisting in silent thoughts, which sanctions the luxury of feeling that she is the one hard done by in her marriage. She inevitably compares John to the more debonair Steven, alternating her musings with intimations of a silence which "now seemed more intense than ever, seemed to have reached a pitch where it faintly moaned" (99).

Of such concentrated stillness, Deanna Bogden observes that "[s]ilence and stasis,

expressions of the reader's imaginative identity with the literary object, manifest a spiritual state—the ineffable, the personally unspeakable" (20). Bogden also writes that the very nature of what constitutes Ann's unspeakable desires obtains an "organic unity," which is the union of plot and theme. Such totality, she argues, "presupposes a universal human condition derived from male life experience and an aesthetic effect derived from male reading experience" (21). What is unstated here is not only that Ann's experience is determined by what is socially rendered a male domain, but also that Ross's narration itself controls the female experience.

Is Ross then in a unique position to portray sympathetically the feminine from a masculine point of view, especially since his homosexuality may (stereotypically) denote the (debunked) prototype of "nurturing female"? Conversely, is the misogyny I noted in Ross's earlier stories the result of totalizing male (literary) experience, one that includes allusions to homosexuality and its psychologically inscribed aversion to women? Or does Ross simply relate a view of male superiority to women by ascribing to the latter group unwarranted hysteria and "naturalized" (female) desires for material comforts? Ann appears determined both to deny and to cultivate what she desires by evacuating her thoughts to the exterior realm of nature, beyond the confines of her home, recalling the danger of Martha's attempt to "harvest" the fruits of nature for both her family and her own "selfish" purposes. Ann looks out the window to see that "[a]cross the drifts sped swift snakelike little tongues of snow. She could not follow them where they sprang from, or where they disappeared" (99). The snakes of snow, which easily partake of a Freudian-inspired interpretation as symbols of desire, become "angry," and the fierceness

of the storm becomes "a boding of eventual fury" (100). Similar to the manner in which Martha appears to have initiated a storm, Ann unleashes a storm which signifies both the uncontrollable nature of her desire and an exteriorized malfeasance, which though apparently sexless is perhaps nevertheless emblematic of a universalized and invisible male interdiction against female sexual and materialistic rebellion.

Regardless, Ann continues to audit her thoughts in order to distance and intellectualize her feelings, and eventually determines that she requires a challenge. She decides that she will go to the stable—a man's world—and to that end engages in a form of drag: she dresses up in John's clothes. It takes her about an hour "to choose the right socks and sweaters . . . changing and rechanging" (102), suggesting that the arrangement, the very *performance* of wearing, is at least as important as the clothes' practical use. What emerges as odd is Ann's actual desire to wear her husband's clothes; if indeed she has faced similar wintry conditions before, as a farmer's wife for seven years, it would seem that she should possess her own attire to face such weather. Therefore, the impetus to wear men's clothing meaningfully arises from the need to imitate a man in order to leave the female realm of home and venture outside, to the male realm of the stable. But she takes off these clothes once her practicing is done, and returns to the task of baking.

Yet later, once outside, the weather pushes her over and the snow penetrates her drag. Ann finds the storm "blustering and furious. It was as if the storm had discovered her" (102). Mining the reading of Ann as appropriating the masculine, it becomes easy to assert that the "snakelike tongues of snow," initially fooled by her appearance as a man, are infuriated by her deception and are intent on making her return to her "natural" realm,

the home. But once inside again, Ann finds she is "still at the mercy of the storm. Only her body pressing hard like this against the door [is] staving it off" (103). Like "the door between us" in *As For Me and My House* (1970, 86), the material barrier is mostly psychological; indeed, when Steven later arrives and knowingly assures Ann that John will not be back on this evening, Ann finds her will to resist him to be "the same as a few hours ago when she braced the door against the storm" (107).

Yet Steven's appearance results in another "challenge" (104); instead of donning a man's clothes, she finds "roused from latency and long disuse all the instincts and resources of femininity" (104). Ann intellectualizes the paradox of what she desires but cannot admit: "She didn't understand, but she knew. The texture of the moment was satisfyingly dreamlike" (104). Ann's thoughts resemble Emma Bovary's in that they substitute the aesthetic feel of the moment (of potential romance) for the more obtuse sense of the reality of understanding. Indeed, Ann finds that, "There was no thought or motive, no understanding of herself as the knowledge persisted" (104). Rather than take on the responsibility for what she feels, she goes on to suggest that "[i]t was less Steven himself that she felt than his inevitability" (105); Ann's forbidden desires are safely lodged in the realm of the aesthetic where they cannot cause any (physical) harm. If she can continue to deny any material manifestation of her own storm, she can later deny that she had anything to do with what happens, either with Steven or to John. When Steven begins to speak, her "mind miss[es] the meaning of his words" (105), engaged as she is in her fantasy which demands continued disacknowledgement.

Ann finds thus that she has "emerged from the increment of codes and loyalties to

her real, unfettered self. She who now felt [Steven's] air of appraisal as nothing more than an understanding of the unfulfilled woman that until this moment had lain within her brooding and unadmitted, reproved out of consciousness by the insistence of an outgrown, routine fidelity" (108). Ann gives herself this excuse to sleep with Steven, only to find the threat of the shadow of her husband appearing, a shadow which advances and retreats in accordance with the protracted desires of her imprecise "dreams." Yet the prohibition against adultery finds realization in the prophetic violence of the passage; in her paralysed state she finds "a deadly tightening hand . . . on her throat" (109).

Bogden asserts that John's death is wrought at the expense of Ann's fulfilled desires: "That she succumbed to her sexual desire brings about the death-dealing reversal" (21). Although this reading threatens to assume that we can easily transfer the understanding of Bogden's 1987 to 1941, the argument is not without value. It is likely that, in 1941, the reader and author would agree on the constitution of female sexuality as subordinate to a man's, that if adultery were to occur it would be the weakness of the woman, not the man, that would be at fault. Indeed, Ann's *petit mort* finds literal (and literary) transcription in the death of her husband, dead in the field but "erect still" (112). Ross's depiction of Ann's "hysteria" and concomitant "sexing" of a gender-conflicted "nature" and "natural order" at the very least indicates that the author's courted ambiguity allows for an excess of signification, one which reveals a concern with and questioning of, however inconclusive, the enforcement of social norms bearing upon the "performance" of sexuality, desire and gender.[63] What is in plain sight—the ostensibly

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[63] In "The Lamp at Noon" (1938), Ellen succumbs to hysterics due to the dust storm

open and symbolically accessible narrative delineating normative gender and (hetero)sexuality—reconfigures, in Ross's indeterminate and equivocal narratives, as the perversion of sight.

(iii) Something queer going on here

Ross further utilizes the corruption of sight in his "prairie trilogy" ("A Day With Pegasus" (1938); "Cornet at Night" (1939); "One's a Heifer" (1944),[64] stories which do not explicitly depict homosexual behaviour, although a close examination of the stories reveals an indeterminacy that permits a sexual reading even if it does not dictate one. Ross gestures toward the desires—often masked as friendship or rivalry—which inform the lives of his fictional male characters. His exhibition of the closet underscores a strategic encoding of male homosociality, which, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, is "the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred

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outside. The "[d]emented wind" (7) is not only internalized but the process itself is actually reversed in order to reflect a "natural" feminine hysteria. The *internal* state of things, as seen from Ellen's point of view inside the house, is projected onto the natural world *outside*: The sun races through the dust clouds is "as if it were the light from the lamp reaching out through the open door" (7).

[64] In her introduction to *The Race and Other Stories*, Lorraine McMullen mentions Ross's initial project which would have linked these three stories more closely:

> "A Day with Pegasus" is one of several stories centred on the same boy which Ross at one time planned as a group. "At the beginning," Ross writes [in his letter to McMullen 15 January 1979], "I had *in mind* a group of short stories having to do with the same boy. In *Cornet at Night* he becomes really aware, for the first time, of the wonder of music—I suppose you could call it an aesthetic wakening. *One's a Heifer* is his first contact with evil (although the man in the story, Vickers, is not evil, of course, but deranged). There was to have been one about death—he loses his parents in a fire, which is why in *One's a Heifer* he is living with his aunt and uncle. *A Day with Pegasus*, the mystery of life and beginning, etc." (Ross 1982, 19)

or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship" (1985, 2).

Ross's stories depicting the (often presumed) friendships of younger boys and older men are not without precedent. Sherwood Anderson's widely successful collections, *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) and *The Triumph of the Egg* (1921) each draw attention to the lives of boys and men. The story "I Want to Know Why," in the latter "book of impressions," particularly bears striking similarity to the narrative arc and character development in Ross's trilogy. Anderson's narrator's love of horses converges with a platonic admiration for an older man, not unlike Ross's "A Day with Pegasus." That man, Jerry Tillford, is a horse trainer who initially garners the admiration of the youth, who transfers his love for a horse, Sunstreak, to Tillford: "I looked up and then that man I looked into each other's eyes. Something happened to me. I guess I loved the man as much as I did the horse because he knew what I knew" (15), recalling Tommy who, in "Cornet at Night," omnisciently transposes his desires to a man he hires, Philip Coleman. Finally, the narrator's wild, violent grief at Tillford's "betrayal" with a prostitute, leads him to become "so mad about it I want to fight someone. [...] What did he do it for? I want to know why" (20). Tillford's actions which defy, for the boy, comprehension, bring to mind Arthur Vicker's unseemly behaviour with his housekeeper and the subsequent perplexity and uncertainty experienced by the retrospective narrator.

I draw attention to Anderson not because I think that Ross drew upon his writing—though Anderson certainly influenced a number of American literary luminaries—but because the notion of male/male friendship (whether sexual or not) had, by the 1940s, lost its vestiges of ostensibly platonic verve. In "Hands," for example, Wing

Biddlebaum, the town loner, tries to explain himself to his friend, George:

> Out of the dream, Wing Biddlebaum made a picture for George Willard. In the picture men lived again in a kind of pastoral golden age. Across a green open country came clean-limbed young men, some afoot, some mounted upon horses. In crowds the young men came to gather about the feet of an old man who sat beneath a tree in a tiny garden and who talked to them. (30)

Biddlebaum subsequently touches Willard, but then runs off in horror that his caress might be misinterpreted, as it *apparently* had been when he was a young schoolteacher. I say "apparently" because Anderson's writing, with its suggestion that the notion of a platonic ideal has been surmounted by a suspect sexualizing of this "pastoral golden age," nevertheless retains the traces of homoeroticism, as one might discover in Anderson's influential inspiration Walt Whitman or in Thomas Eakins's *Arcadia* (1883).[65] Indeed, the late 19th century's notion of what might loosely defined as an emerging modern homosexuality drew much of its inspiration from classical contexts, such as those of ancient Greece.[66] However, the imperative to begin to distinguish between brotherly love and homosexual desire, issuing from sexological and psychosocial discourses, made a defense of platonism, "genuine" or otherwise, increasing troublesome.

By the time Ross began publishing, some fifteen years after Anderson's first work, the appearance of literary platonic friendships was definitely waning. But this drawback,

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[65] Authors of Anderson's day were not blind to the homoerotic possibilities of "Hands." See Hart Crane's obvious allusion to Anderson's story, in his poem "Episode of Hands."

[66] For a concise overview of the art of this period, see "Free from the Itch of Desire" in Emmanuel Cooper's *The Sexual Perspective: Homosexuality and Art in the Last 100 Years in the West* (2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 1994).

due in part to the psychiatric and social edicts prescribing heterosexuality and eschewing homosexuality, was not without its benefits, particularly as strict parameters defining acceptable (sexual) behaviour began to be questioned.[67] If, as Robert Kroetsch states, that "the consequence of the northern prairies to human definition [results in] the diffusion of personality into a complex of possibilities rather than a concluded self" (1973, 152), then it appears that Ross took advantage of *indeterminacy* most familiar to him, rather than the established historical precedents of a *definable*—and therefore suspect—literary platonism, in creating his youthful characters.

Ross compounds this notion of indeterminate selves in his portraits of these youths who, on the brink of sexual knowledge—of the self or another, and of heretofore unquestioned desires—begin to explore their maturing, changing and increasingly unstable world. The unconcluded self, rife with ambivalence, aptly describes Ross's adolescents who, in the trilogy, encounter the complexities and prohibitions inherent in discerning identity, queer or otherwise.[68] The largesse of the adult world, like a mirror, reflects an enigmatic and alluringly cryptic society; the youths, in typical initiatory fashion, ponder a prairie world which, in Ross's stories, plays with their attempts to achieve a deciphered, conclusive self. The secret of what is not (yet) known is elided as potentially forbidden space, and these teasing absences directly confront the young

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[67] Alfred Kinsey's *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male* (1948) is perhaps the most well-known and influential publication to revolutionize public thinking about male sexuality.

[68] Kroetsch suggestively addresses the problem—and the reality—of sexual identity in his discussion of erotic space in prairie literature. Concerning Ross and Willa Cather, Kroetsch writes that "it would be naive to attribute the absence of explicit sex—of its language or its actions—merely to prudery on the part of either Cather or Ross; for the same absence is an operative presence in the works of numerous prairie writers" (1979,

seekers of knowledge. The men, with their carefully concealed identities, that these boys encounter risk being exposed as the boys see further into the prairie's "diffusion of possibilities." Ross's noviciates live in a world wherein the borders of textual space both expand to open up a world of possibilities and break down to reveal that a stable, compulsory heterosexuality is an illusion.

Illusion itself is the overriding theme of the trilogy's first written story, "A Day With Pegasus." Peter Parker's unnamed colt, the Pegasus of the title, most obviously comes to represent Peter's flights of imagination. The adult world denotes circumvention, and Peter feels resentment at its intrusion. His mother reminds him of his chores; his elder brother becomes increasingly compromised by mature responsibilities; and Miss Kinley, his teacher, fails to understand his need for embellishment.

The only adult to impress Peter is Slim, a cowboy who had paid him special attention at his uncle's ranch earlier in the year. Importantly, Peter recollects an idealized Slim while studying a foreign land—a key point in all three stories, and one which highlights the exoticism and otherness of the youth's experiences. Peter thinks of naming his horse—"a name to match the miracle" (*The Race and Other Stories* 41)—and, moreover, wishes to name it after Slim; however, he would prefer to use Slim's real name, and his urgency to solve the mystery of naming leads him on an imaginary quest wherein he travels from rodeo to rodeo in search of his hero.

On his winged horse, Peter hopes to concretize his ambivalent kinship with Slim, this "big handsome fellow who had taken time off from roping steers to show Peter the

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spurs and belt and silver-studded chaps he had worn in the big rodeos" (41). Peter's relationship with Slim is safely cerebral, yet the pronounced need to name Slim—to *uncover* his real identity—is but the beginning of a coded investigation into the nature of male/male attraction. While daydreaming, Peter pursues his self-presumed friendship, mounting his colt and soaring above "the limitations of mere time and distance," all the while careful to preserve "all the steadfastness of his vanished comradeship with Slim" (45). Later, in the barn loft, Peter thinks of his inspiring Pegasus and its essence as "this mystery of beginning" (48), the beginning of his adolescent awakening. Peter, while watching the shifting play of light on the prairie over which his horse glides, again mounts his winged horse, finding that "the mystery was not solved, but gradually absorbed, a mystery still but intimate, a heartening gleam upon the roof of life to let him see its vault and spaciousness" (48). Like Peter, the narrators of the next two stories in the trilogy attempt to unravel these mysteries of beginning as their relationships with other, older men become more central.

In the follow-up, "Cornet at Night," the narrator, here named Tommy Dickson, vigorously pursues the object of his desire, a stranger hired on to help out on the farm. Tommy finds himself the vicarious site of parental battle, simultaneously ascribed conflicting gender roles. His mother keeps him housebound in order to keep him from following in his father's farming footsteps. She engages him in the feminine arena of indoor domestic chores, and asks him to bathe, change clothes "and maybe help a little getting dinner for your father" (*The Lamp At Noon and Other Stories* 30). However, Tommy later forgoes this "feminine" role, gladly capitulating to his father's request that

he go into town—as he notes, "It was my first trip to town alone"—and "pick somebody big and husky" (33) to help with stooking the wheat fields. Tommy as narrator appears to be fully reliable in his retrospection, although his reasons for his eventual choice of hired hand, Philip Coleman, are tantalizingly elided.

Once in town, and feeling embarrassed in his dealings with the townspeople, Tommy finds himself "more of an alien in the town than ever" (36), and, appropriately, decides to eat at the Chinese restaurant, amidst "pyramids of oranges" and "tropical-looking leaves," with "the dusky smell of last night's cigarettes that to my prairie nostrils was the orient itself, the exotic atmosphere about it all" (36). Tommy, like Peter in the earlier story, inclines to the foreign, with a predisposition to initiation into the realm of what he longs for but cannot yet describe. Immediately, he begins watching, in a compulsive, cruising manner, a young man sitting further down the counter. He cannot justify his desires other than to say that, "[i]t was strangely important to be with him, to prolong a while this companionship" (36), which, at this point, had not even been consummated.

Tommy's attempt to decode the situation, despite his shyness, leads him to remark that the man, Coleman, is somehow different, although he knows nothing about him. These unmasked incongruencies, in which desire is optically framed, exploit a complex, queer (sub)text. Tommy's odd evasion of any concrete explanation of his motives solicits the reader to fill in the absent spaces. Coleman's hands, Tommy notes, "were slender, almost a girl's hands, yet vaguely with their shapely quietness they troubled me, because, however slender and smooth, they were yet hands to be reckoned with, strong with a

strength that was different from the rugged labour-strength I knew" (36). He will state only for certain that he just wants to be "assured by something I had never encountered before" (36). A burly man who wants to be hired on interrupts the idyll, but Tommy declines, turning to find Coleman watching him: "[W]hen I glanced up and met his eyes he gave a slow, half-smiling little nod of approval. And out of all proportion to anything it could mean, his nod encouraged me" (37). Without any elaboration, Tommy decides to hire Coleman, a cornet player, who proffers his labour despite never having farmed. On their way home, Tommy thinks, "This stranger with the white, thin hands, this gleaming cornet that as yet I hadn't heard, intimately and enduringly now they were my possessions" (41). Tommy's possession of what is prohibited—Coleman is clearly not the kind of man needed for stooking—suggests that he wishes, obliquely as it may be, to further examine Coleman's fanciful "strength that was different."

In the only omniscient piece of narration in the story, Tommy transparently reveals the thoughts of the cornet player; he states: "We thought a great deal about each other, but asked no questions" (41). But since Coleman's thoughts are never known, what Tommy thinks is an obvious transposition of his own desire onto his new friend. The silently disapproving parents allow Coleman is to stay on, and, after dinner, Tommy slips out to the bunkhouse. There, Philip silently motions for Tommy to sit on the bed. "At once he ignored and accepted me. It was as if we had always known each other and long outgrown the need of conversation" (42). The identification that Tommy seeks in his older friend or mentor—Slim with a real name—becomes more suggestive as, silently, Tommy sits, tense and expectant, looking at Coleman, "wondering who he was, where he

came from, why he should be here to do my father's stooking" (42).

In his brief summary of this scene, David Carpenter writes of the phallic nature of the story's images, stating that "Tommy has been seduced into a new vision of soaring possibilities by Philip's cornet;" but, furthermore, "the images I have cast this story in are charged with erotic innuendoes. The story seems to carry this subcurrent" (78). Carpenter then abandons this rather titillating view, though perhaps he was thinking of the following passage, when Tommy silently observes Coleman:

> [P]resently he reached for his cornet. In the dim, soft darkness I could see it glow and quicken. And I remember still what a long and fearful moment it was, crouched and steeling myself, waiting for him to begin. (43)

It is difficult not to interpret this "masturbatory" scene as allusively sexual. Carpenter, though, may have been following the silent critical injunction against reading this story's sexual subtext, for fear, as Sedgwick states, that "any discussion of homosexual desires or literary comment will marginalize him [the author] (or them?) [the critics] as, simply, *homosexual*" (1990, 197). For example, in a customary interpretation of the story, Lorraine McMullen writes that, "Tommy achieves new knowledge about the world outside the farm, about men who are different from either the farm boys or the small town men he has known" (1979, 40), although she adds that his initiation will serve him in his future career as an artist or musician. Oddly enough, Ross's revisions to the original story,[69] from which he *removes* material, make Tommy's new awareness, according to McMullen, "more tentative and less fully understood by the boy himself in the revised story" (40).

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[69] For the original version, see "Cornet at Night" in *Queen's Quarterly* 46:4 (Winter 1939-

Ross's elisions may help develop the idea of Tommy's uncertainty in becoming a musician, but so too do they allow for a reading of an initiation into what is sexually prohibited, what cannot be spoken of but must be *read into*.

Such elisions of sexuality forcefully solicit the reader's participation in Ross's later story, "One's a Heifer." The retrospective narrator, unnamed and apparently orphaned, leaves his aunt and uncle's farm in search of two yearlings who have apparently wandered off during a snowstorm. From the start, Ross removes the youth from the comfort of the typical family of mother and father; furthermore, since his uncle is ill, the narrator must assume the mantle of "man of the house." He notes that, at 13—an older Peter, or Tommy—he "had never been away like that all night before," (*Lamp* 113), foregrounding both the nocturnal nature of the adventure to come and the novelty of experience.

The personified landscape intimidates with its propensity to stare; not only do the cattle stare, but so too do the fields and the sky (114). The fields, "the flat white silent miles of prairie" which asserts itself "like a disapproving presence" (114), closely survey the youth with its non-human yet tangible presence. Dogs bay, and the "thin wavering howl of a coyote is heard" (115) as the narrator desperately tries to assert himself, fighting against the dispersion of identity commensurate with the open prairie; conversely, he unwittingly reveals a subtle indignation toward the surveillance of his movements, that in this alien territory he can no longer rely on the surety of home to define himself. The narrator's unreliability increasing compounds our reading of the

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increasingly odd encounters. Although he proclaims that he "saw [the calves] for sure a dozen times," the boy's sight disappoints him every time (115). Here, an element of eerie disquiet suggests that the prohibition against knowledge naturally increases in a hostile environment. The narrator, ostensibly desiring to know where the lost yearlings are, falls prey to sensations not mediated by parents or foreknowledge. Suggestively, in this environment, he will encounter a secretive man with a masked, dissembled history.

Arthur Vickers, an intriguingly complex figure, is this man. He and the narrator warily cruise each other in an arena where knowledge of the other's motives is desire(d). Of "One's a Heifer," Dennis Cooley notes that Ross, through his unreliable narrator, "cultivates the gap" (146) between what we know and what he tells us; therefore, "what we read is not a presentation nor quite even a representation of life, but a making of it, a making that in turn invites us to share its shadings and shapings" (150). The reader, also seduced into the "complex of possibilities" (Kroetsch 1973, 152), only knows what the retrospective narrator presently reveals. His unreliable retelling suggests that the gap—the absence, the neglected closet—must be read as part of the story, in our own parallel search to reveal what is suppressed. Ross prohibits foreknowledge not strictly as a narrative device but, rather, to ensure that the reader will engage in the young protagonist's need to know.

Arthur Vickers, then, is only as forbidding as we allow the narrator's colouring of him to be (recalling Tommy's earlier transposition of the responsibility of his desire for Philip onto Philip himself). In observing him, the narrator looks "straight into his eyes and felt that for all their fierce look there was something about them wavering and

uneasy" (*Lamp* 115). What the narrator observes, though, is not Vickers's anxiety but a reflection of his own; the "I" and the "eye" trade places. Of such alterity Ernst van Alphen writes:

> The other is used as a screen on which ideals or terrors can be projected, or as location to which problematic feelings about the self can be displaced. . . . Because of the very fact that identity is constituted by the creation of alterities, our object of knowledge can never be just "identity" or "alterity," but only the observer's (re)creating a self-image and the image of the other. (15)

This suggests, in Ross's story, a correlation between the two, as each tries to keep his own motives hidden. Vickers's secret, in this case, is a locked barn stall, a space physically inaccessible to the narrator but one which later reveals itself as, metaphorically, the closet.

Questions arise, here, concerning the narrator's need to depict Vickers as evil or crazy, especially as the psychological space between the two merge. Vickers and the diminished nature of the landscape, combined with the narrator's own belief that Vickers has stolen the missing calves, elicits what Sedgwick calls "paranoid Gothic," recalling the Romantic novels "in which a male hero is in a close, usually murderous relation to another male figure, in some respects his 'double,' to whom he seems to be mentally transparent" (1990, 186). It is in these paranoid gothic plots, Sedgwick elaborates, that "one man's mind could be read by that of the feared and desired other" (187). The retrospective and selective narrator of "One's a Heifer" projects his own fears and desires onto Vickers, the conveniently available other, as he further qualifies Vickers's actions as

being "seeming" and "apparent" but never exactly precise. The key to the secret of the missing calves resides not in our understanding of Vickers—which is always circumscribed by the narrator in any case—but in the narrator's unacknowledged deep anxieties in needing to assert, for example, that Vickers has "a dark and evil face" (*Lamp* 115). The narrator unwittingly projects the anxiety of his own desires onto the other who, for him, appears to be, to a great extent, readable and transparent.

These desires become more explicit when, in the stable which contains the enclosed stall, the hovering darkness is personified, and the light of the lantern—"a hard hypnotic eye" which Vickers holds (117)—is associated with the older man. Under the double gaze, the narrator freezes: "It held me. It held me rooted, against my will. I wanted to run from the stable but I wanted even more to see inside the stall. Wanting to see yet afraid of seeing" (117). Critiques of the peculiarity of this sentiment unanimously relate this fear to the suggestion that Vickers might be hiding something far more sinister in the stall. Yet it is *before* the never-clarified "evil"—a supposedly murdered housekeeper—is evoked that the narrator expresses his paradoxical anxiety. What knowledge is he afraid of perceiving, either in himself or Vickers?

This is not the first time Ross uses the stall as a place of questionable expectancy and of the possibility of circumscribed knowledge, wherein measurement by sight is metaphorically uncertain. In the earlier story, "A Day with Pegasus," Tommy approaches the stable which contains the stall of the new colt—the Pegasus—and its mother, Biddy:

> At the stable door, just for an instant, he hesitated. It was some instinct perhaps of emotional thrift, warning him that so fierce and strange a tingle of expectancy

> ought to be prolonged a little—some vague apprehension that in Biddy's stall there might be *less than he had already seen.* (*Race* 37, emphasis mine)

In "One's a Heifer," the narrator's need to know complicates the reading of the forestalling gap, the stall, the place where there may be "less than he had already seen." The elided space guards the unseen secret, and this perpetrated textual absence dismisses, as Charlene Diehl-Jones writes, "our naive tendency to equate secrecy and truth"; she also notes that this assumption underlies many of our strategies for reading and "points us toward a reading position that admits the power of discourse to keep its secrets" (84). The possibilities of discourse, then, undermine repeated critical assertions that this initiation story primarily explores Vickers's supposed potential for the ultimate horror of murder. Understanding the (sexual) tension between Vickers and his guest is not necessarily *the* story, though it certainly clarifies the narrator's strangely expressed desire to know what is in the stall, the prime gap or absence in the text.

Certainly, while I do not wish to overdetermine double meanings in the text itself, a surmise with regards to the words "stall" and "stable" is inevitable. As the two men move into the house, the enclosed stall remains the hovering emblem, a transposed space of anxiety for both, sensed yet absent, palpable yet unseen. The stable thus functions simultaneously as a place of "instability" while "stall," as a verb, becomes the narrator's motto, one he wishes to vanquish. Ross's privileging of the knowledge of what the stall contains emphasizes the notion that disclosing what is in the stall *is* what the boy needs to know in order to complete his crossing over into manhood; he must quit stalling. What is actually in the stable is now the motivating undercurrent of the unstable narrative. That it

is a secret and remains a fixation is more important than the material existence of either the calves or the housekeeper.

Sedgwick deftly touches upon both the fetishized secret and what the necessary enclosure of knowledge reveals, in her discussion of James; she writes, "the outer secret, the secret of having a secret, functions . . . precisely as *the closet*. . . . [I]t is the closet, of simply, the homosexual secret—the closet of imagining *a* homosexual secret" (1990, 205). As the narrator and Vickers struggle for control of the knowledge of the stall, knowledge which is itself the thing desired, the sexual nature of the cruised secret is heightened. The stall becomes, by this point, the closet.

The narrator, in deciding to stay the night in the hope that he can slip out and gain access to this knowledge while Vickers sleeps, falls prey to his own paranoid phantasms, repeatedly displaced onto an apparently nervous Vickers. Again, the narrator "fancies" he can see the wavering expression in Vickers's eyes, then decides, with certainty, that "it was what you called a guilty look" (*Lamp* 118). Vickers reveals to the narrator that he is lonely and that, during the previous summer, he had a girl, the aforementioned housekeeper, cooking for him, "for a few weeks, but it didn't last. Just a cow she was—just a big stupid cow. . . . I had to send her home" (119). The girl, whose trait of familial stupidity is, we infer, the result of incest, becomes associated with the missing heifer of the title; the absence of both and their elision from the story supports the belief that either one or the other now occupies the enclosed space—the secret—of the stall. However, the third possibility (and the one I am arguing) is that neither the housekeeper nor the calf is there; rather, the stall is the displaced secret of the narrator's and Vickers's queer natures.

The stall, fetishized as secrecy itself, is important only insofar as it represents contested site and sight, both perverted by the narrator's paranoia. The sexualized tension of the situation—the suggestion of violence, the absence of the girl, the narrator's desire for knowledge—is what, in homosocial terms, Sedgwick calls "erotic rivalry": in these bonds "are concentrated the fantasy energies of compulsion, prohibition, and explosive violence; all are fully structured by the logic of paranoia" (1992, 162). Within the rivalry in "One's a Heifer," the girl, the third point completing the triangle of herself, the narrator, and Vickers, becomes less essential as a physical presence but important only insofar as she remains a point of reference, a stand-in for the metaphorical place that is the closet. Since the cow, we later discover, was never in the stall, the girl, who Vickers's has equated with the cow, can be assumed also to be safe. The real struggle is over the meaning of the stall more than over its possible material content.

The narrator, trying to circumvent his own paranoia by insisting to himself the logic of his mission, threatens to explode the homosocial space now occupied by himself and Vickers. The narrator's "homosexual panic" (Sedgwick, 1990, 186) is subsumed within the realm of (homo)social inexperience; actual sexual consummation, it seems, would complete the initiation and remove the panic. Vickers, on the other hand, does not outwardly seem to fear what may be misconstrued: that, as a presumably heterosexual man, he may be overstepping social boundaries. Rather, his fear is born of what Eric Savoy calls "the gay man's panic over what *is* proscribed" (15)—he is afraid of the uncovering of his secret, metaphorically displaced as the secret of the stall, the closet itself. Vickers represents the youth's paranoid fear of what a (possibly) homosexual

"concluded" self looks like, but his unreliability ensures that a clear picture of Vickers cannot be easily read. The "logic of paranoia," thus, fractures the narrative into a multiplicity of (mis)representations.

This paranoia forces the narrator to admit, finally, that material evidence of the calf is not important. Having failed to stay awake and watch Vickers, the narrator tries to distance himself further from his own desires within a dream he has: he speaks to his horse, Tim, in the same stable which contains the locked stall; Tim advises him to wait before trying to gain entry. The narrator tellingly states, "I agreed, realizing now that it wasn't the calves I was looking for after all, and that I still had to see inside the stall" (*Lamp* 124), recalling his earlier sentiment of "[w]anting to see but afraid of seeing" (117). Upon rising the next morning, Vickers entreats him to come back and stay longer another time, and "[h]is face softened again as he spoke. There was an expression in his eyes as if he wished that I could stay on now. It puzzled me" (125).

Ultimately, the narrator makes one last effort to get inside the enclosure. After waylaying Vickers, he frantically tries to get at the mystery of the stall, and his fear of Vickers slides away: "Terrified of the stall though, not of Vickers. Terrified of the stall, yet compelled by a frantic need to get inside" (126). No longer is it the heifer which matters to the youth, but rather the need to dissolve the mystery, to cross the threshold of the secret in order to ascertain his own (homosexual) identity. The now-returned Vickers seizes then strikes the narrator, who in a wild panic, asserts, "I knew now for sure that Vickers was crazy" (127); yet this only recalls his earlier discredited assertions, such as having seen the missing calves "a dozen times" (115).

Critical interpretation of the story's end, in which the narrator successfully escapes and finds that the calves had returned home the previous day, usually sustains the argument that Vickers has murdered the housekeeper and put her in the stall. Anthony Dawson writes that "the ending is left vague because the essential action of the story is the struggle of the boy to assert his manhood in the face of Vickers" (50); and Lorraine McMullen offers the standard variation on this, stating that the "truth" is "simultaneously revealed to the boy and to the reader . . . that the box-stall contains the body of Vickers' murdered housekeeper" (1979, 46). Yet it is here, at the end, that Ross elides certainty; the narrator's last comment, fittingly, ends with an ellipsis, a perpetual deferment of the secret. The self-liberation that the narrator may have found by releasing the potentially dangerous secret remains safe within elliptical meaning.

These elisions, which permeate the shifting yet similar patterns of relationships throughout the short stories, perhaps set the stage for biggest "secret" Ross attempts, the enigma that constitutes *As For Me and My House.* Ross gathers the threads of gender asymmetry and "perverse" sexuality as if to speculate more fully on what I have previously defined as "homotextuality." More forcefully than before, Ross employs the trope of sight to designate insight which, in turn, comes to suggest, in my view, homosexual self-regard and narcissism; and these inform the novel's status as homotext, a narrative both allegorical and telescopic in its representation of the repression of homosexual desire.

Chapter Five

As For Me and My House

The specular, passive and potentially erotic nature of the opening of Ross's first novel—that Philip "has thrown himself across the bed and fallen asleep" (1970, 3)[70]—recommends a literal and literary positioning more constitutive of a possessive male onlooker[71] than that of the scribing Mrs. Bentley, especially since the object of the gazing, rather than the *subject* (which exhibits control and possession), is usually female. Considering that Ross is the male writer *looking* on, might Mrs. Bentley be rendered the filter through which Ross, collapsing the distance between himself and his fictive creation, himself gazes at the recumbent Philip? And is a third party drawn in, namely the

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[70] Unless otherwise noted, all quotes to *As For Me and My House* refer to the 1970 reprint.

[71] It is tempting to use Michel Foucault's idea of the panopticon, the prison wherein surveillance is maintained through a controlling gaze, thereby underscoring the relations between power and knowledge. Applying such a (generalized) overview to Ross's work would suggest that Mrs. Bentley, in her diary which is itself a record of surveillance, has appropriated (or attempts to) the kind of power normally associated with a male subject position. Foucault's account, though, does not account for aspects of desire, though desire may indeed be implicated in machinations of any form of control. See Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (trans. 1989). I have avoided a discussion of "gaze" theory in my work since its inscriptions of desire, though often intriguing, eschew the kind of essentialist gestures I see occurring in Ross. For an overview of the "gaze," see Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman's "The Gaze Revisted, or Reviewing Queer Viewing," in *A Queer Romance: Lesbians, Gay Men and Popular Culture* (1995), and Earl Jackson Jr.'s "Graphic Specularity" in his *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation* (1995).

reader, who along with Ross and his narrator, shares in the view?[72] Moreover, is this an instance wherein eroticized looking is concomitant with eroticized *reading*, but only in so far as such readings could be sanctioned through the use of institution of the married couple (in the privacy of their home), as part of the repertoire of what was the (then-) socially intelligible medium of acceptable heteronarrative?

These perspectives, drawn in part from considerations of the engendering of the narrative, the reader's own gender, and the trouble which arises from the contemplation of the novel as "confessional autobiography" (that is, either Ross's or Mrs. Bentley's, or both), are further complicated with the suggestion that Ross is either speaking for women, a group of which he is not biologically or socially part, or through women, implying that he is making an unwarranted move into a fictive universe whose real life parallel he cannot or should not enjoin. Other considerations, that he writes either *as* a woman or *like* a woman also foreground the question of gender trespass and transgression or, at least, a form of literary transvestitism.

In this chapter, I wish to examine these questions, particularly as they evoke the turbulence of emerging sexualities—what counted as sex, what gender meant—in mid-century Canada, and in *As For Me and My House* in particular. I want to explore how Mrs. Bentley, (in a position similar to, but by no means the same as, the way Kaja

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[72] Helen Buss, in her essay on feminist revisions of Ross's novel, writes that an author "may choose neither to validate nor dissent, inviting the reader into a third narrative triangle of textual subjectivity, writerly subjectivity and readerly subjectivity, a triangle indicating an active relationship in which we are never allowed to rest in only one reading of the text" (Moss 43). I agree with Buss's emphasis on subjectivity, especially as it allows for fluctuation in meaning and interpretation, a requisite point for my subsequent discussion of the variability of the homotext.

Silverman writes of Henry James), "occupies an emphatically spectatorial position, [though her] look exercises no control over the field it surveys; it is instead the point of entry for an alien and traumatic sexuality" (157). Simultaneously, I wish to consider the problems of authorial insertion in the narrative and how this complicates notions of (what I have called) Ross's homotext, especially as sight serves as a metaphor for insight and, relatedly, self-regard and narcissism, tropes denoting homosexuality, familiar to those schooled in the psychiatric discourses which informed the societies of Ross's formative years. Finally, I wish to inform and underscore throughout my argument the conflation of homo-narcissism[73] with the novel's status as an allegorical representation of an emerging gay textuality forming under the rubric of an anti-normative, resisting paradigm of difference.

I must first mention that it would be an oversight not to admit that psychological "traits," such as homo-narcissism, amongst many medical discourses labelling homosexuality as a disease, did have socio-cultural ramifications, that they were often taken at face value and internalised by those so labelled. As Jennifer Terry states in her discussion of "deviant historiography," "a lesbian and gay history which hopes to find homosexuals totally free of the influences of pathologizing discourses would be an historiographic optical illusion." In using such an historiography, Terry hopes to "map the techniques by which homosexuality has been marked as different and pathological, and then locate subjective resistances to this homophobia" (58). This oppositionality can, I will assert, work as an appropriate ground in understanding how deviance/deviation

[73] I am drawing on Michael Warner's "Homo-narcissism, or Heterosexuality." See chapter

itself is marked as instances of difference throughout Ross's novel; from this, I submit that Ross uses tropes such as inversion (and self-regard) and homo-narcissism to evince a kind of allegory for homosexual writing as revealed through (though not necessarily constitutive of) difference.

The most evident difference that marks Ross's novel is that although the author is a man, the narrator is a woman. She is not, strictly speaking, an actualised or real woman (and all the socio-cultural meaning thereby contained in that word), though she is a fictive narrative device through which the author may or may not have covertly expressed (at the time) censurable desires. Arguably, Mrs. Bentley's life and desires might be said to approximate Ross's since, as a filter, Mrs. Bentley necessarily expresses her desires through acceptable (read: heterosexual) social contexts, in as much as Ross might be said to look at Philip or Paul through that culturally intelligible medium called the heteronormative narrative.

However protean Ross's writing may have been, though, Mrs. Bentley, as a "created woman" within a culturally specific context—one which operates under the assumptions that a woman's desire (for a man) follows "naturally" from gender, which in turn follows from her biological sex—cannot be said to represent *exactly* Ross's desires, unless such desires are always (as they often have been) read as an overdetermined subtext. She reflects, rather, the social category of "female," despite her creator's own gender status, since, I argue, she is neither a Ross surrogate nor, to favour and invert Karl Heinrich Ulrich's late 19th century maxim, a male soul in a female body.

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three.

If, in recalling Kahn's "narrative transvestism" —and I am not sure that Kahn's is an altogether useful paradigm—we entertain the notion that Ross performs a kind of narrative drag, such gender-confused positioning might be helpful in drawing attention to specific locations of homosexuality in mid-century Canada; yet, ironically, it also serves to draw attention *away* from homosexuality in that it depicts homosexuality as a *masquerade* but never "the real thing." An application of this facade as a critique functions in much the same manner as imagining that the "false fronts" frequently observed by Mrs. Bentley are conjoined with "closet doors"; whatever appears *behind* those "fronts" is never the object of inquiry since the impetus to "discover" homosexuals, in a kind of hide-and-seek game of "There's one!", becomes, with this critical verve, more significant than ascertaining the *subjective nature* of *homosexuals* (or at least its possibility). As a result, Ross, drawn into the book as the homosexual-in-disguise, might be identified as any number of his fictive creations,[74] all within his Kroetsch-like "female book," one analogous to his acquired female body—a (technically speaking) reductive biological notion of equating homosexuality with a desire for the marker of femaleness, a woman's body—and which plays on an essentialist notion of sex and gender as always biologically site specific.[75]

However, might this be the way that Ross understood homosexuality? If Ross actually did engage (or were to be understood as engaging) in such narrative transvestism, what does this mean for how we read cultural contexts which may have prescribed and

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[74] The "protean" nature of Ross, as essayed by Raoul, and Ross's multiple identifications *as* his characters, as essayed by Fraser, are critiqued in the third chapter.

[75] See the third chapter for my critique of Kroetsch's female erotics, and for Fraser's

proscribed an(y) understanding of an actualised homosexual man? Do we continue, *must* we continue, to study him through realms of either fantasy or narrative drag? Rephrased, the question which needs to be asked is if Ross's narration, his writing *as it is*, can be said to be in any way homosexual. It may seem outrageous to pose this question, but less so when it is always already assumed that Ross's discourse is heterosexual since his narrative is presumed to be *congruent* with his subject, an ostensibly heterosexual couple—and the dodging sense implied by "ostensible" is part of the point. It might be more accurate to say that the most we can propose is that *As For Me and My House* reads like the work of a homosexual man in 1940's Canadian prairie, which is the point I am setting out to explore.

This gives rise to the opposing problematic (or defence) that Ross, given such critiques of his work, is not being allowed to write on any subject he wishes, that perhaps he indeed intended to write this novel "straight"-forwardly. Yet this supposition is but a argument for the naturalised status quo, since such arguments only come up when a defence of a usual course of things is made; why another position should not be either equally valid or perhaps even favoured is never made or foregrounded but must always situate itself as a position requiring a vigorous defence not required of the status quo fix. So too must we understand that this plays into a potential reinforcement of binaries, that Ross must be on one side or another. Certainly, Ross lived in a world of enforced sexual difference and, as such, non-heterosexual affiliation (this, itself, is a definition presupposing that heterosexuality is always the origin from which all arguments emanate)

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rendering of Ross's text to his "dis-eased" body.

may have been signalled through either perversions or appropriations but cannot rightly be said to occur through wholesale embracing of what was considered, in the case of Mrs. Bentley, the biological "opposite."

Philip's unconscious passivity is a signal that such a fantasy of occupying a (female) subordinate position (that "biological opposite"),[76] though temporary, might be a position from which he needs to be continually awoken. His silences, here as elsewhere throughout the book, do not indicate a steely reserve but its opposite: the fear of not being able to demonstrate a dominant (male) subject position, signalled by its analogous masculinist gestures. Philip is always in danger of becoming subordinate, in as much as a homotext—the denoted reading—is always subordinate though threatening to the ostensible heterotext; as such, Mrs. Bentley's diary is a document of such a crisis, particularly as it may be simultaneously viewed as a crisis of fictive or mimetic representation—that dialectic of display and concealment?—in Ross's own writing, writing which escapes, I reason, normative understandings, meanings and interpretations.

Lee Edelman argues that homosexuality, as a scribed reproduction, is "constructed to bear the cultural burden of the rhetoricity inherent in 'sexuality' itself; the consequence . . . is that a distinctive literariness or textuality, an allegorical representation, operates within the very concept of 'homosexuality'" (xvi). Writing by a homosexual, then, may be said to bear, always, the mark of difference, whether or not such difference may lend

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[76] In writing of the relation between culture and nature, Judith Butler asks if "whether the discourse which figures the action of construction as a kind of imprinting or imposition is not tacitly masculinist, whereas *the figure of the passive surface, awaiting that penetrating act whereby meaning is endowed*, is not tacitly or—perhaps—quite obviously feminine" (1993, 5, emphasis added). See also Silverman, 72.

itself to an interpretation as subtext. It is perhaps invariable that such alterity finds expression as deviation and so gives itself over to medical labelling of deviance. Regardless, might a connection be made between this sense of the "alternative" and the textual structuring (or stylisation) of the difference (that was once) termed deviance, especially as it may solicit certain readings bespeaking alterity? Edelman also writes that "[l]anguage, syntax, the appurtenances of 'style,' *perform* more truly than they *register* an erotic cathexis, a condensation or dilation of pleasure, a circuit of fantasmatic identifications that articulate desire" (xvi). Or, as Robert Martin puts it, in writing of the literary performance of self-same desires, "[t]he homo text, like the homo body, will not produce meaning; it will be it" (1993, 291).

Does Philip's body, performing female passivity, threaten to let leave the omnipotent signifier of the (at least then-empowering) phallus he possesses, rendering him analogous to a woman who "lacks" such signification, at the same moment Mrs. Bentley grasps a different phallus to *inscribe* such passivity, and, in her appropriation, engage the possibility of the spectacle of male castration? But consider that we encounter Mrs. Bentley, in the opening paragraph of her diary, at the same moment we encounter the (male) author in the opening paragraph of his novel: as writers. Normally, we do not elide the two but force a distinction between the two "sensibilities" in order to preserve, at least for ourselves, a normative gendered narrative. Do the conflicting signals—a man writing a woman writing of a man positioned as a woman—foment narrative conflation of all characters, resulting in (multiple) readings of Ross writing either *as* or *like* or *for* a woman, signalling not only difference but a difference measured as what would, in mid-

century Canada, be deviant or at least non-normative?[77]

The only way to sort through these questions, some of which adhere to knowledge as wrought from naturalised discourses such as biology-as-destiny, is to suggest that the text must be considered not marked just by gender but perhaps also by a gendered reading, one that cannot help but see somewhat queerly, that is, necessarily *different* in every instance of reading, in every instance of reader. Martin writes that "[I]f a text is to become polymorphous, protean and textured, reading for its part becomes almost impossible except as a (re)creation or rewriting" (1993, 291). This suggests that readers necessarily interpret any text through the privileged imperatives of then-circulating socio-cultural edicts. Reading is besotted with looking and self-regard: *Can we identify ourselves in the text through empathetic recognition with a character*? This brims with the idea that we mine any text with many of our (preconceived) desires, in order that these desires may be affirmed or at least in some way reinforced.

Ross's ambiguity of (in)sight, revealed through the multitude of approaches to the question of how we might read, itself an activity of sight. Philip's passivity, for example, is *the* mark of *As For Me and My House*, one that serves as a platform from which we may undertake to observe the markings of difference throughout the novel. Sight, as an allegory of understanding (or misunderstanding, as in "blindsight"), parallels Edelman's notion of homosexuality as an allegory of the representation of sexuality itself. What sight and sexuality, then, both share are their representative natures: they are never the

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[77] This is especially important for considerations of the instances of gender instability found in the novel, the places where the markings of gender are not directly affiliated with a presumed and prescribed biologically given sex.

subject itself but a means, embodied as the transcended homosexual object, by which to understand the different "truths" of a given text.

(i) "I let him be the man about the house"

Extending Edelman's principle, we find that the trope of self-consideration, *insight*, parallels the metaphor that is the *invert*; as forms of self-regard, each hail the concept of narcissism. Certainly, a deliberation of the critical incitement of narcissism is inescapable when discussing homosexuality prior to more emancipatory modern times. Andrew Hewitt writes that the category of narcissism is the means "whereby homosexuality releases itself into the very structure of all desire" (26). Not only does sight inform the structure of narcissism, Hewitt adds, but that the desires inherent in self-regard extend to include that of the very operations of self-seeing; he proposes: "I desire to see my seeing. The desire to objectify not only the object of the gaze but the gaze itself is a desire to reduce desire . . . to the level of representation" (30). The self-representation of the ordering gaze invests itself not "in that which has been ordered, but in the act of ordering itself" (31); so, homosexuality is homosexual "by virtue of its investment in the narcissistic contemplation of its own contemplation" (30).

The result, he concludes, is a reduction of the homosexual to the level of object, as I have noted above, on par with the historical understanding of women as object and never subject. Ross's homosexuality, then, as congruent with early 20th century notions of inversion, plays also to a conceit that homosexuality found its correlative, in certain then-circulating socio-cultural understandings of gays and lesbians, in an identification with

women, though not, I would argue, *as* women, since even those embracing the most essentialist conceptualisations of gender could not (ironically) biologically square the proposition of biological males as being somehow biologically female.

The text, then, might be said to serve as the subject of Ross's gaze, as the repository for what Silverman calls "the repertoire of culturally intelligible images" (353): it is his vehicle by which to observe the construction of self-reflection itself. The writing of the gaze, then, locates Ross's own position as homosexual object as the *subject* of the novel, thus moving, simultaneously, the homotext and homosexuality into the realm of visible, though it is a visibility accessible only, it would seem, through a *different* reading, one that pays close attention to the markers of difference, such as the aforementioned trope of sight.

That Ross, the author, is not a woman might be taken as a signal, despite its obviousness, that we should look toward difference as both a governing discourse and a disrupting oppositionality while reading the novel, and that, at the very least, we should not view any character as embodying "real" (read: heterosexual) men and women. Just after her opening description of Philip, Mrs. Bentley draws attention that Philip has had difficulty in putting up stovepipes, noting metonymically that he "hasn't the hands for it" (3), when she means to say that he is not dextrous when it comes to such physical labour. She follows this reference to physical delicacy with a subtle barb: "I let him be the man about the house" (3), tacitly suggesting that at other times he may not be such but, moreover, that it is she who makes such determinations, ones which underscore, to use an appropriate figure of speech, the way she sees things. She is the arbiter of assaying

gender normativity, tacitly apologizing for her husband's apparent inability to measure up to what would be, for the public eye, an acceptable standard of "maleness."

John Moss, in "Mrs. Bentley and the Bicameral Mind," describes this as Mrs. Bentley's attempt to occasion a workable myth for their lives, one which "depends on Philip's masculinity, his function as the heromale, and this function she repeatedly usurps. To build the myth, she must shape the man; and in shaping the man, she destroys the myth" (Stouck 142). Their performance is enacted for the possibility of how others may *see* them—how others may *read* the myth—and so the attempt at making *an* appearance becomes elided with the allegorically suggestive making *up* appearances. Not only is Mrs. Bentley involved in the constant surveillance of her husband, she must also survey her own writing to ensure that any marks which may suggest deviation remain cloaked despite the ostensibly candid realm of her diary.

Ross's book itself, then, becomes a negotiation between apparent falsity and apparent reality: "apparent," because such negotiations are always attempts at approximation, and as such, the Bentleys live out a series of crises in (self-) representation. The most evident metaphor for the perversion of the presumed "natural" realm—the subjective male province of the universal and unmarked—is Philip-as-artist, a man given not to erecting stovepipes but to the dandified realm of aesthetics. He paints false-fronted buildings and writes sermons he will later deliver, although, as Mrs. Bentley notes, he "still handicaps himself with a guilty feeling that he ought to *mean* everything he says" (4, emphasis added). She combines the two acts of aesthetic creation—drawing and writing—calling them "a kind of symbol, a summing up" (4) for the apparently

compromised Philip. Here, the "symbol" itself denotes allegory, the mode of representation that mediates and links subordinate illustrations. Philip's anxiety (wracked as he is not by compromise but what is allegorically understood as the failure to perform a more normative gender role) expresses itself as the "mood" of the mark of difference in the novel; his troubled exterior is a mediation of what he *sees* himself to be, his *insight,* exhibited either through his bodily expressions or his paintings, however imperfectly such endeavours may be interpreted by his wife.

His anxiety, functioning as the underpinnings of allegorical sight, functions as a kind of "worry," that what readers may see in the text might be misinterpreted or, more importantly, that it may not be *ironically misread* by the more discerning reader. Mrs. Bentley's own reading of Philip's depictions of false fronts leads her to assert that they are "outlandish things, the front of a store built up to look like a second storey" (4). Self-evidently, "second storey" connotes the subtextual "second story," the story to which the reader may be blind; or it may be the story which Ross intimates is so preposterously overdetermined that a reader may bypass such obviousness in favour of a normative meaning. At an allegorical pitch, the interpretative level that Ross promotes and that readers negotiate, the very act of ordering—the literary structuring of that "second story"—becomes apparent; and so, recalling Hewitt, Ross's self-representation leads to questions of how such narcissistic contemplation reveals itself in the novel, not only in the different ways it is revealed but, moreover, in how the (homo)text might be constitutive of difference itself.

Mrs. Bentley appears to misread the difference(s) implied by the false fronts, in

that she is one of those readers of "second stories" who, in interpreting them for her "readers," favours the "preposterously overdetermined" approach. Dismissing the fronts as "pretentious, ridiculous," she scoffs at Philip's view of them as "stricken with a look of self-awareness and futility" (4). Yet if Mrs. Bentley's diary renders her as her own reader, then there is no ostensible need to assert an interpretation of falsity, to prove any kind of falseness, since within the diary everything is invariably a construct not requiring verification. She effectively writes to herself, in as much as Ross writes *of* such a narcissistic process.

The reader has little else but Mrs. Bentley's own insight into Philip's art, rendering what Philip "sees" as necessarily what she thinks he sees. Added to this, of course, is the reader's own negotiation of her report, simultaneous as it is with Ross's own. Her (self-) critique, therefore, recommends the allegory of sight as an opening up of space, structured within or as the novel, which allows for readings of difference(s), and it is within such spaces that room is found for differences in *instances* of reading (particularly readings of sex/gender instability). For example, Mrs. Bentley internalizes (in her diary) what she sees as Philip's failure as an artist but is blind to the manner in which she balances her somewhat sympathetic critique of her husband with the luxury of self-pity. Rather, the "hurt" she feels (4) she projects onto her surroundings, "looking at the dull bare walls" (5); within the space of this reflective internalization of such bareness, she expresses a longing for a child which, she states, would fulfil in some fashion *Philip's*, not *her*, inability to fulfil himself (not *herself*) and, at the same time, we might assume, relieve her of the self-imposed pressures caused by her presumed infertility.

But the imagined child, rendered as a symbol for what is missing, is what Mrs. Bentley mistakenly sees as a metaphor for fertility and, relatedly, fruition. She reads into something which does not exist—the symbolic child—in order to alleviate her feelings about what does not exist—an actual child. In externalizing her feelings of emptiness, she does not vanquish them but, rather, extends them and makes them *literarily* visible. Ross structures the play of "insight/blindsight" thematically implicit *as* Mrs. Bentley's diary, and the resulting ambiguities destabilise narrative sameness—and its attendant regulated methods of writing and reading—in favour of a sustained, though discreetly displaced, gesturing toward "other" possibilities inherent in appreciations of difference.

The novel's allegorical drive, then, obtains its fuel in Mrs. Bentley's finding sustenance in this unfulfilled longing—she later reveals that she gave birth to a still-born child many years ago—since it delays or defers the couple's discrete encounters with the "essence" or "truth" of the lives of one another. Her emotional perversity, that she continues "taking" from Philip (5) despite a recognition that she should stop, ironically serves to heighten the anxiety of not producing children which, presumably, would give the family a semblance of normalcy in the community.

Reflecting a critical Marxist tenet concerning the family as a self-perpetuating conduit for capitalist production, Martin writes that "all that is perverse that leads to no production" (287): the couple's inability—unwillingness?—to procreate suggests an equal stake in maintaining the perversity of their relationship, though Mrs. Bentley seems not to want to acknowledge how Philip might be contributing to the status quo in his avoidance of amorous contact with her. Rather, she looks inside—in the room in which she sees the

recumbent, passive Philip; to the bare walls onto which projects her (maternally) barren state; to her internal emotional state—and decides that she is merely being sentimental and so compels herself to look outside and beyond interiority to the possibility of that grand "immense night." Not surprisingly, perhaps, she writes: "It frightens me, makes me feel lost"; subsequently, she reverts to self-regard, to thoughts of Philip and the bare walls (5). She can only read surfaces, and this is reflected in her diary *as* the diary, a literary record which points toward other meanings but cannot itself divulge the essence of whatever those "other meanings" are.

(ii) Image as the mirror

If, with narcissistic-based models of (self-) desire, we read Ross as an undertaking by which to probe and further contest classifications of (self-)identificatory writing and reading (such as minority-identified "gay"), what of other models of desire which aim either to discount or negate those desires read as "other"? I have suggested here that when we read Ross we might abandon the (otherwise useful) notions of duality critics often find at the core of Ross's writing. But it is even more than reading Ross one way and then another: it is that these "other" readings (including dualities) occur simultaneously so that, perhaps, any encoding or subtext "naturally" evokes a play upon the readerly self-assurance wrought from normative literary insight. The reading of *As For Me and My House* can never mean one thing or another but always simply "other," and thus multiple and differentiated; and it is this multiplicity which Ross underscores through a narrative structure of allegory which, in allowing readings to fold one upon

another, guarantees a virtually permanent suspension of certitude in favour of prompting the alterity and inconstancy of desire.

Marilee Lindemann writes that bodies often signify desire, pain, deviance or disorder, in the sense that they may be non-procreative. The "general ambivalence toward the condition of embodiment" Lindemann finds in Willa Cather's work (39) finds parallels in Ross's depiction of Mrs. Bentley, whose register of the shape or pleasures of her own body is spare. This avoidance of the physical suggests that Mrs. Bentley's emotional "bare walls" reflect both a psychologically narcissistic and physiologically troubled condition, or that her biological status as woman does not solicit the kind of advances she might otherwise hope for from Philip. Thus, when she looks at Philip's body "as the object of a gaze that is either punitive or possessive, it [the body] is made ec-centric [sic]—off-centered in the sense of not fully belonging to the person who inhabits it" (Lindemann 35-6). This figure extends to her view of her own body: it is beyond the representation of the diary, a secret that comes into view by its virtue of secrecy. Both bodies, and the text that encloses them, retain this "off-centered" quality, and the fissures attendant upon such aberrations bleed space, allowing for the multiplicity of interpretations bespeaking differences.

The narcissism, or inward-looking natures, of both Bentleys reveals how *As For Me and My House* plays upon mirror imaging, both in form and content, with special reference to how narcissism plays as a trope of (homo)sexual inversion. Hewitt writes that "the moment of any apparent presence is literarily embodied as the representation of a representation, a literary performance of identity through a reification and self-

reflection that is endlessly mirrored, a narcissism reclaimed as both empirically based in notions of socio-cultural identity and in repetitions and ungraspable instances as boded forth by the ongoing reflections in the mirror" (180).[78] The text itself, as Mrs. Bentley's diary, is an internal reflection set on paper presumably mirroring the direct thoughts of its author, when in fact it can only represent or approximate such musings. It is as though the words, representing Mrs. Bentley's thought, and because not read by anyone, are caught in the very contemplation of reflection itself: mimetic structures perform but cannot enact (outside the novel) moments of self-presence if the text is left merely to fold upon itself. It might be said, then, that a diary, as a closed venue open to no one, is always in the proper company of itself, in a manner not dissimilar to the way in which Philip's closeting reflects a desire for the company of self.

It is ironic that the perversion exhibited by a desire for "the same" is shared by both homosexual and heterosexual identities, both of which are figured—though in very distinct configurations—in the novel. In the former, it is a seeking for a physical reflection of the same-self; in the latter, it arises as a desire for contiguity and unambiguousness—as desire which expresses (invisibly) a naturalised normativity. Homosexuality or otherness issues in the novel as a kind of passing as heterosexual since ambiguity, literalized as allegorically decentered, does not have access to vehicles of expression except *through* heteronarrative forms. As Edelman writes,

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[78] Hewitt also states that the mimetic "serves to construct personal identities through the act of representation, claiming no ontological anteriority for the putative 'subject' of representation. The mimetic performs as the mime performs, acting—and re-enacting—a representation. [It] stresses the moment of presence inherent in the act of representation itself" (180). Hewitt's intimation closely follows Judith Butler's notion of the

> Heterosexuality has thus been able to reinforce the status of its own authority as "natural" (i.e., unmarked, authentic, and non-representational) by defining the straight body against the "threat" of an "unnatural" homosexuality—a "threat" the more effectively mobilized by generating concern about homosexuality's unnerving (and strategically manipulable) capacity to "pass," to remain invisible, in order to call into being a variety of disciplinary "knowledges" through which homosexuality might be recognized, exposed, and ultimately rendered, more ominously, invisible once more. (4)

The invisible threat that Mrs. Bentley perceives comes from the "immense night," with the wind blowing through it personified as "indifferent, liplessly mournful" (5). The sky becomes a metaphor for an unknowable quality: what she looks at and senses is not indifference as such, but the more unsettling notion of *difference*, and its ability to cloak itself within or as sameness. She finds that she cannot, in the darkness, distinguish between the comfort of that familiar quality of the known and the deceit brooding within the depths of a night. She notes somewhat quixotically that the church "black even against the darkness, tower[s] ominously up through the night and merg[es] with it" (5). Simply put, when she looks into the "indifferent" sky, she sees her image—how she *figures* in her own life and her conception of it—in the mirror and becomes frightened by an incomprehensible reflection, the reflection of a differing "self," one that threatens her, ironically, with distinction rather than *in*distinction.

After she retreats into the house and, again, the "bare walls that depress [her]" (5),

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performative, which I do not take up here.

she describes Mrs. Finley's visit, one involving her watching Philip watching Mrs. Finley's 12-year-old sons, "[Philip's] eyes critical and moody." Philip's apparent desire for a youth "strung just a little on the fine side, responsive to too many overtones" reflects, according to his wife, a wish to build "in his own image" (6). This narcissism parallels Mrs. Finley's aim of "managing the town and making it over in her own image," attendant with a "crusading steel in her eye" (5). Ross matches disparate desires—Mrs. Finley's social one with Philip's internal one—in order to set up an ostensible match of wills, fought along the lines of self-control, projected coolly as adherence to social will in Finley's case, and as paternal instinct in Philip's. Mrs. Finley's desire, a narcissistically motivated (and somewhat anti-social) activity, is nevertheless in plain view whereas Philip's is a socially commendable goal—to create a family—that paradoxically reflects a private and narcissistic will to self-create through biological perpetuity. Philip's aberrant desire for a self-admiring and re-creative "sameness" subtends Mrs. Finley's desire for social sameness. Ross rewrites Mrs. Finley's unadmirable exploitation of her desire for greater social good as Philip's ambiguously differentiated desire for personal (and potentially sexually "perverse") gain.

This mirroring serves, in the novel, as a form of reciprocity indicative not of binary opposites but, rather, a deliberation upon how difference is found to operate within the same (textual) framework as (hierarchically) presumed heteronarrative. Immediately following the paralleling of Philip's *modus operandi* with Mrs. Finley's, Mrs. Bentley discusses "Propriety and Parity" (6) as false gods symbolizing the formality of the rites of exchange, in this instance, dinners at each other's houses. The correlation of social duties

depends on an economy not of Christian piety but of pagan-inspired belief: Mrs. Bentley calls it 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" (6). The mutuality underscores a striving toward appearances whose means and ends are, on the surface, respective of difference(s) but are superficially and seriously no different.

(iii) As for me and my homotext

As stated, Ross imbeds narcissism in the formal structure of the text, thereby substantiating a self-absorption corroborated both by Mrs. Bentley's choice of explication—the diary, which is meant to be read by no one and is reflective of one's own interiority only—and by Philip's cordoning off of himself in his study, a perhaps overdetermined metaphor for his closet. At the thematic level, the past reflects upon the present through the parallels Mrs. Bentley essays, such as the continuity of the small main-street towns, or the asceticism of the withered landscape reflective of a similarly austere interiority. These, again, are not to be understood as binaries which oppose but as cross-reflections which refuse hierarchy in favour of differentiated angular viewings; that is to say, the differences suggested by the book entreat a reading that recognizes difference in every instance of reading.

Does this make *As For Me and My House* exemplary of the kind of queer topologies currently circulating? Or, rather, might it speak to the notion that Ross's book is a homotext which reads—and solicits a reading of—difference to demonstrate that homosexual difference itself is firmly lodged within the culture that once denied its

existence except as a medically deviant discourse? Martin writes that a "text will be 'homosexual' to the extent that it presents itself as both subject and object of desire, a text in the act of beholding itself, often through the mirror of the other, and loving itself" (1993, 293), recalling his earlier statement that the "homo text, like the homo body, will not produce meaning; it will be it" (291). Martin's reading of Barthes gestures toward a recuperation of the psychological model of homo-narcissism: rather than merely evoking the disenfranchised position of subject, one that gay men are seen to occupy as abject (or failed) "women," a reassertion of self-positioning as subject—presumably, all men are raised as heterosexual and have to some degree internalised the subject position—is required to obtain both sites of desire. In this manner, the positions are conflated, to the point that any binary is destroyed; the mirroring summoned through constant self-regard results in the reading of the same-self through the prism of constantly changing angles. The aggregate asserts difference not only in each instance of the scripting of the self—which might occur in *auto*biography—but in each reading undertaken as well. The homotext, therefore, is not a product arising from a consideration of its possible difference *from* a heteronarrative (of which it is nevertheless inescapably a part) but, rather, is constitutive of the structuring of difference itself. Likewise, it is text *and* subtext, sight *and* insight, anti-representation *and* allegorical representation. Edelman's formulation, that "a distinctive literariness or textuality, an allegorical representation, operates within the very concept of 'homosexuality'" (xvi), underscores how Ross's novel operates within the paradigms of heteronarratives as signifying homotextuality, much in the same way that Ross's use of ambiguous language to create (new) meaning

nevertheless depends on the available discourses circulating as unambiguous received meanings.

The characterisation of Paul serves a (rather obvious) tool to study what Martin calls "a reclaimed narcissism of language" (1993, 294), as it may be structured in the novel. Paul explains to the Bentleys that he is a philologist: "[Y]ou know—lover of words" (8). The first example he relates to them is "*offertory* [which] comes from a word meaning *sacrifice*" (8). "Offertory" is a derivation of a word signalling a harsher, more demanding forfeiture or relinquishment, and is one that suggests a more voluntary form of atonement or yielding for the purposes of worship or supplication. Paul's efforts are involved with not necessarily a simple explanation of words and their histories but, rather, how words' meanings may shift over time, and how they may, from a modern perspective, appear to contradict their ostensibly initial "meaning." Indeed, built into Paul's role is a virtual critique against the dominance of presupposing atemporality and universalization of meaning. As an authority on "author/ization," he is more interested in what gives rise to these traces and how origins are forgotten or made to disappear; effectively, he calls meaning into question in order to valorize difference *as* deviation, not simply to summon the possibility of a word's opposite(s).

As if to pay reverence to the notion of elision itself (inherent in the sense of trace), Ross tellingly has Mrs. Bentley speak on behalf of Paul, in one narrative instance, as though to reciprocate, in the very structure of the text, Paul's detective work. Mrs. Bentley reports that, after she plays Handel's *Largo*, she plays it "a second time, because it was simple and steadfast, and good for a man." Yet she then writes: "That's the way he

talks, with a wise, innocent solemnity" (8). Although an initial reading of the former sentence gives us to believe these are Mrs. Bentley's thoughts, the sentence's meaning must be restructured to take into consideration the information conveyed by the subsequent one, that it is really a paraphrase of what Paul has apparent said. She—or Ross—intimates that every "first time" must be read that "*second* time." And Paul, a man paradoxically "wise" yet "innocent" in his solemnity, enigmatically explains that what he feels about either the *Largo* or being "simple and steadfast"—it is not clear which—has nothing to do with being religious, begging the question of whomever said it might. So Paul, the lover of words, further clarifies that he does not want to give the Bentley's "a false impression" that (it would seem) he may be religious but that he appreciates, rather, the music, "and the way Mrs. Bentley plays" (8).

It appears as though Ross teases us here with a playful demonstration of the problems philologists face: Mrs. Bentley's writing enacts the kind of elision Paul seems so concerned about exploiting, in his work against obscuring or effacing origins which would serve in either resurrecting or affirming a historiography of meaning. Ross's "second time" suggests that any meanings to be derived from the content of the text inhere within the play of allegories a reader may discern. If we might consider, for a moment, that Paul is the stand-in for the author (the implied author, not necessarily Ross) in that he is concerned with author/ization, and that he appreciates the way Mrs. Bentley "plays," might this be Ross's denotation of an appreciation of (her) wordplay, her own author/ization as she plays the gambit with Paul in eliding meanings? And perhaps as a gesture of reciprocity which simultaneously signals his own admiration for keeping

secrets through discretion, Paul calls Mrs. Bentley by her formal name, thus keeping her first name hidden but ever present through a somewhat foregrounded "absence." This may be part of a natural predisposition for formalities, but it is an odd display considering his own predilection for speaking on a first name basis. Also, the formal address appears to be directed to Philip, the only other auditor present, though the compliment is clearly for Mrs. Bentley, another instance of "doublespeak."

As Mrs. Bentley later writes, "You learn a lot from a philologist" (76). In prefacing her declaration, though, she again paraphrases Paul without stating whether what she is writing is just a summary or is what she has understood from Paul's latest lecture. She writes:

> But while words socially come up in the world, most of them morally go down. "Retaliate," for instance: once you could retaliate a favor or a kindness—it simply meant to give again as much as had been given—but memories being short for benefits and long for grievances, its sense was gradually perverted, and its better nature lost. (76)

Mrs. Bentley (again) appears to allow Paul to appropriate the narrative to disseminate on philology, and the etymological drift, here as elsewhere, suggests the trope of deviation. However, the notion that the "perversion" of meaning more often than not results in a "better nature lost" is not true, if we are to believe the examples given by Paul, the guardian of residual meanings. The string of "morally"-based words Mrs. Bentley lists at the end of the diary entry suggests (since they come after the paragraph, above) a decrease in kinds of virtuous propriety: Paul mentions "cupid/*cupidity*," "Eros/*erotic*," and

"Aphrodite/*aphrodisiac*"; but only the etymological evolution of "Venus/*venereal*" hints at the appropriation of a "better nature" in service of "perversion" (76). The inclusion of the one amongst the four appears to counter Mrs. Bentley's (or Paul's) assertion of (what the reader presumably discerns as) a general moral degeneration in the temporal unfolding of meaning. (This is aside from the fact that the corresponding synonyms are meant to underscore a subtext of amorousness between the two game-players.) Might it be that Ross's play here is, rather, to ironically valorize perversions of meaning, that what one might take to be an (d)evolution into deviance is better understood as that better nature regained when considered in context?

When Paul, earlier, characterizes the landscape's contours at his brother's ranch as "so strong and pure in form that just as they are they're like a modernist's abstractions," Mrs. Bentley downplays his enthusiasm as belonging to "a homesick rancher with a streak of poetry" who "oughtn't to be taken too literally" (45). Or literarily, perhaps. When the two are in Philip's study, Mrs. Bentley observes that the study "sees and knows him [Philip] for what he really is, but it won't let slip a word" (46). The combination of the metaphors of keen sight and tacit understanding; the obvious play on the meaning of "word" and on word playing itself; and the correlation of these to (in)sight and knowledge attests that the reader is, in Philip's room, in the realm of self-regard and -referentiality.

Mrs. Bentley's personification of the room as co-conspirator in constraint—it is also "loyal" and "reserved" (46)—intimates that she is, at some level, aware of the nature of Philip's difference, an understanding of which is mostly inaccessible. Therefore, in her attempt to explain her own lack of "insight," she reverts to using an extended metaphor—

the allegorical perversion of personification—which in turn helps her to give a vague yet discernible human shape to her potential (mis)reading of Philip's inner life. Recalling Lindemann's comment on how deviant bodies may signify non-procreativity, the deviant "body" that Mrs. Bentley effectively creates through her personification of the room does not bear fruit, so to speak, except as an allegory; she discovers nothing about Philip though she implicitly admits that all she knows is that she knows little. The walls in Philip's study—the walls which are metonymic of the house (*House*?)—are no doubt also emblematic of the "bare walls" Mrs. Bentley continually complains about: she sees nothing and so builds a phantasm to allay her fears that either she cannot fathom the "truth" of Philip—like the wild unfathomable night sky—or that she does have insight into his ghostly closet but can deal with it only through the mediation of words. Ironically, the "truth" of Philip might be revealed if she could only read the writing on the wall; but lacking insight, willed or otherwise, Mrs. Bentley prefers blindsight over insight, in order that the house remain just that, housed in her diary, and not something it may be rewritten/re-read as, such as a homotext.

When she writes, then, that she knows the books "as well as he does—the covers anyway" (46), she highlights the significance of the cliché of judging a book by its cover. Paul returns that, in fiction, it is knowledge rather than love that is sought, a connotation that the inner life of insight is the realm of art(ists). Later that night, after dinner, Paul mentions that "sponge cake" is a corrupted form of "Spanish cake" (47), an aside curiously sandwiched between Mrs. Bentley recollections of Steve and her "catching Philip's eyes on me" (47). Certainly, the adulteration of language as it affects the Bentley

trio, especially as it pertains to what it might *signify*, is acknowledged by Mrs. Bentley when she writes that their communal false front is "such a trim, efficient little sign; it's such a tough, deep-rooted tangle that it hides" (61). The tangle that is the perversion of meaning suggests that the sign's bent rests with its indecipherable nature, or in that it is, at least, difficult to see, to read, or to interpret in any normative manner. Paul's interjection of the corruption of language denotes that the content of signification—the tangle that is the Bentley trio—is always open to the inconstancy of the forces struggling over meaning, be they those of the status quo or those favouring anti-normative difference.

(iv) "The pipe belonged to both of us": The aesthetics of gender

Ross questions perhaps, in the codification of desire in his homotext, the ideological implications of representational literary forms oriented toward the construction of a "natural" heterosexual subject. He does not write about homosexuals because the historical object of that representation is itself constructed—literarily performed—through the text.[79] As Hewitt writes:

> Homosexuality is not simply "there" if it is itself produced and constructed as discourse—among other things, in the act of writing. Writing itself becomes a form of positing, a reification, a location of a "there" where homosexuality must subsequently "be." [...] Only in locating the "there" of writing and in elucidating the "Being" of homosexuality itself does one fundamentally question the paradigm

[79] I have paraphrased, in a fashion, Hewitt; see Hewitt 203.

> of aesthetic reflection and begin to understand writing as a process of construction. (137)

Hewitt locates the act of writing, a process of signification, as part of the constructions contributing to (homosexual) identity formation. He identifies one of these arrangements, aestheticization, especially in its relation to both narcissism and literary self-construction, as being too narrowly lodged in the historical categorization of "vulgar psychoanalytic paradigms of homosexuality" (138); it should not, he concludes, be considered as synonymous with narcissism if we are to move beyond representational understandings of (historicized) homosexuality.

I wonder, though, that Ross could not help but identify with psycholiterary discourses widely circulating as received wisdom, in his formative years and while he was writing *As For Me and My House* in the 1930s. In the Canadian socio-cultural realm of the early 20th century, the fallout of the Wilde trial, concomitant with the increasing medicalization of the homosexual "condition" (as discussed earlier), undoubtedly contributed to continuing literary representations of homosexuality as either a special category of moral and curative disapprobation—embodied as "the third sex" and medicalized as the invert—or the dandy, personified as effete, feminine or aesthetically neutered. Hewitt convincingly goes on to argue that "[l]iterature does not simply present and give expression to homosexual realities, but offers a space of potential fabulation that counters the ideological 'passivity' and representationalism of other discourses on homosexuality" (138). I would argue, however, that the space of fabulation which Ross occupied was nevertheless limited by what he saw reflected in the (relatively)

conservative society around him. In a time when sex and gender roles were enforced by adherence to undisputed normative values, Ross's grasp of "other discourses" of homosexuality were assuredly restricted (though I would by no means discount the possibility of Ross's resistance to these views). As Lindemann writes of queer revisionism's tendency to efface specific identity formations, "[D]oes the anti-identitarian stance of much queer work disallow the making of history in the name of a stable and coherent group of individuals defined by something as quaintly modernist and humanist as their genders and sexualities?" (80).

If indeed Ross at all attempts to codify his writing—and it cannot be known if he ever did so, consciously or not[80]—as a strategy of self-aestheticization, then the notion of a self-styled autobiographer, such as Mrs. Bentley, might have been especially appealing. Of course, writing across gender, as the conceit of "writing as a woman" would imply, allows Ross to distance himself from an expressed desire for Philip (or Paul) while paradoxically positioning himself as possibly a substitute for the (unmediated) autobiographer and, thus, potentially homosexual by virtue of a tacit identification with the category of "women." At the same time, *desiring* as a heterosexual woman legitmitates Ross's desires for men like Philip. What might constitute any "real" homosexual existence is, in Ross's novel, always only an allegorical representation of the unrepresentable, since Ross had to (publicly) "watch himself," figuratively and (psycho)literarily.

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[80] Keith Fraser, in his memoir, notes that Ross, upon reflection, states that the novel may have been homosexual (32, 41), but Ross's "recollection," prompted by Fraser's questioning, serves more as a buttress for Fraser's psychoanalytic doctoring that it does as

The aesthetics of such textual self-mirroring communicate a play upon what Adrienne Rich has termed the category of "compulsory heterosexuality" and its attendant demand for the exposition of the rudiments of gender normativity.[81] I write "play" in order to summon the phrase "play of desire," especially as it hints at fluctuations within hetero-normativity and -narrativity which allow for that "space of fabulation," but also "play" as it relates to the concept of staging. If the aesthetics of gender (derived from biological assumptions which conflate a physical sexual essence with related social roles) are performed as scripted or staged events, the written record becomes allegorically situated as a mediator of meaning, *between* words and what they signify. Yet if the text is a homotext, one which reflects upon itself as encompassing the problems of how to represent the unrepresentable, then the rift between words and what they signify—between what is staged and how that staging is played out—widens in a manner not dissimilar to how the social representations of gender serve as allegories, but not truths, of how sexual essence purportedly claims simultaneity with gender so to play *as* gender, thereby allowing for reconsiderations of the construction of gender itself.

Mrs. Bentley's discovery of the pipe, as attributive of a masculine gender role, discloses a history of subversion: "It was hidden so well in a cranny up near the ceiling that the Ladies Aid must have missed it when they were here to do the papering". In relishing this discovery, she revels in "the thought that we aren't the only ones" (14).

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retrospective revelation.

[81] Judith Butler relates gender normativity to the function of heterosexual desire: "The heterosexualization of desire requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between 'feminine' and 'masculine,' where these are understood as expressive attributes of 'male' and 'female'" (1990, 17).

But Ross fails to clarify just what Mrs. Bentley means: The only ones who secretly smoke pipes? Or the only ones who hide potentially transgressive markers of deviance? The refusal to settle on either meaning—or on both—signals that Ross plays on the ambiguities wrought by deviating from a more telling literary construction. The pipe, therefore, signifies deviance rather than simply a luxury that the Bentleys may be called to account for.

Though she does not confess to smoking herself, she believes a pipe Philip smoked in an earlier year eased the tension in their marriage. Their deviance, however, becomes more marked when Mrs. Bentley goes on to admit: "The pipe belonged to both of us. We were partners in conspiracy" (14). The importance of this is not that she literally owned the pipe but shared in the unseen act of collusion *through* a material thing signifying both the male realm and potential social censure; it is as though Ross highlights the subversive nature of the conspiracy itself in order to propose that Mrs. Bentley's own attempt at appropriation of both the markers of masculinity—the pipe—and the subjective realm of the masculine—smoking the pipe—converges in her self-reflective narrative, though it is one which tends to reflect more of her husband than it does of herself.

It is within the autobiography that Mrs. Bentley most tries to usurp male prerogatives of "universal subject." She covets not the pipe but the power it signifies. Paralleling Philip's earlier struggles with smoking in secret—"he flared, said that since he couldn't smoke in daylight *like a man* he wouldn't smoke at all" (14, emphasis added)—Mrs. Bentley takes the new pipe and, as Philip had done before, throws it in the fire. The action she performs suggests not only a deep understanding of her husband but, perhaps, a

desire to perform both *for* him and *as* him: "like a man," she will not collude in smoking. Ross further structures the parallel by compressing time: Mrs. Bentley, in writing of how their earlier disagreements over the pipe are summoned by her new find, says that, "I remember as if it were today. Somehow, because of the pipe I found, I can't help feeling that it really was today"; she notes of the quarrel that "I sobbed and blew my nose and cleared *my* trouble up," but that Philip's persists and figures as "hypocrisy" (15, Ross's emphasis). She intimates that she *could* act "like a man" but biologically, at least, cannot; she has resolved *her* trouble while Philip dissimulates, implying that she is right to abrogate his role as subject and assume it herself.

Her problem in appropriating it finds resolution in the halfway measure that is the narrative constituting the novel. If Philip's "hypocrisy" signals, here as elsewhere in the novel, (homo)sexual ambiguity, his gender incongruity—the psychoanalytic model of homosexuality figuring as (a desire to be) female and thus object, combined with his biological male status as subject—serves as an identity node around which Mrs. Bentley can rally. In writing herself as both subject (self-author/ization) and object (woman), she interchanges the *staged* roles they play out: if either of them can occupy both psychic structures of gender, their identities might merge under the signifier of "Bentley." The novel, then, as an allegorical representation of homo-narcissistic models self-same mirroring, disrupts gender normativity to allow for a subversive reading, one which works in tandem with subversive writing. In *As For Me and My House*, it is always at the denoted level that the play on meaning becomes, ironically, most revealing.

In other instances, however, the denotations that might be read as aesthetically

"homosexual" or, at least, gender transitive, are not so discreet. Mrs. Bentley writes that Philip's son would be "a fine, well-tempered lad by now, strung just a little on the fine side, responsive to too many overtones" (6); Steve, later revealed, comes close to the description, as "[s]ensitive and high-strung" (36), possessing "Oriental eyes" (40), often a key signifier of otherness, and a slender "gracefulness" (41). The feminized nature of Steve easily positions him as a cross-gendered object of desire for the ambivalent Philip. But even before Steve's physical appearance, what Steve might figure as divulges a tableau of anxiety for Philip. Paul's musings on Steve, that a boy should ride a horse because "[t]here's no better way to grow a mind" (36), are wedged between Paul's and Philip's silent deliberation of what these mean to each. Paul's eyes are "fixed on the lamp in the center of the table, the reflection of the flame making them sharp and resentful"; Mrs. Bentley notes, after Paul finishes speaking, that Philip's eyes are also "on the lamp. Sharp and resentful with the reflection . . . with a combative kind of bitterness that [is] their own" (36).

Mrs. Bentley's insight, that she has seen into her husband's psyche, is met with scorn: "It was as if he were helpless for a moment before a spasm of hatred for me." She interprets this as Philip's remembrance of "the boy of his own I haven't given him" (36), recalling the notion that the ever absent child, in symbolizing the "incomplete" and (suggestively) non-productive Bentley family, serves to denote a form of deviance, if not perversion. That the child, now given form in the figure of Steve (reflective of Philip's own youth and thus self), might embody that fulfilment of Philip's ambiguous (autoerotic) desire is a possibility that Philip believes Mrs. Bentley has seen, though, as before when

she stares at the bare walls or book covers, she likely has not understood. But she does take heed that Philip has seen her seeing *into* him, and she calls her glance "a precipitant, crystallizing to anger whatever there was in his mind just then rankling and unsatisfied, clearing his eyes for a moment so that he could see me in his life for what I actually am" (36-7).

What she actually is, in this instance, is an autobiographer who records what she sees, and in doing so, Philip, who fears exposure, sees her reflecting him, as though she threatens to usurp his psychical life and the privileges accorded to such a subject position. Mrs. Bentley's "straight"-forward reading of Philip solicits narcissism, the reading of the other as self. Philip sees this, and his anger arises from the possibility of effacement wrought through his wife's appropriation of his gender. Ross structures Mrs. Bentley's misreading as heteronormative, the surface or *obvious* reading, whereas Philip serves as a metaphor for what cannot be said; taken together, the allegorical structuring of this passage reveals how allegory comes to serve as a sufficient literary grounding for the inadequacy of homosexual representation. The incompleteness of the novel's heteronarrative, as it is haunted by deviance and absence, allows for a reading of Ross's ambiguity as being homotextually "meaningful." As Hewitt writes, "[T]he imperfection of representation opens up an aesthetic space that the homosexual writer might inhabit: homotextuality, in other words, as the aporia of heterosexual self-grounding [or h]omosexuality, one might say, as the tectonic fault line of all representation" (211), recalling Edelman's statement that homosexuality, in bearing the cultural burden of what is considered as "sexuality," functions as an allegory of it, as homotext, if you will.

Ross's engagement with the aesthetic representation of the various forms of homosexuality, especially as they may be expressed as gender trespass, supplements what appears to be a treatise on art itself. Mrs. Bentley appears to favour Paul's humanist interpretation of Philip's drawing of the Partridge schoolhouse, but gives some time to Philip's point of view:

> According to Philip, it's form that's important in a picture, not the subject or the associations that the subject calls to mind; the pattern you see, not the literary emotion you feel. . . . A picture worth its salt is supposed to make you experience something that he calls aesthetic excitement, not send you in to dithyrambs about humanity in microcosm. (80)

She does not give Philip's declarations half the regard she gives Paul's, blundering instead into revering Philip's larger than life stature. She ascribes his artist's credo to "some twisted, stumbling power locked up within him, so blind and helpless still it can't find an outlet, so clenched with urgency it can't release itself" (80). The near-orgasmic nature of Philip's "power," combined with a creed worthy of the aesthetic verve of Oscar Wilde, revives the notion of aestheticism as firmly lodged within the realm of the "sensitive" artist.

While later painting at the Kirby ranch, Philip again becomes angry, though this time not with his wife over her intrusion into his psychical space. In letting "the artist in him get the upper hand" (101), he spars with Paul's sister-in-law, Laura. She, described as possessing a "mannish verve" and wearing a "man's shirt and trousers," takes an "unaccountable dislike to Philip." She tells Mrs. Bentley that he isn't "the right kind of

man to bring up Steve" because she disdains Philip's artistry and its influence on the youth (93). It is easy to identify Laura's disposition as being a lesbian, in that her cross-identification with masculine attributes functions in much the same fashion as, for example, Steve's "gracefulness." Yet Laura openly denigrates potentially "harmful" effects Philip may have on Steve by virtue of the older man's artistic inclinations, which she obviously reads as effeminate and contra-male, and so homosexual. If she were a lesbian, would she not be inclined to empathy and so remain silent? Perhaps Laura's presumed lesbianism is really a red herring.

Mrs. Bentley, rather than pondering the root of Laura's plaint, attributes her own husband's inability to make a good impression to his status as minister, leaving aside questions pertaining to his artistry. Laura persists, however, in irritating Philip, who is trying to paint; and their interaction culminates in a spat. Indeed, Philip becomes so angry that he gives "such a squeeze to a tube of paint that it squirted across the palette and down his leg" (101). While I do not wish to imperil my interpretation with overdeterminations, Philip's actions nevertheless suggest two things: first, an inability to control not just his sexual energy—that power "clenched with urgency it can't release itself" (80), but does here—but that which such involuntary abandon might signify; and second, a recounting of his earlier acrimonious conflict with his perceptive wife, in which she then called his awareness of her "a precipitant, crystallizing to anger whatever there was in his mind just then rankling and unsatisfied" (36-7). The aesthetics of art, symbolized by the paint, converge with Ross's allegorical structuring of Philip's ambiguously defined "rankling and unsatisfied" anger to suggest that, again, Philip

withers under scrutiny.

In this instance, however, his ire arises from what is perhaps a greater hazard, namely Laura, and her "unaccountable dislike." Although she is married and appears to eschew aesthetic leanings (as made manifest by Philip's artistic endeavours), she nonetheless embodies what the stereotype—one which depends on an economy of cross-gender psycho-social identification—of an "accomplished" lesbian may look like. Ironically, that she may be a lesbian is less important than the fact that she might *signify* a homosexual presence, and thus the paradox of her literary existence—the ironic exposition of a lesbian written as invariably heterosexual—recalls how Ross may have taken advantage of how the homotext flaunts what Hewitt, again, describes as the "imperfection of representation open[ing] up an aesthetic space that the homosexual writer might inhabit" (211). Laura, with her "mannish verve," serves to deflect, as the "obvious" reading, attention away from Philip which, synchronously, allows Ross to further explore how Philip's angry silence might serve him [Ross] in exploring the inadequacies in homosexual representation, allegorized as homotextuality. Philip's sexual "misfire" neatly symbolizes, for example, how his inability to give his words form results in a perversion of the reading of his sexuality; the threat of Laura's insight, like Mrs. Bentley's, causes Philip to read, narcissistically, Laura's otherness as his own, although this time he fears not effacement but exposure.

The other instances of gender transgress in the novel, such as Judith's "stooking in the harvest fields like a man" (11), and Mrs. Bentley's wearing of Philip's "old felt hat" (27) or her "masculine attitude towards music" (151), though suggestive, are quite within

the historical context of arduous prairie life in the 1930s, wherein women necessarily helped out on the farm; or, if they were more artistically inclined, they perpetually procured "masculine attitudes" towards most things, given male socio-cultural dominance. While it is true that Mrs. Bentley stresses Philip's masculine attributes, her anxiety in doing so reveals, as I argue, her interest in (Philip's) male subjectivity more so than it imparts a status as "misbegotten man." [82]

In fact, ascribing to her the status of "man" in any sense (recalling the "mannish" Laura) works to affirm the historical exemplar of a lesbian as really a man in a woman's body. While this chronicled account of lesbianism possesses validity in psycho-social contexts, when applied to *As For Me and My House*, I believe it to be an overdetermined reading of the subtext, as the evidence presented in favour of the argument is not consistent. Mrs. Bentley's overweening occupation with her husband corroborates a fear of competition with other women for Philip's attentions; in that respect, her admiration of Mrs. Holly's freckles and Judith's body are not untoward commentaries in that they are socially acceptable. Of course, this very approval, in its tacitly (male) denial of the possibility of female-female relationships, would appear to provide the means by which to be covert about one's lesbianism; however, the critical impetus arises, I think, from

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[82] Of the critical concern with the possibility of Mrs. Bentley's lesbianism, Terry Goldie writes that Helen Buss "specifically notes Mrs. Bentley as a 'patriarchal woman. Sidonie Smith says *in Poetics of Women's Autobiography* that such a woman, attempting to write the self inside the patriarchal symbol system, is a "misbegotten man"'(Stouck 195), using Acquinas's famous term for the lack in women." He later adds, "If, as the autobiographical female, Mrs. Bentley is the misbegotten man, her narrative of Philip and her actions in the plot misbeget a man" (Terry Goldie, unpublished manuscript). See also Raoul's argument in which she, building a case for Mrs. Bentley's lesbianism, misreads Sedgwick's homosocial triangle as a homosexual triangle.

something as simple as an attempt to (homo)sexualize all of Ross's characters, now that the knowledge of his own homosexuality is public.[83]

(v) Old and new Horizons

If Philip is in any way homosexual, one important stumbling block concerns his supposed affair with Judith, and the fathering of baby Philip. Philip's autoerotics do not, bearing in mind his homo-narcissistic turn, favour his wife. Mrs. Bentley is vague even about who fathered her dead child; she evasively refers to the event: "[W]e were married. The next year there was a baby, stillborn" (33), as though a stork delivered it. It may be that she is pained over the loss of her child and wishes to avoid discussing the subject, but her numerous references to it throughout the novel, especially in contexts concerning Philip's unfulfilled needs, reveals, rather, a fixation on having another.

The possibilities of this transpiring appear slim. Only once in her diary does she mention sexual coupling, and at that it is lacklustre: "He didn't mind, but he wasn't eager" (120). The significance of this, however, is not only in that it occurs but *when* it occurs. Steve has just been taken away (August 3), and their sexual encounter—an aptly bleak description of it—takes place on August 7, just when Mrs. Bentley must have begun to fall ill. She is diagnosed with neuritis on August 9, and Judith comes by to help out that evening. Mrs. Bentley vacillates between fearing Judith's presence as a rival and dismissing her fear altogether. Is it that she feels that, upon Steve's departure, she might be able to redirect Philip's attentions back to herself?

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[83] I am again referring to my earlier critique of Raoul and, especially, Fraser.

It is as though she fears she is a way station between Steve and Judith: "I know Philip—know too what a short time Steve's been gone—and still I'm afraid of her," later admitting that "I'm not finding the place in his life I hoped I would once Steve was gone" (122). But of Judith, she generalizes, saying that she supposes "it's every woman's lot, dread of what she knows can't be true, of what she knows won't happen" (122). The first part of the statement is a rhetorical denial using ironic reversal, whereas the second half is not, intimating that "what she knows won't happen" is intentionally contradictory: Mrs. Bentley, once again, misreads the situation or, rather, does not know how to read it.

Her deliberation that she had not taken enough sleeping draughts rings false in light of the illogic of her subsequent rationalizations. She says, at first, that she woke after a few hours, then recounts her dream, and then again restates that she "woke at last" (122), thereby underscoring the notion that she was never awake at all, but simply about to recount another dream. She intellectualizes her reminiscence, a distancing gesture to those describing unpleasant dreams; she writes of the cold floor, "I remember the way my mind seized on the thought [of it being cold]," rather than simply stating that the cold of the linoleum was overwhelming. The laugh she says was Judith's is one she has "laughed often with him too," and she stands, rooted: "I put my hand out to the door, but didn't open it. I wanted to, but there seemed to be something forbidding it" (123).

The dreamlike sequence importantly recalls Ross's next written work, the short story "One's a Heifer," in which the narrator seeks to disclose the secret of a stall wherein he presumes rests his heifer or, as the narrative intimates, a murdered woman—or neither. Yet his imprecision, in both wanting and not wanting to know, allows for a multiple

reading, one which renders the closed stall as emblematic of Arthur Vickers's (the antagonist) homosexual secret. The absent woman is less essential physically as she may be referentially, as the third point completing Sedgwick's now-familiar homosocial triangle.

Likewise, Judith retains significance in Mrs. Bentley's retrospective recital only in so far as she might stand in for the absent Steve. In the closet that is the lean-to, the (former) tenant, Steve, has a picture of the Virgin above his bed, recalling the vacation where Mrs. Bentley sleeps under a picture of a bull symbolizing fertility. The antithetical juxtaposition of the (presumably) infertile Mrs. Bentley with the bull, suggests that, if we extend the conflicted comparison to the only other parallel in the novel, Steve similarly repudiates the virginity his picture connotes. Judith substitutes for the recently departed Steve (and though it is likely that the picture is no longer on the wall, the bed is the same one); and it is Mrs. Bentley's fear of this possibility—"what she knows can't be true, . . . what she knows won't happen"—that leads her, in her sleepwalking, to install Judith in her imprecise dream, a young woman significant more for what she signifies to Mrs. Bentley (and readers)—narrative heteronormativity—than for any actual physical presence. Mrs. Bentley goes on to insist that she is right about Judith, but tellingly admits that Philip "was trying to escape that night, trying to prove to himself that Steve after all didn't matter. And she just happened to be there" (127). The irony of this statement, and her repetition of it, lies in the truth it conveys: that Philip was really attempting to vanquish thoughts of Steve, and that Judith was indeed there . . . but neither in the sense that Mrs. Bentley imagines. Philip works out his affections for Steve *through* the

figuration of Judith; her presence or absence, like that of the housekeeper in "One's a Heifer," is meaningful only in that she remains a figurative point of reference in the negotiation of male-male bonds of affection. The ironic and imprecise turns of Mrs. Bentley's narrative again demonstrate Ross's manipulation of a "space of fabulation" in which to paradoxically hide and reveal the machinations of homosexuality, allegorically structured as his homotext.

Regardless of Mrs. Bentley's misreading, Judith gives birth to a baby, and the worth of uncovering the identity of the father and the role that Philip may come to play presents challenges for interpreting the close of the novel. I aim to exhibit how the quixotic shifts in displays of homo-narcissism resist novelistic closure and how the homotext's allegorical self-regard signals a transcendence of closure. The three Bentleys, and Philip in particular, serve both to arrest a historically coded novelistic "completion" versed in heteronarrative terms, and to transcend the encumbrance of a (Canadian) realist tradition, thereby opening up the possibility of homotextuality.

Closure is itself at stake at the level of thematics, wherein the novel leaves itself open to an interpretative future not weighted by its very historical moment. Mrs. Bentley reports that she has surprised Philip with a pipe (164), suggesting that she either no longer fears "discovery" or has achieved, in some unspecified way, a measure of male subjectivity which the pipe once signified and no longer requires the *marker* of such subjectivity because she has internalised it, unbeknownst to him. Ross uses Mrs. Bentley as a foil in that she appears to have discovered how to transcend (hetero)male prerogatives whose imperatives, if they controlled the narrative of her diary, would

demand (climactic) closure. Ross also forcefully (re)invests in the trope of sight which opened the novel; Mrs. Bentley reports: "He [the baby] doesn't look like Philip yet, but Philip I'll swear is starting to look like him. It's in the eyes, a stillness, a freshness, a vacancy of beginning" (164-65). The primary clue to uncovering the thwarting of conventional closure is Mrs. Bentley's reverse reading of resemblance, that Philip begins to resemble the child, suggesting counter-teleology in its temporal reversal of an adult growing to approximate a child.

I do not mean to imply that Mrs. Bentley, then, has finally learned how to read between the lines, and in doing so understands Philip's insular self-reading. But she, as Ross writes her, seems to control finally the narrative through courted ambiguity; it is as though she has discovered the means by which to usurp, at least narratively, her husband's role. Her intentional "forgetting" of Philip merges with the novel's somewhat quixotic ending, which, focused on the baby Philip, would otherwise suggest new beginnings. But her narrative distances her from her husband: "'Another Philip?' the first one says" (163), calling attention to the fact that, since the "second one" cannot speak in any case, the process of making her husband into an infant—and thus powerless—through the literary merging of the two has already begun.

The cross-current of this attribution of Philip *as* his namesake—a collapse of the self-same identification—ironically revives homo-narcissism, though it does so at the cost of reading Philip's (homo)autoeroticism as incestuous. Yet if homosexuality, structured as the novel's allegorical reading, bears the cultural burden, as Edelman has pointed out, of the rhetoricity of all sexuality, then questions respecting incest become a concern for

all sexualities; it is not simply the province of homosexuality, though historical heteronormative discourses have attempted to link homosexuality with psychological models which merge homo-narcissism with male-male incest and/or paedophilia, ephebophilia or pederasty. Is Ross, rather, critiquing the falsity of the modern structure of the *family*, that *it* is damaging in its inability to respect psychical boundaries defining parent/child relationships? Philip's homo-narcissism, as the child is reflected in his face, is compromised by his position as "false" (non-procreative) father; Ross suggests that Philip will make the same misstep as did his father, in attempting to resolve the secret of his homosexuality within the romance of the family "narrative."

Ross, massaging the elliptical nature of "ending," demonstrates the epistemic and contingent nature of (literary) history. The crisis of the Bentley family, fusing with that of the gender—and concomitantly sexual—anxiety evinced throughout the novel, renders the conclusion as bastardized (much like the Bentley child). The climax of the novel thus suggests a different form of closure; and if one considers climax *as* closure, it is a different kind of climax—a counter-climax which insistently forces a consideration of difference, whether simply expressed as "otherness," or as difference *from* the climax normally favoured by heterosexual investments in reproductive sexuality and its history.

Hewitt, in commenting upon heterosexuality's function as a figure for historical closure, writes: "If these two historical tropes—reproduction and climax—suggest a particularly sexual historical itinerary, they allow us to think of historical representation as itself invested in the tropological structure of heterosexuality" (279).[84] The ending is

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[84] Hewitt adds that heterosexuality "loses its figurative power in the subsequent

a moment of release of both Bentleys from the burden of (hetero)sexual reproductivity, and thus the climax—really no climax at all—takes as its paradoxical antithesis "normative closure" and renders it an anti-(hetero)libidinal closure. The false front that is the Bentley family ironically gathers around heteronormative family structures, both novelistically and socially; if there is any apparent ecstasy—in Philip's wonderment or in Mrs. Bentley's self-satisfaction in rendering "Philip" childlike (so as to mother both)—it is evinced in the paradoxical "new beginning," one without heterosexual coitus and orgasm, but a homotextual ecstasy of being released from heteronormative form: a new Horizon, one which looks the same (and is looked at as familiar), but reads as the horizon of a new form of representation, the homotext. The novel indeed, as a structured allegory of homosexual possibilities, exhibits itself not as a false front but simply a front, an allegorical front, at one remove from the homosexuality it denotes but at least (textually) rubs against.

Perhaps it is not altogether surprising that such a forceful exploration of homosexuality's figuration as *text* occurs as Ross writes, for the first time, about people who are *not* farmers, a group he abandons almost altogether in his subsequent fiction. The association of more intellectually-inclined people like Philip Bentley with homosexuality is not such a great leap, when one thinks about the historical clichés which have often associated the intellect with a "softness" born from not employing manual

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literalization of that which it figures." In reference to the novel he is examining, he furthermore observes that "conclusions dramatise a crisis in the representational possibilities of heterosexual narrative: as a figure for historical closure, heterosexuality has become—literally—'inconclusive'" (282). I might append to this that it does so *literarily*, as well.

labour, linked in turn with femininity. Regardless, Ross increasingly turns away from the farming world, in tandem with setting his own sights on homoeroticized self-sight and its relation to medicalized "aberration."

Chapter Six

Fiction after 1945

After the relative financial failure of *As For Me and My House* in 1941, only one more "prairie" story appears during the forties, "One's a Heifer" (1944). And those writings that are published beyond the 1940s, including the novels drawing on prairie settings, register a distinct turn away from Ross's concern with the land, to a marked interest in criminality or, at least, social aberrations. Even the two "horse" stories—"The Outlaw" (1950) and "The Runaway"(1952)—advocate, in their titles' wording, a shift to a thematic concern with delinquency and reprobation, an alteration foregrounded in the characterization of Arthur Vickers in the 1944 story.[85] Arguing that this shift is evident as early as 1939's "The Painted Door," Morton Ross says Ross moves away "from the mechanical matrices of deterministic psychology to a more spacious exploration of the intricacies of human choice" (1991, 14).

Recalling the metaphor of the "grounding" of Ross's pre-1945 rural writings, as discussed in the opening of Chapter Four, the affiliation of gender and sexuality with the forces of nature—often expressed as biological destiny—wanes in Ross's later writing. The accented attention to the psycho-social behaviour of the characters in this work does not mean, however, that Ross abandons the (most often prohibitive and condemnatory) medical and legal discourses which informed the framework for the essentialist-inflected gender portraiture of his early work. The enforcement of social norms and normativity,

during and after the Second World War, provides the context in which Ross exhibits a stronger attention to male/male friendship and camaraderie, especially as it may involve deviance, a curtailing of trust, and/or psychopathology.[86]

Nor does Ross forgo his earlier traffic in the metaphors of sight and insight, particularly as they may recall the tropes of narcissism and self-regard that (often) denote homosexuality. So too does the post-war writing, I will argue, continue *As For Me and My House*'s concern with homo-narcissism, concomitant with an understanding of Ross's writing as often allegorically representing homotextuality which, in its anti-normative verve, literarily demonstrates a resisting paradigm of difference.

I want to preface my discussion by briefly re-drawing attention to what Lorraine McMullen calls Ross's "fascination with the criminal mind" (1982, 20). It is difficult to avoid the surmise that Ross's own homosexuality, since it was either repressed or furtive in its expression, might find articulation both thematically and stylistically in his fiction: in the former instance, as the homoerotic nature of the some of the fictive male/male

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[85] See Ross's comments on Vickers's "derangement" in chapter four.

[86] Mary Louise Adams discusses the national resoundings of the links between delinquancy and deviant sexuality in Canada in the period preceding and following the Second World War. Adams notes that such national concerns were transmitted, in part, through cultural forms. She writes:

> Discourses like those on indecent literature, for instance, were constructed and responded to as if they were of national concern. Of course, so-called national discourses of this type did not operate in similar ways across the country—the range of practices and institutions to which, and by which, they were articulated varied regionally, between rural and urban areas, and among class, racial, ethnic, and age groups, They were, nevertheless, put into circulation by way of practices and institutions located in Toronto. [...] The process was facilitated by national media outlets and by the fact that Toronto was home to many organizations, from the YWCA to the Health League, that claimed to be national in scope and to represent the interests of "all Canadians." (5)

relationships; in the latter, as the literary allegorizing of these relationships. The surmise is that homosexual and literary deviance converge, as the argument might go, and result in (or find expression as) another form of deviance, that of criminality; and since Ross was a homosexual in a social milieu that medically and legally condemned such expression, it would only be "natural" that the (subconscious) depiction of his homosexuality in his writing would be conjoined with other forms of criminality.

The trajectory of Ross's "reprobate" fiction seems to promise as much. From the miscreant Arthur Vickers to the murderous father in the final story, most of Ross's later fiction deals in some fashion with a criminal element. Yet this psychological surmising, as interesting as some of it may be, relies mostly on reading Ross *as a deviant* and then importing this into his fiction, wherein Ross can thereby be understood as having an interest in being protean. This postulate is not only circular but prescriptive in its assertions of intentionality, as we have seen in Keath Fraser's attempt (discussed in chapter three) to pathologize the homosexuality which he sees as having retarded the dramatic development of Ross's writing. Although I think that an examination of criminality in mid-century Canada might be revealing of attitudes Ross may have drawn upon, I do not believe—as I hope my ensuing readings of Ross's later fiction will indicate—that his homosexuality itself, suppressed or otherwise, resulted in a thoroughgoing (subconscious) fictionalizing of what was then social deviancy.

(i) "Don't read into it what was never there"

Yet it would be misleading to suggest that the "deviancy" witnessed during the

Second World War was not seen as intimately related to the ongoing psychological criminalization of homosexuality.[87] How this might have affected Ross is, if we interpret his two wartime stories as evidence of how he saw things, somewhat self-conflicted but not contradictory. After four years in the army, serving in England, Ross published two stories bespeaking military influence. These stories, "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" (1947) and "Jug and Bottle" (1949-50), are all that remains of Ross's writings of the war years; according to McMullen, he had apparently destroyed an abandoned manuscript concerning a Canadian soldier from Manitoba.

Ross also told McMullen that his wartime years in London was "the happiest time of his life" (6). If so, that jubilant attitude is clearly expressed in "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune," a story whose only strife has little to do with the war front but has much to say about the joys of male/male camaraderie. "Jug and Bottle," however, plays night to the other story's day, in that it deals with a man's distress and internal psycho-sexual war, though he too is at a remove from the actual war front. Although the stories find common bonds in the depictions of the variations of male friendships during the morally relaxed war effort, Ross seems to be of two minds about such companionship. Whereas "Tune" appears to celebrate male/male bonding and its homoerotic possibilities, the other story

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[87] In his essay on the wartime attack on Patrick Anderson, Robert Martin writes that Anderson's critic, John Sutherland, makes use of medical categories, such as narcissism and abnormality, as code for homosexuality. The result was a denigration of the status of Anderson's "Poem on Canada" which, Martin writes, "readers could take as the definitive work of Canadian national expression of the 1940s were it not for Sutherland's allegations that it had personal qualities that made it . . . incapable of serving as a national poem" (1991, 199). While Sutherland's comments also mask his homophobia, it is clear that any deviation from the national body represented as aggressive and heterosexual (Martin 1991, 121) might be interpreted as psychologically criminal (if not legally so) and thus a subject best suited for psychological examination—and cure. See

consigns the nuances of homosexual desire to the psychological forces of what is destructive and pathological.

This dark view is not unsurprising, if indeed it is true. As Gary Kinsman writes of the Canadian military regulations concerning the classification of sex deviates, "the military placed [male] homosexuals and lesbians under the heading 'psychiatric disorders' (which included psychoneurosis and psychosis) and more specifically as 'anti-social psychopaths' and 'psychopathic personalities' with 'abnormal sexuality'" (150). The result is that, Kinsman continues, "homosexuality was not clearly distinguished from other sexual deviances or had been re-conflated with broader psychiatric categories as part of larger diagnostic units. The social conceptualization of 'homosexuality' was still only in the process of being generalized within official and more popular discourses" (151). Of course, the problem of same-sex sexual behaviour could be attributed to things such as shell-shock and the general stress of war, and that after the war normal sex/gender roles would resume.

So, while the war presented opportunities for men to explore homosexual desire under the guise of an inescapable "aberrant" necessity—not dissimilar to male rape in prisons—it also served to affirm the abnormality of homosexual experience. Indeed, the heightening of a fomenting medicalization of gay sex as psychopathology comes to fruition in Ross's later exploration of paedophilia and murder, in "The Flowers that Killed Him," discussed later in this chapter. But while Ross may appear to adhere to received ideas about homosexuality, his stories simultaneously offer a critique of how gay men

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also footnote 39.

might find admissible expression—or not—of their (sexual) desires, and of how the war mirrors society's influential perversion of things that might otherwise be natural.

Ross's two war stories also herald the critical inattention accorded Ross for his work published after 1945. Except for two stories—"The Outlaw" (1950) and "The Runaway" (1952)—collected in *The Lamp at Noon and Other Stories* (1968) and the canonical (by way of inclusion in the *New Canadian Library* series) *Sawbones Memorial* (1974), very little has been written on Ross's post-war fiction.[88] McMullen's glance—more of a blink—at the war-based stories aptly sums up the prevailing critical attitude: they are "adequate but unremarkable" (1991, 41). I wish to counter, or at least supplement, such arguments about Ross's literary (in)competence by suggesting that indifference or inattention in the critical field may not have been due to claims of artistic failings on Ross's part so much as to the possible discomfort with the homoerotic potentiality to which more thorough analyses would necessarily pay heed. Indeed, the cursory examinations of "latent homosexuality" (McMullen1991, 80; Ferres, 2), for example, evince either a prohibition against "speaking the unspeakable" (as examined in chapter three) or a lack of critical tools by which to study or tackle any facet of an emerging homotextuality.

If friendship is a main component of any homotextual investigation, then the two

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[88] McMullen's (1979; 2nd ed. 1991) is the only comprehensive work on Ross's entire oeuvre, although she pays scant attention to the short stories in 1982's *The Race and Other Stories* (which she edited). Robert Chambers's 1975 *Sinclair Ross & Ernest Buckler* says very little about these (then-) uncollected short stories; and Ken Mitchell's 1981 *Sinclair Ross: A Reader's Guide* merely recaps these same stories. Fraser (1970), Friesen (1976), Bowen (1979), Davey (1983), Cooley (1987), and Morton Ross (1991) have written on the some of the stories in *The Race*, but virtually nothing has been written

stories appearing after "One's a Heifer" (and after the war) absolutely bear closer scrutiny. As Robert Martin writes in his examination of *Billy Budd*, the military milieu reminds us "of the extent to which military action is a perversion of love. In this homosocial world, charged with sexual potential, only strict control of the homosexual world can prevent a mutiny" (1986, 108). Although there is no mass uprising in either "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" or "Jug and Bottle," Ross examines the threat of the loss of that "strict control" through the microcosm of certain male/male friendships. The stories' first person narrators each refer to their superficial denial of kinship with the new friend at hand, while nevertheless entangling themselves in the lives of their respective friend, a man always seen as something of a social outcast.

In "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune," the narrator views the army recruits amongst him as encompassing "a sort of camaraderie, almost a need of one another," one that is "something rare and powerful, whatever it [is]" (*Race* 61). The very young recruit, Peter Dawson, plays a fiddle poorly and it causes great consternation among the men with whom he comes to share a room. Yet when succeeding newcomers to the room complain, the fraternal men come to Peter's defense; and of this paradox, the narrator can say only that they "didn't know why it was that way. We never stopped to ask ourselves. We couldn't have explained it even had we tried. No more than we could have explained Peter" (62).

This apparent inability to express the paradox in terms other than "don't know why" leaves the narrative (and the narrator) almost embarrassingly open either to claims

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on "Spike" and "The Flowers that Killed Him."

of authorial artlessness (as McMullen argues) or, as I wish to argue, to a reinterpretation of the possibilities inherent in the very inability to *speak* of male/male friendships, especially as they may reveal an erotic investment. The figure of Peter—almost a cipher by which the narrator and his friends galvanize their camaraderie—as an admired "outsider" renders him something of a mirror against which the men in the barracks can project their gruff warmth for one another. As a player of a musical instrument, the helpless, sincere Peter (63) begins to acquire erotic undertones; indeed, he is not unlike Philip Coleman in "Cornet at Night," and in many ways strongly parallels Herman Melville's Carlo, the "hand organ" player in *Redburn*, whom Martin calls "an allegorical figure and an erotic image." And too, like Peter, that although there is "nothing to suggest that Carlo himself is homosexual, . . . he clearly represents a figure of homosexual desire" (1986, 54).

While I do not wish to overextend the similarity (especially since Melville's art in *Redburn* has far different implications and concerns), Martin's comments are nevertheless instructive in questioning the historical freight of what he calls "misleading interpretation[s]" (56). Martin argues that the special friendships constituting Melville's "chummying" can exist "only within the oppressive structure of a system that is opposed to all the values they may embody" (41); I would extend this to include the presumptions of circulating (hetero)narratives as they informed Ross's fictive wartime worlds.

The narrator's inability to "explain" Peter somehow results, regardless, in Peter's commandeering of respect, since there is "something positive, within himself, a kind of dignity" (*Race* 62). Peter's lack of urbanity and worldliness clearly marks him an

outsider, though one who immediately elicits an inexplicable sympathy. The entire story concerns itself with keeping an eye on the youth, and the narrative never lets him out of its sight. While in the recruiting office, the inductees listen to a conversation in which Peter partakes: "We were all watching him so intently he became confused" (63). Peter later excitedly tries on his army equipment, "taking a squint at himself in the two by four steel mirror . . . beaming with satisfaction" (64). Peter, it seems, is as equally excited with himself as are his comrades at arms.

Yet for this display of enthusiasm, a fellow soldier upbraids him. The narrator notes that a "frightened look spread over Peter's face, as if he expected the harshness to be followed by a blow. For a moment, crouched on the floor with his equipment, he faced us, defensively, and then bundling everything into his pace and kit bag he took out his fiddle and sat down on the bed" (64). We are reminded here not only of Tommy in "Cornet at Night," who "crouches" in a "frightened" manner, but also of the man he crouches before, Philip Coleman, who proceeds to take out his cornet and play in what clearly appears to be a masturbatory manner. The narrator in the wartime story notes that playing "comforts" Peter, the "hurt child" (64), in a fashion not unlike the aforementioned Carlo, who says of his eroticized instrument, "[I]t is my only friend, poor organ! It sings to me when I am sad, and cheers me" (*Redburn* 250).

But quite unlike the *jouisance* produced by Carlo, Peter's "fiddling" causes nothing but grief. Yet the men let him continue because, they argue, it is his only solace from his youthful growing pains, including those he experiences at the hands of drill sergeants. The compensatory nature of Peter's amateur "fiddling" is associated with

growing sexual awareness and experimentation: he is not yet an expert because he is not yet an adult. Within the homosocial setting of the army, the older men let him "play" in so far as Peter is able to find "release." Ross's allegorical study of the kind of friendship specifically found within a boundary of ostensibly thwarted (hetero)sexual desire recalls that the inexpressive nature of homosexual desire lodges itself within the text either as an overdetermined subtext or, as I am arguing, as a writing which beholds itself and, in its narcissistic gaze, demands a reading of its concern with difference *from* as allegorically constituting a non-normative narrative.

The narrator, then, reveals through the trope of (his) (in)sight not only what he sees and does not see but that the situation of doing *either*—and so, through the interplay of binaries, *both*—constitutes a pull toward a perpetually unresolved difference. Of Peter, he says that "[t]o watch him—to see no more than [the sergeants] saw—you would say he was stolid, insensitive, too stupid to obey, or too stubborn" (*Race* 65). The sergeants read much in the same manner as Mrs. Bentley: they eschew any gestures made toward the possibilities that they either cannot *see* or otherwise misinterpret, those metaphoric prospectives that are so overdetermined as to be preposterous. Since the (hetero)narrative pull is toward a stabilizing and unchanging sameness, the subject of the narrative must be constitutive of a transparent and universalized heterosexuality. Therefore, the sergeants do not deviate from reflecting what they implicitly understand that others want to see in them; their (in)sight is thus reflective of the army's prohibiting edicts, in whatever forms they may take, with special regard to (homo)sexual aberrations.

Yet the narrator contends that, unlike the sergeants, "[w]e were the only ones who

ever really saw him. We saw him only when he had his fiddle out" (65). The insistence on "only" draws attention to its placing, particularly to its odd situation in the second sentence: rather than emphasizing the first instance of "only we," the mirrored phrasing contextually hails the instances in which Peter's comrades see him "fiddling." Here, Ross's act of ordering—again, the literary structuring of a "second story"—demonstrates that the text's narcissistic contemplation potentially misleads in its very corruption of (metaphoric) reflection. Ross (or the narrator) intimates that the men's sight, in stating that "we saw him *only when*," displays an impetus to erotic *recognition*: the events *only* revealing a "fiddling" Peter are those which *solely* interest the men. The desire for an eroticized sameness—the men's desire to see *only* their sameness—effectively perverts the stabilizing universality of the larger society in which the homoerotic military is lodged; and this again reveals how the homotext is able to constitute difference within heterosexual attitudinal inattention to literary deviancy.

Even Ross's brief introduction of a female "love interest" merely serves to underscore the fact that none of the other men are apparently interested in women. Tellingly, Peter's interest in Florence leads the men to wonder why "a fellow like Peter has to fall for a girl like her," to which the narrator adds: "It was the Army, of course, and we had other words for her" (65). Florence's rejection of him leads Peter to play the fiddle badly, so much so that the other men conspire to destroy it. Ross suggests that Peter's eroticization has been misdirected and so must be controlled and subjected to reconstitution within the homosocial unit. To that end, the men look not to Peter but to the eroticized metaphor of the fiddle. Their "glare" is a "black, cowardly evil, directed

not at him but at his fiddle. We looked at one another, and it was in every face. For a day or two everybody's lips twitched, framing it, everybody's eyes fell, concealing it" (66).

As if to balance and counter the named woman, Florence, Ross names (for no other apparent reason) one of the unit's men (aside from Peter), the only time in the narrative he does so. This man, Billy Carson, and "the man whose bed [is] next to Peter's" (66), plan to destroy the violin by falling on it; they play at wrestling and, at an opportune moment, lose their balance and fall "clinched together across the bed" (66), destroying the fiddle in the process. Billy, standing in for Florence, embraces another man as if to demonstrate the edict of the homosocial army unit, an entity for which Ross (or the narrator) also has unclarified "other words."

Indeed, when Peter later leaves the unit (with a new fiddle given to him by the repentant men), the narrator again dwells upon his inability to "explain" Peter. He impels the reader to "[l]ook at us" when making his own comparison between the youth and the unit, concluding that "as the Army goes I daresay we were average" (68). He urges the readers not only to share in "cruising" the text (for an erotic meaning?) but in taking part in narrative surveillance: Are they "average"? What kind of contrast are we meant to make, and against what? What does the "average" army unit look like, and can the reader ever know? The "likely" reader of Ross will intuit without being prompted that an "average" unit is commensurate with at least a discernible sense of "the ordinary," and thus the call to stare will end with the word on the page.

But the narrator intimates, I think, that other soldiers—the ones whom Peter will

go to live with—will also be "average" and will doubtless treat Peter in much the same fashion. This ironically reaffirms not the "likely" meaning (of their being repulsed by a noisy fiddle) but a reading signalling the army's propensity to foster an ineffable homosociality *regardless* of the soldier's place or unit. The "elation and regret" the narrator feels "could only mean that knowing [Peter] had been important," but he cannot decide whether "the importance was because of him or us" (68). The assertion of "could only mean," in this context, is a weak remonstrance against the narrator's assertion of a vaguely defined "importance"; he likely knows both what he means and that that is unutterable. The final assertion that it was "not so easy to decide" (68) about the issue of that hazy "importance" (of Peter) subtly reaffirms that the space created by indecision gives way to the installation of difference as the governing method of understanding: "explaining" that (or who) which cannot be explained because the available discourses present an interdiction paradoxically reveals Ross's deep investment in creating meaning through an allegorical narrative both concerning and exhibiting "difference" itself.

Ross's concern with a sexual divergence illustrative of homotextuality is even more persistent in his next story, "Jug and Bottle." Aside from its war setting, "Jug and Bottle" is highly effective as a companion story to "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune." It is, in many ways, a darker elaboration upon the hidden homoeroticism which suffuses not only the army but, moreover, male/male friendship. The irony of the title, unveiled as the story's dénouement, reveals a concentrated investment in methods of reading and, in particular, what an attention to *mis*reading may disclose. The sign on the bar's door, "jug and bottle," signals, as a generic term, merely the bar's stock and trade: it flags the

establishment's "content" as concomitant with its context. But since the term may (and does) apply to any bar in the English town, the bar's other sign—its discrete name—needs to be read as well in order to make manifest the institution's difference.

The narrator knows he has failed at reading *all* the signs and is therefore doomed to try to achieve understanding by repeating the story again and again. The story's opening defense, in which the narrator attempts to "explain," recalls the similar attempt in "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" to "explain" Peter. The result here is the same: incomprehension, or a committed attempt to suppress the unspeakable. Effectively beginning with the end, Ross uses the allegorically endowed "Jug and Bottle" to tease the reader with a promised "explanation"—the clarification of the title's "meaning"—but does not really deliver. He merely leaves the inference of the explanation of the bar's insignia for the reader to discern, as the story trails off to an inconclusive ending.

This lack of resolution—expressed by way of the narrator's cold discomfort and the author's inveighing against normative closure—forces a return and a reconsideration of the *titular* import of the story, especially as it signals a standard opening which both conflicts with and reflects the story's contra-normative ending. The title, as a multi-faceted signal—sign, clue and "meaning"— advances the proposition that it is an allegory of the process of reading, with its accompanying search for (customary) significance.

That the narrator cannot find the normative meaning he searches for impels him to look to others for clarification, and it is this seeking which accentuates the story's allegorical emblem as one which underscores the "explanation" of difference. His assertion that "[w]hat I did for him and what I failed to do are beside the point" (69), but

his admission itself is the "point." He explains the demise of his friend Coulter, who "was on his way out anyhow," by turning to metaphor: "A leaky boat in a storm is doomed. It makes little difference which wave finally swamps it" (69). But he knows that his misreading of the sign has, indeed, made all the difference; his use of an analogy suggests an evasion from having to speak the inexpressible "truth" of their *different* male/male friendship.

His subsequent (two) references to "*The Jug and Bottle*" (emphasis added) at the story's beginning (69) and end (85) yet again affirm his seemingly intentional misreading of (the) signs: if the story is a retrospective account, he must know that in its retelling the term "jug and bottle" is nonexclusive. The bar in which he was to meet Coulter is *not* called *The Jug and Bottle* or *Jug and Bottle*; yet he insists upon using the article "the" when he knows that this generic term was not *the* name of the establishment, in any case. He tries to paper over his misreading of the difference between the bar's "universal" appellation and its corporate name (not revealed in the story), a mistake that was later to give rise to Coulter's demise. Ross implicates the narrator's culpability through a rather pointed irony; of "*The Jug and Bottle*," the narrator cautions: "Don't read into it what was never there; don't try to fit it into some pattern of destiny or judgment. It isn't necessary; there's no blame to be shifted" (69). His insistence on disavowal, aside from the irony of compelling us to want to "read into it," is undercut by the simple fact of the ensuing narrative, which is his effort to "explain" Coulter. At the authorial level, this explanation would constitute a gesture toward a reading of the allegorical rendering of an eroticized difference.

The narrator's consternation recalls the manner in which Philip Bentley's anxiety functions as a kind of allegorized "worry," that Ross may fear that readers might misinterpret the story or, more likely, that its irony may *not* be garnered by the perceptive reader. Certainly, Ross courts ambiguity, as he has in his earlier fiction, yet unlike that fiction the perpetrated vagueness in the war time stories operates within a paradigm of male/male bonds; it seems riskier, now, to write in a manner which, in its less oblique attention to homoerotic potentiality, might "expose" Ross's homotextual agenda. In the case of "Jug and Bottle," though, Ross deflects this dormant focus through the prism of an aesthetically "safe" emphasis on Coulter's psychological troubles. Our attempt to read into "what was never there"—the heteronormative ordering of a negated aesthetic of a sexually problematic other—is (re)captured by a narrative normativity which hails psychoanalysis as a cure for the anti-normative which may escape it. In other words, the narrator plays doctor to Coulter's patient, in a manner not dissimilar to Ross's homotextual doctoring.

In putting Coulter on his metaphorical couch, the narrator quickly discovers that it is easier to discern his friend's nature than his own. He asserts,

> I failed him when he had the greatest need of me . . . [and] you can't live six months in a barracks with a man and not discover something of his character and story. The one has left me with a feeling of involvement and responsibility; the other with a conviction that beneath the failure and confusion there was something that might have grown and developed. (69)

He expressively again uses the article "the" to evade ownership of the "failure and

confusion," though it seems likely that he speaks of Coulter's character. Yet his insistence on indistinction perseveres in the allegation that "there was something": if we grant that it is Coulter's confusion that needs clarity, even then the *location* of "there" remains ambiguous. Does the narrator mean to evoke, through his turns of narrative imprecision, that "there" is, recalling Hewitt, a "space of fabulation" (138) which both cloaks and communicates the stratagems of an allegorically inscribed homosexuality?

The space occupied by the narrator and Coulter certainly brings the men into close contact. But the metaphorical distance between the two is, Ross intimates, really no distance at all, if one takes "distance," in its spatial connotation, as a span to be bridged. The narrator, though, blames the nearness on the military situation: "[B]arracks and the parade square have a way of arranging relationships. In this case it was a combination of proximity and helplessness" (*Race* 70). The narrator confesses that he too is a "helpless rookie," but in Coulter's case such impotency is due not only to his "useless pair of hands" but to his "exposed and vulnerable" nature (70) which arouses "something unexpected and protective in you" (71). Clearly, Coulter's disposition mirrors Peter Dawson's awkward, exposed and helpless personality (62) and his indescribable "something that kept us in our place, demanded our respect" (63). And again, like the boyish "two-year-old Clydesdale, bigfooted and rangey" who is Peter (61), Coulter embraces the paradoxical duality of "a small boy in charge of a lumbering draft horse" (71). His (in)delicacy, combined with incompetence, compels the narrator (tellingly referring to himself in the second person) to "want to keep an eye on him, see that he kept out of trouble" (71). If the narrator does not necessarily bridge the gap between his bunk

and Coulter's, suggestively just above, he does manage to close the breach through constant surveillance, ostensibly (as Ross might) to maintain (hetero)normative narrative control but also to prevent a "homosexual" mutiny.

Coulter does manage to wind up in the narrator's bed, but in a drunken state that occurs each time after he visits his wife, Muriel. She is always safely off-stage, and the only proof the narrator has of her existence is a brief glimpse of a snapshot that Coulter quickly snatches back and, "in what seemed a fit of rage, ripped it through and crumpled up the pieces" (72). To a question concerning his apparent care for her, Coulter, "with a candor as gaunt and enigmatic as his rough, bony face . . . answer[s]: 'No—not the way you think. I enlisted to get away from her'" (72). Unlike Florence in the earlier story, however, Muriel provides the rest of the story with its psychological underpinning, especially as she, like Judith in *As For Me and My House* or the "murdered" housekeeper in "One's a Heifer," embodies "evidence" of heteronormativity. Her displacement to the closet of the glimpsed photograph renders her a cipher, more important for her figurative reference than for literal essence, and so she, again like the other women, stands at the third point of a male/male/female homosocial triangle (Sedgwick 1992, 2).

The story shifts more strongly at this point to the narrator's diagnostic approach to Coulter's dilemma. He notes his beleaguered friend's "inner collapse, a relinquishment of everything by which a man lives—purpose, expectancy, self-respect" (*Race* 73). Shortly after his subsequent play at suicide, Coulter confesses his dislike for Muriel, intensified by the recent visit. The narrator, again assuming the role of psychologist, notes that there was "a shrillness in his voice, a threat of hysteria, that made me force him down roughly

on the bed. He whimpered a moment, like a child that has been punished" (74). Coulter psychologically manifests, according to the narrator, a diagnosis of both infantile regression and female "weakness," traits Coulter comes to detail as belonging to Muriel. The narrator quixotically says, in trying to boost the distressed man's spirits, that he wonders "whether it wasn't what I said that was important to him, but what I was" (74).

What the narrator *is*, in this instance, bears at least three readings: one, the received reading, that he plays "doctor" in order to comfort his friend; second, the subtextual reading, that Coulter struggles with homosexual feelings and finds like-minded kinship in his auditor; or third, and the reading I favour, that the narrator is a conflicted combination of these two things. Ross's narrator must audit his own behaviour as much as he does his friend's, and to the end that he must cloak his desires, he must demonstrate to his friend the method of emulation. His doctoring is commensurate with Ross's own doctoring of the narrative, that prohibitive desires must be subjected to a rigorous regulation; the surveillance of a proscriptive society must be internalized and its heteronormativity expressed as narrative normativity. The narrator is successful on at least some level, as he finds Coulter wants companionship "[n]ot to steady himself, but to be steadied" (75).

Coulter achieves this balance in part by visiting the narrator's bunk, late at night when the narrator, pretending, sleeps. While sitting there and watching, Coulter even mothers the recumbent but awake man by drawing back over him a thrown blanket, recalling how the enigmatic Arthur Vickers, in "One's a Heifer," mothers his young visitor by wrapping a scarf around the youth's neck for him. But eventually Coulter tells

his story, saying that at the root of his problems lies his propensity for letting other people down: "It does something to you after a while, the balance never in your favour. It spreads like spilled coffee, till your whole life's stained. You feel in the wrong, even when you don't know what it is you've done" (77-78). Yet it is never really clear what it is that Coulter has done, and to make up for this indescribable "something" (like the earlier "something" eschewing a contextual location), he marries Muriel.

That he does so only calls attention to the notion that this rather extreme form of compensation must have "something" behind it which needs "explaining." Coulter says that "[w]hat was done was done, of course, but there was still the balance. You see what I mean—why I thought that putting in some time with her—" (78). The elliptical nature of his comments, with a direct address to the "you" who is both the narrator and reader, collapses the figurative and literal meanings with the result that any discernible, *exact* meaning must be juggled or at least deferred. But the subsequent identification with Muriel—Coulter says that "[w]atching her was like going back ten years, standing in front of a mirror" (78)—recalls his own "hysteria," and it is a neurosis which mirrors hers. The possibility of the inversion of gender effected by Coulter's attention to a metaphoric mirroring revives not so much narcissism—though that is a possibility—as an attempt to rid himself of the reflection he sees within himself of the (feminized) hysteria he may identify as an outward manifestation of a psychoanalysed homosexuality, in favour of struggling toward a more normative (read: heterosexual) masculinity.

Muriel's own doubts about Coulter pressure him into marrying her: "She wanted something more—proof—something she could lean on" (79). Yet despite their marriage,

Muriel still "saw through me" (80), and as a result he joined the army. Her suicide, and Coulter's assumption of responsibility for it, mirrors Coulter's suicide and the narrator's assuming of accountability for that. Do we, as readers, see through Ross's analogy of Muriel/Coulter's relationship with Coulter/the narrator's? Is this why the narrator insists on his misreading of "The *Jug and Bottle,*" because he wants us to not "read into it what was never there," in the manner Coulter demands that we "see what I mean," that we must "[u]nderstand that she didn't mean anything to me" (78)?

(ii) Triangles and the failure of heterosexuality

Following the initiation of relationships in "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" with a more expansive sophomore effect in "Jug and Bottle," Ross's subsequent "crime" novels more comprehensively tackle the topic of triangulation. Significantly, the women in both *The Well* and *Whir of Gold* receive much more than just the cursory attention paid them in the short stories. Regardless, they still function in much the same way Florence and Muriel do, with Sylvia in *The Well* coming across as every bit as manipulative of Florence, and Mad in *Whir of Gold* as needy and plaintive as Muriel.

The function of the women still appears to be far less important than that of the men in so far as they complete the Sedgwickian triangle and allow Ross to explore how the men in the novels deal with the "real business" of being the subjects and instigators of plot and narrative. Although Chris and Sonny are sexually involved with women, the attraction extends only so far as it recalls male aggression and dominance (Sonny) or a rather strange, passive narcissism (Chris). Chris's real interest is in the money the

property might yield, in as much as Sonny's real interest is his music and getting ahead. Yet for each to pursue his interest, he must engage in a relationship with another man who has rather dubious desire for the woman who comes between them. And this other man, for reasons of his own, chooses Chris, or Sonny.

Larson's picking up of Chris in the Chinese-run restaurant both anticipates George's mistake of picking up Spike in "Spike," and recalls how Tommy picks (up) Philip Coleman in a similar establishment in "Cornet at Night." In echoing the latter story, Ross here writes that one of the first things that Larson notices is Chris's hands: "You've got soft hands. You've never worked much—on a farm or anywhere" (6). Philip Coleman's hands, as Tommy remembers, "were slender, almost a girl's hands, yet vaguely with their shapely quietness they troubled me, because, however slender and smooth, they were yet hands to be reckoned with, strong with a strength that was different from the rugged labour-strength I knew" (*Lamp* 36). Larson has noted Chris's "difference" easily enough, and Chris, irritated with the observation, defends himself: "They were good hands, slender and shapely, but not effeminate, and it piqued him that Larson should describe them as soft. They were one of his vanities. They even served as a justification for *what he was*, the kind of life he lived" (*Well* 6, emphasis added). It is tempting to sketch yet another parallel to the narrator of "Jug and Bottle," who highlights that Coulter is drawn to him for *what he is* (*Race* 74), that certain "something" which requires "explaining."

Although Chris is not a musician as is Philip, Ross evidently associates "soft hands" with artistic leanings; and such "softness," invariably linked to effeminacy, clearly

causes consternation among those—observers or possessors—who fear a casual link between what these hands may signify or how these hands may be misinterpreted or "read into." Chris's Aunt Rosemary, in commenting upon his hands, says (as Chris recalls): "Look at the hands on him, will you! He's not cut out for a pick and shovel, that one. . . . One of these days you'll have to be getting him a piano" (*Well* 7-8). The curious thing about this remembrance is that it finds expression couched within contexts of contempt, both that of Chris's remembrance and that of the present situation. But oddly and somewhat contrarily, Chris goes on to further reminisce, fondly, about how when he was alone in a public place "he would pose a little, holding his glass or cigarette to show them to advantage; and sometimes, losing himself in a fantasy or day-dream, he did play the piano" (8). And later, when he is looking after a young boy and is reminded of his own youth, he again recalls his Aunt Rosemary's comments, only this time, they are approving: "And the hands on him, will you, and the long fingers—that shows he'll be good at music when he gets older. One of these days you'll have to be getting him a piano" (114). Her mirroring comments send out paradoxical signals, which highlight a concomitant contextual shift: the same words carry different meanings.

However, in order to counter a hint of effeminacy which may, at the same time, suggest a homosexual predilection, Chris awakes from his daydream of ostensible artistry, and asserts himself to Larson: "They're not soft. And this isn't either" (8). Ross ends the paragraph here, and the ensuing white space is indeed a gap in which the reader's imagination, perhaps seizing too tightly on colloquial inference, might resurrect, as it were, a rather stiff vision of an ostensibly potent symbol of masculinity. But Chris

merely rolls up his sleeve and shows Larson muscles "where they were worth showing off" (8), that is, on his arms. And Larson is quick to admire them: "But you've got real nice muscles there—nice a set as I've ever seen" (8).

When Larson asks if Chris has been training, the conversation wends it way to Chris's hinting of his former athleticism and potential to be a boxer. Yet the masculinity which would shore his faltering slide into an effeminate identification gives way to the aesthetics of *not* becoming a fighter: "His nose was a particularly good one, and his profile, like his hands, was already important to him. The moments of conquest and admiration in which he sometimes indulged would not have survived disfigurement" (9). Chris's looks, like his hands, are an cultivated treasure which suggests a *necessary* compromise between (masculine) athletics and (feminine) aesthetics, and it is significant that the latter continually wins out over the former. Like Coulter, and the two Philips—Coleman, whose slender hands are "slender, almost a girl's hands" (*Lamp* 36); and Bentley, who "hasn't the hands" for manual labour (*House* 3)—Chris possesses a delicacy and self-regard suggestive not only of just narcissism but a narcissism deeply indebted to a (denied) feminine demeanour signalling a (possible) homosexual identity.

But Ross connects "the presence of something abnormal, perhaps exploitable" to Larson, whose eyes take on "a rapt, childlike look" (*Well* 9). Chris exploits the discussion, now turned to travelling and its attendant freedom, in order to excite the older man, whose fascination with trains appears indeed "abnormal." He confesses to Chris that "I thought once I had her [his wife, Sylvia] I wouldn't do it any more, but it's just as bad. [...] It's crazy, a man my age, and I figured she'd fix it for me. I mean so I'd be

satisfied, never hear the trains. Nice young wife . . . you'd think so" (10). Ross's delay—almost a form of free indirect discourse—in the identification of "it," coupled with the sexual urgency of "having" Sylvia, installs the pronoun in service of some alternate sexuality: What is "it" that Larson hoped he "wouldn't do any more"? What is "it" that is "just as bad"? What is "it" that having Sylvia would "fix" for him?

Ross's saturation of the answer to "it"—"trains"—with both sexual energy and "abnormality" cements the rail cars as a metaphor for not only a generalized "freedom" but also the sexually "licentious." Throughout the novel, Ross employs "trains" allegorically to suggest a freedom that Larson has never experienced but thinks his new protégé has. The normative signifier that denotes a railroad vehicle—the word "train"—becomes itself the *literary vehicle* by which to express the inexpressible possibility of a definitely queer sexuality. Ross's homotext takes on the appurtenances of the (heteronormative) *structuring* of difference wherein the text and subtext indecipherably merge, recalling again Edelman's formulation, that "a distinctive literariness or textuality, an allegorical representation, operates within the very concept of 'homosexuality'" (xvi). Ross's text—as an allegorical vehicle for the expression of homosexuality—requires close attention not just to the "obvious" subtext but to what end these subtexts force a reconsideration of heteronarrativity in its role of enforcing a "straight"-forward reading despite its revelation and commandeering of its inherent "differences."

Perhaps the largest problem—and most enticing challenge—concerning text and subtext convergence is Ross's use of the word "queer" in *The Well*. Certainly, Ross uses

it elsewhere in his fiction[89]; and, as we have seen in chapter three, Raoul, in overdetermining its usage, removes the word from its cultural context (Raoul 20, 22) in order to signal not feelings of strangeness but presumed homosexuality. In *The Well*, however, Ross seems to pl(a)y the word in accordance with the allegorical substance of his novel. When Larson explains that he speaks to his dead son—for whom Chris becomes the stand-in—he fears that "maybe I'd got queer, living too long alone" (18), recalling the solitary Vickers whose own "queerness" suggests a form of social deviance. Larson says that despite fixing up the farm in order to impress his (dead) son, the result is "[n]o difference" (18), intimating that "sameness" is the invariable (or desirable?) result. Larson's remedy for this state is to marry Sylvia; but he offers that "I keep on thinking about the trains, listening and taking off on a trip. Her lying there right beside me" (18).

Sylvia is no compensation for the "trains" which beckon, and Larson repeats his earlier plaint: "I know—you think I'm crazy talking like I do about the boy. But Sylvia's been no help at all. That's what I got her for, and I'm as bad as I ever was" (26). His attempt at assuming a form of (hetero)normativity does little to allay his queerness. But it is a strangeness in which Chris shares as well. In an extended dream sequence, comprising the entire ninth chapter, Chris relives the shooting of Baxter, a crime for which he is on the run. In his waking dream—a dream punctuated by an interchange of

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[89] The most frequent uses appear in Ross's first story, "No Other Way" (three times) and *As For Me and My House* (13 times). It appears once in "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" and in "Jug and Bottle." Only twice does it refer to a person rather than a feeling: Mrs. Bentley writes: "Right to my face Horizon tells me I'm a queer one" (*House* 155); and the narrator of "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" says of Peter: "To most of the men outside our room he was simple and a little queer" (*Race* 65). The first (and only) clear use of the word to signify homosexuality occurs in *Whir of Gold*, when Charlie says to Sonny:

wakeful reality and revealing flashbacks—Chris finds himself naked on the butcher block Baxter is about to use. Chris "lay still and passive [and as] Baxter began feeling his arms he tried to tell him that ordinarily he had good muscles" (82). However, suddenly, it is not Baxter but Larson who is "examining and feeling him" (83).

Struggling to awake, Chris is attenuated to his physical presence: "He knew he was safe in bed, that his muscles were as hard and firm as they ever were . . . but he felt uneasy none the less, vaguely threatened. They were a queer pair anyway" (83). Again, Chris reverts to what might signify masculinity and the "safety" (read: heteronormativity) it offers in order to fend off his imbrication in a rather homoerotically tinged dream. Baxter and Larson are the "queer pair," and this projection serves Chris's rationale for his "passivity." Larson's address to him, though—"What's wrong, son? You look scared" (83)—recalls the older man's fatherly comparison of Chris to his dead son (18-19).[90] Importantly, Chris drops back to sleep and, within the dream of going to eat ice cream with Larson, has a flashback to his own youth, about a time when one of his mother's suitors deserted him after going out on a similar outing. Dennis Cooley argues that it is a likely possibility that Larson becomes "the father Chris never found in his mother's anonymous lover" (1992, 117). That man, who "never rises out of the anonymity of pronoun," and who "withholds himself, never makes himself known to the young Chris," leaves the youngster in a continual search "for some noun, some proper noun, that will accommodate him" (115).

Yet this queerly expressed psychologically freighted "search," replete with Chris's

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"[L]ike the queers say it takes one to know one" (132).

tactile reflections, turns on a desire for the "same," if not the self: Chris observes both his own *subjective* presence within the dreaming and how he functions as the *object* of desire. As in my reading of Philip Bentley's "passivity," which opens *As For Me and My House*, and his "same name" identification with baby Philip, the temptation here is to read Chris's (somnolent and recumbent) collapsing of homoeroticism with autoeroticism as underscored by a troubling incestuousness and (if we are to read Larson's desire for Chris as a sublimated longing for his young, now-dead son) paedophilia. Cooley points to the possibility of a Chris/Larson/Sylvia *menage à trois* or an incestuous potential wrought through an interpretation of Sylvia as a "mother" to Chris (117), though it is a reading which maintains a heteronormative perspective in its positioning of Sylvia as the focus of sexual desire. The attraction of interpreting the situation using the paradigmatic Oedipal complex is not lost on McMullen, who makes full use of the triangulation. [91]

But perhaps more interesting is McMullen's exploration of how "Chris's contempt for women, his closeness to the Boyle Street gang, and especially his affection for Rickie, the street leader, suggest homosexual tendencies" (1991, 80). She argues that Chris uses women to prove his own superiority, but that paradoxically Chris finds Elsie Grover, a girl who works in a store in town, "more appealing to him in the boyish garb of their first

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[90] Larson frequently refers to Chris as son elsewhere in the novel. See 23, 39, 41, 74.

[91] McMullen discusses Sylvia as a mother figure because, in part, she figures as a stronger adult than the "passive and accepting" Chris (1991, 80), calling attention to the scene wherein Chris lays back while Sylvia presumably initiates fellatio, "the rich, big-breasted warmth of her body envelop[ing] him," leaving him feeling "small and childlike again, infinitely at peace" (*The Well* 127). McMullen notes that the "traditional romantic triangle of husband-wife-lover develops into a symbolically oedipal one of son-father-figure- mother-figure" (1991, 80). Although Chris does not kill Larson, his contemplation of it is, apparently, enough of a "fit."

meeting than in her frilly dress and attempted femininity at the Saturday night dance. He seduces her to reassert his masculine dominance" (81). Additionally, Chris's lack of a father is interpreted within the romancing of the gang leader Rickie, who in giving Chris gifts, intimates "rituals of a traditional courtship" (81). But the promise of examining the ramifications of homosexuality is dashed as McMullen reverts to the stereotype of "absent father" to explain Chris's sexuality: "Indications of latent homosexuality in Chris's relationship with Rickie may be viewed as the result of arrested emotional development caused by the absence of a father figure in childhood" (81).

I wish to maintain this suggestion of homosexuality by affirming Chris's pivotal position in any reading of desire, bringing to the fore the inevitably of a Chris/Larson coupling which necessarily pushes Sylvia aside. Certainly, the will to get rid of Sylvia is just as prominent in Chris's dream. Chris fears what he believes to be "a strong woman, stronger than he was"; and so he finds that, in the dream,

> [i]t wasn't strange either that both he and Larson should be trying to hide from her. She was the one who spoiled things, for both of them. He thought of all the times Larson seemed about to confide in him, had touched his arm, then drawn back shyly, and suddenly it struck him that she was what stood between them. "You're the one," he had said. Farm, horses, Cadillac—without her, everything would be his. (*Well* 85)

Ross couches desire safely within a want for things material, yet the possibility of Chris inheriting his "father's" wealth suggests that Chris is compromised by the "falseness" of his position as "son." The perversion of desire, either sexual or material, is a result of

Ross's inability, in the 1950s, to make textually manifest forms of desire not dependent on an heterosexually-inspired economy of meaning, especially as it may (not) be expressed within narrative. Ross demonstrates that an enforced adherence to dictums of the family romance does not leave room to attempt to resolve the "secret" that is homosexuality, and so this irresolution results in an impetus to difference: irresolution as difference. His critique of the non-reproductive extended Larson family reminds us that when expression of difference cannot rise "naturally" through narrative, it must appropriate such narrative in service of its project.

A clue to Ross's transformation of narrative normativity is found in the "dizzying chain of crossed identities" (Cooley 1992, 115) that permeate the novel, and these crossings and doublings lead to an examination of Ross's use of mirroring to effect the feature of his homotext, narcissism. Chris derives the pseudonymous "McKenzie" from an old teacher of his. For Larson, Chris is the double of the deceased son; had the son lived, he would have been the same age. But Chris is also identified with another younger namesake, a frail young boy who is Larson's first wife's sister's grandson, a generational remove doubled twice (wife's sister, her child's child). Sylvia is the second Mrs. Larson. The new dog on the farm is named Norris, after a favourite teacher of the dead son, but it is but one of a succession of Norrises, as is the current sorrel, Minnie, named, like her predecessors, after the horse which threw and killed Larson's young son. As Cooley keenly observes, Ross "yo-yos those homonyms up and down the novel" (115), with the result that (in at least the case of the Chris/Chris doubling) there ensues "two signifieds wobbling under one signifier and all the ambiguity that creates" (116).

The crucial aspect of the collapsing of doubles is that meaning does not consolidate around one pole or another but, rather, around a number of *possible* axes. The homonyms, for example, share the same *form* but denote discrete senses; these in turn are negotiated through the context, yet if the context is not immediately clear, the likely meaning(s) must be negotiated by the reader. Ross's narratives, if we are to understand them as vehicles for the allegorical expression of homosexuality, thematize the very notion of the possibility that different readings of difference will signal that which is inherently prohibited. More than a subtextual rendering, which would place homosexuality under a heterosexual aegis and lead to the co-optation of the difference at hand, Ross seeks to express the prohibitive nature of a narrative of homosexuality. This writing of—the allegorization of—the literary performance of self-same desires means, recalling Martin's earlier comment, that a "text will be 'homosexual' to the extent that it presents itself as both subject and object of desire, a text in the act of beholding itself, often through the mirror of the other, and loving itself" (1993, 293).

The mirroring attendant upon such doubling also finds literal references within the text, in line with Chris's formidable narcissism. A scruffy-looking Chris looks into a mirror upon arriving at the farm and shrinks from what he sees. "It made the need of a wash and shave more urgent than ever. Restored good looks would mean restored self-respect" (*Well* 24). After shaving, Chris (in a narrative so often "reflecting" his point of view) finds this to be a "transformation, the re-discovery of his good looks. After their brief eclipse they seemed even better than remembered. For despite himself, he had half-believed the [earlier look into the] mirror, and now, as if wakening from a bad dream, he

felt relief, a kind of gratitude" (32-33). His fastidiousness, not so dissimilar to that of the men in "No Other Way" and "Nell," is, he believes, "a qualification, like his hands and profile—a proof that the larger life he dreamed of was in reality his due" (33).

This "larger life," however, is not exactly commensurate with Chris's rather limited abilities; his outlook, as it were, is very much limited to what he sees of himself. Gail Bowen writes that "Chris finds his only assurance of existence in the reflected image of himself. . . . His treatment of people is marked by his need to find reflected in them an image of his own worth (45). One of people against whom he reflects his self-image is Larson, the prototype of "father" but of "lover" as well. Larson finds Chris in the dark barn, just as a train approaches. In an extraordinary orgasmic narrative rush, Ross describes its arrival: "The roar was crescendoing impressively. One whole side of the night shook and filled with it. The whistle blew again and Larson edged closer to Chris, so that as they leaned on the gate their elbows touched." Larson then says: "Sort of mournful, coming from away off and going on again. Watch now—there's about half a minute you can see the light" (72).

But Chris becomes restless and shifts away, oddly stating that "Maybe I don't feel it quite the same" (72). His weak remonstrance against feeling the "train" in the same fashion nevertheless does not distance him from the older man. Upon lighting a cigarette in the dark, Larson's hand rubs against Chris' arm, and Chris finds that "a glow spread through him, intimacy and warmth. To have something done especially for him—it was a good feeling, a feeling of being safe and cared for. But as Larson struck the match he seemed to see himself, to detect the weakness" (74). This scene reflects both the initial

meeting between the two men and the subsequent "waking dream," when Chris, in wondering how the situation might "reflect" upon him, changes his attitude in order to repel what he thinks is a perceptible "feminine" weakness that might be read as a queer predilection.

Does Chris, then, fear the "weakness" which Larson seems to repeatedly reflect for him? What does he see in Larson that might be a reflection of himself and his own desires? In yet another dream, recalling Chris's passivity on Baxter's butcher block, Chris finds "himself on Larson's knee, with the big horny hands feeling him over lightly, indifferent to his discomfort and precarious balance, as if he were something inanimate laid across a trestle." The hands proceed to caress his body until they move on "again purposefully towards his eyes" (125). Chris wakes, only to fall asleep again, dream once more, then presumably stir again to await the arrival of Sylvia: "He was awake, and not quite awake. He knew now that it was really Sylvia but still it seemed that she was coming from a long way off. . . . Sylvia and not quite Sylvia" (126)

Chris's certainty in what he sees recalls how the narrator in "One's a Heifer" is misled by (or seeks to mislead the audience with) his (in)ability to see straight. Chris's deliberations are underscored by the pointed threat to his sight, and it is as though Ross, through the figure of Larson, wishes both to point *out* the vehicle of sight—Chris's eyes—and to *menace* what that vehicle has the ability to signify, to read, to *reveal*. Chris's "eye" is one of those signifiers, recalling Cooley, under which wobble two metaphoric signifiers: the (false) homonym and the (equally false) synonym of "eye" and "I." Chris's identity is intimately bound up with not only his narcissistic vision of

himself but also how others might see him, how he thinks *he* can see how they see him. This narcissism has a deep investment in both the self-representation of desire—the desired self—and the ordering (and control) of these desires. But what Chris knows is, Ross intimates, underscored by a repressed falseness and (in)attention to difference(s): his position as the desired one, as the third focal point on the triangle, depends (he forgets) on the interrelation between not only Larson and himself but Sylvia as well.

When Sylvia does come to his bed, he lies still and submits to her "passively . . . with one arm flung out limp beside him . . . mak[ing] no move to embrace her or draw her to him. [...] There was no pretense of sleep now, only limp, passive silence" (126-27). In wanting "to yield to her, to lie passive and receptive," Chris finds that Sylvia's long hair, falling about his face, "enclose[s] him so that he could open his eyes without her knowing, without committing himself to response or initiative" (127). Chris's mimic of (what was understood to be) the quiescent domain of (dominated) women tellingly occurs in the dark, a place where he "could open his eyes" without, I would argue, her knowing of what he sees since the darkness reflects nothing. He is free to see a clear vision of himself without worrying about how he might be seen, under "a blank soothing darkness now, on which was written neither the dangers from which he had fled, nor the dangers still to come" (128)

But after all this passivity, when we are given to believe she has performed oral sex on Chris, Ross ends the chapter: "When at last he roused himself and turned upon her to *perform as a man*, it was almost with a reluctance, a feeling that now he could not do less" (128, emphasis added). Chris's reluctant performance necessitates a stir from his

receptive (dis)position, yet his act(ion) is cloaked by the chapter's end, as if to signal that what ensued was either less important or of no importance at all. The next time they repeat their tryst, Chris again wants

> to yield the initiative, to open his eyes within the obscurity of her hair and lie unseen and irresponsible. But when presently he turned it was as if *in the daylight he were aware of his submission as he had not been in the dark*, and to give it the lie, to make up for his lack of male aggressiveness, he closed upon her with a flare of passion that spent itself quickly. (134, emphasis added)

Chris's "exposure," that there may be others who can see him and thereby discover what only he himself can see in the darkness, leads him to attempt to reassert "male aggression" as a form of assertive denial.

But the feeling rankles, and upon leaving Sylvia he remembers an older woman he had met in Montreal three years earlier, the "efficient" Mrs. Flanders (134). Inside her apartment, he sees a piano and asks if she might play it. She laughs and says: "Oh no—not *you*! Those arms and shoulders. I thought . . . (136). Again, Ross creates an unspoken link between possessing an artistic bent and homosexuality which runs counter to the signals of an embodied heterosexuality. When Chris responds to her by dismissing the piano, Mrs. Flanders tries to explain further: "*He* plays, and one of his friends has a fiddle. When they get tired they put on records" (137). She intimates that her husband's—*his*—"playing" clearly is related to an unstated queerness, and so she had, she intimates, mistakenly thought the same of Chris. The narrator, in revealing Chris's thoughts, states that her clarification is nevertheless "a denial, and even with her two

hands clasping his arm—to span such an arm it took both hands: that was what she succeeded in conveying—she could not quite make it up to him" (137). Again, the assertion of the accoutrements of a heterosexually related masculinity is somehow meant to be a defense against the suggestion of homosexuality.

(iii) Play "that tooter of mine" again

Once Chris has established himself as Sylvia's ally in planning to murder Larson, the novel shifts its focus from a central consideration of character to become a rather conventional account of a crime. Chris's psychological motivations do not become any more or less elaborated, but Ross's agenda does become more engaged with an attenuated climax; it is as though once Ross has established Chris's and Sylvia's inner motivations, he relies solely on external action to finish the job. Morton Ross correctly faults the author for creating "a virtual paralysis of consciousness," with the result that Chris's "progress [is] so barely perceptible that it seems more like stasis" (1991, 26).

However, did Ross's inability to further delineate his homotext mean that Chris, the character who is the prime vehicle by which to draw tentative attention to homosexuality, is necessarily paralyzed since, within an ostensible heteronarrative, he has no means by which to develop? His sexual encounters with Sylvia are repetitious, and his increasingly tense relation with Larson seems only to serve to justify what Ken Mitchell calls a "drawn-out, flabby resolution" (57). But Chris's reluctance to carry through with the crime, in that it seems commensurate with Ross's own inability to decide upon conventional closure, is perhaps an appropriate indication that Ross is working here, as he

does in *As For Me and My House*, against conventional closure. The accretion of climaxes, however, betrays the economical elliptical finale of the earlier novel, and thus we might assume that Ross had moved on from that to attempt something new.

In *Whir of Gold*, Ross again attempts to mine similar territory, but the shift to an urban environment does little to dispel the notion that this is *The Well* redux. Comprising the familiar triangle of relationships are the pivotal first person narrator, Sonny McAlpine, and Mad and Charlie, each vying for his attention and embodying contrary social worth. This time, however, the woman figures as a potential catalyst for good. Mad, an erstwhile prostitute, attempts to make Sonny steer away from the dubious trappings of the criminal life offered by the sinister Charlie.

Like Chris, Coulter and Philip Bentley, Sonny is tall and possesses "[h]ands soft and cared for—suspect. Everything to be proved" (21). What he does prove, at this point in the novel, is his ability to engage in heterosexual sex, though such activity serves mostly to fend off the intimations of homosexuality that his soft hands and music lessons would, he fears, otherwise signal. As in the preceding novel, the protagonist's intercourse with women again takes place in the dark. In the barn with Millie Dickson, Sonny finds that his brief, forceful lovemaking later leaves him "trying to work up appropriate feelings of achievement and virility." Millie surprises Sonny by wanting to have sex again, and Sonny, "less because of desire than unwillingness to admit that what had happened was in fact consummation," goes along, finding that this time there is "experimental detachment and control" (22). His awareness of what has just transpired is contained by the darkness, which is itself indicative of a desire to mask, to perpetuate a

blinding unwillingness.

Sonny's adult encounters with Mad occur (as she insists) with the lights out (21, 87); and when he suggests that she undress, she reminds him: "All right, but not till you turn *round*. I told you before—no watching" (30), or "no looking" (32). But whether Sonny watches or not has no *apparent* bearing on either the novel's plot or on character development; the only inference might be, then, that Ross, in constructing his narrative, is conflicted about Sonny's attitude toward women. Like Chris Rowe, Sonny seeks to see how either other people reflect him or what they might see in him: in the dark, he does not have to worry about either of these and can simply reflect upon himself and engage in narcissistic self-regard; in the light, he appears to seek mostly in others, and Mad and Charlie in particular, an affirmation of what he thinks of himself.

When Mad "bounces" into bed after disrobing in privacy, Sonny finds that the "old tramp with defeat in her face was gone: a trick of the eyes, an illusion" (31). In order to allay his uneasiness, "fearing that if there had been one trick of vision there might be another," Sonny says unpronounced things to make her open her eyes, with the result that he is "reassured." And what constitutes this comfort? "For I could see her now, catch glimpses of the eyes, ***shining and blind***, and it was as if I too were something coming true, coming towards her, ***incredible and unknown***, with a swing of light around my shoulders (32, emphasis added). The contradictory nature of Mad's eyes, shining but blind, serves as a mirror for Sonny: he sees into them the unexplained but welcome nature of something "incredible and unknown," that ineffable "something" he can refashion as a vision of himself, for himself. Yet once the act is over, he finds the "curtain" fallen and that "the

glass behind it [is] as cracked and dirty as I feared" (31).

The motif of looking through cracked glass extends to Sonny's vision of Charlie, the neighbouring tenant who draws Sonny into crime. Although Charlie brings women to his room, Sonny never sees them, only hears them through the thin wall. He notes that "every time the voice [is] wrong. Sour, wrangling, exasperated. . . . [I]t wasn't the voice for the occasion" (6-7). Sonny infers from this that perhaps Charlie may not be buying the women's services, but that they may be buying *his*. Charlie offers him "Nicole from Chicoutimi" and a drink of scotch, both as means of a proposed but unspoken exchange. Sonny drinks in the enticement, both literally and figuratively, finding that "instead of a dirty offer at the bottom of the glass, there was a dirty taste. Because I had listened to him, let itch and interest show. Because I would listen again—the next time might consent" (7).

Again, Sonny omits the object of consent—consent to what?—likely because Ross, in this drama of an emerging criminal consciousness, wishes to draw out Sonny's slide into social deviancy in order to make it look more credible. But Sonny notes that the "next time" which Charlie had mentioned earlier, Saturday, had now arrived.

> *Saturday*, he had said, *and today was Saturday*. For then I would be one of them—on the other side—and whenever it was time he would move in on me, and whatever he wanted he would take. I was sure of that. Somehow, as I lay there in the half-dark, watching the snow through the branches, the two were linked—as if part of me had already secretly responded, as if a deal were being made behind my back. (7)

It would be a mistake to read Charlie's solicitation of Sonny's friendship as an invitation to homosexual liaisons, to the "other side," especially when it becomes rather clear that Charlie is seeking an accomplice in crime. Yet following the emergent pattern in which Ross's ambiguousness strongly points out more than one readerly direction, it cannot be discounted that Ross's homotext insistently courts readings which do not discount the possibility of an abiding homosexuality.

It is this novel which, I think, most successfully delves into the allegorization of homosexuality, especially as it most creatively revels in the trope of homosexuality as deviancy. Charlie's criminal nature, one in which he invites Sonny to partake, is indeed suitably allegorical if one includes homosexuality as a medically deemed criminal act. The deep irony of Charlie's recruitment of Sonny recalls the charge that homosexuals selfishly procure the young in order to propagate their own (sexual) needs, and Charlie's enlistment of Sonny definitely follows that trajectory. And so, homosexuality and crime converge as *deviancy*. Again, for example, when Mad accuses Sonny of wanting Charlie to hear them, Sonny, rather than respond directly to the charge, merely restates his claim that his neighbour will not tell the landlady. He then oddly muses that Charlie "seemed unimportant now, diminished. All the menace was gone. [...] I had been imagining things: alone too much, too much time to brood and worry. My own mind was starting to go sick" (26).

He then goes on to assert that being "loud" with Mad was meant to show Charlie that he was "independent and could sleep with a woman of my own" (26), although he admits that such an act now seemed childish. Mad, in supplanting her wonderment at the

possibility that Sonny was in collusion with Charlie, adds that, despite Sonny's claims, "there was something funny about the way you said it" (26), recalling Sonny's own view of the way Charlie speaks to the women he brings home: "[I]t wasn't the voice for the occasion" (6-7). It might be easiest for Ross to intimate the constitution of homosexuality through the literary composition that is narrative, attendant upon literary devices such as ambiguity. The notion that "it takes one to know one" functions as an ironic commentary upon Ross's own endeavours in "homosexual writing," that he engages the knowing reader to reflect upon the allegorized homotextuality which encompasses his corpus.

Mad thinks she "knows one" when she persists in her examination of Charlie; she asks: "You don't mean he's one of those fellows that don't like girls?" (26). And again, rather than directly address the *implication*—one that might naturally extend to himself—Sonny delivers a "sideways" reply: "He brings one up every so often. What I hear through the wall sounds normal enough" (26). The qualifier "enough" suggests that there may be room for doubt; and after Mad gives herself over to worry, he asks (though the rhetorical nature of the question is weak): "You sound as if you had your doubts about me?" She responds that he would be likely to respond with violence to a gay overture, as if it were a *natural* thing: "I'd like to see what you'd do if anybody came along and tried" (26). But again, as in the case of "enough," the doubt has been planted, in as much as one might wonder for what reasons Sonny might elicit such "trying." Indeed, Mad plays out the "fantasy": "they" would get him drunk. "That's the way they work, you know, taking advantage. You and that tooter of yours, wanting a job and no luck. Clubs and places like that are just full of them." And Sonny responds, without editorializing, "That's

right—that tooter of mine" (26).

Sonny's highlighted use of "tooter," within a discussion of sexual "predators," attests that *that* is what "they" want to "take advantage" of, since no one certainly wants Sonny for his clarinet. Perhaps his tooter—the one Mad excitedly refers to earlier when, grasping him, she says: "Oh Sonny—you mean that's all *you!*" (21)—will get him another kind of job to pay the rent. The wry spirit of Sonny's comment—Ross's comment?—is quite amusing in its irony, especially as it seems to pass by Mad, who unwittingly offers her own ironic twist on the "tooter" when she attempts clarification: "I *mean*, sometimes when you want something a lot there's nothing you won't do for it. Some people, that is—I don't *mean* you" (26, emphasis added). What does she mean? She refines her gist further: "No, Sonny—not you. It'd take an awful lot of liquor" (26), leaving "enough" room for the notion that "it" just might be a possibility, given the scotch Charlie has recently given him.

And when Charlie sees Sonny coming home looking "rough," he offers to buy him a drink: more scotch. At the bar, he chides Sonny: "Jesus, Sonny—how can you?" (105); and Sonny notes that Charlie was "[n]ot putting it on this time; the disgust as genuine as the bewilderment. 'A couple of hours all right—get it out of your system. But the *morning*—waking up and *looking* at her—'" (105). Charlie's pronounced misogyny certainly plays to the stereotype of a homosexual as a woman-hating man; a subsequent encounter with some female passers-by on Sherbrooke leaves Charlie hissing: "Dirty bitches—who'd want you anyway?" (108).

But Charlie's "meaning," unlike Mad's, finds special currency in Ross's use of him

to signify a homosexual "menace." Certainly, Charlie understands the presence of homosexuals in the city; as he says to Sonny: "[L]ike the queers say it takes one to know one" (132). However, might such an awareness also denote an allegorized form of self-implication—"It takes one to know that others may be one"? Charlie and Sonny's discussion of the latter's propensity for a life of crime is always suggested, never explicit, as though to indicate Sonny's willed self-deception. After denigrating Mad, Charlie coyly smiles and tells Sonny that returning home to the prairies is not to be expected: "[Y]ou'll never fit in. You'll never be one of them. Because all this time, whether you know it or not, you've been growing. Same as me, Sonny—you're the growing kind" (106). And again, once Charlie has gone, Sonny finds his mind going "sick" in that evening's dream of an escape to anywhere: "I whispered the words into the darkness like a sick prayer" (109).

The moment of resolution, when Sonny decides to throw in his lot with Charlie, heightens the metaphoric connection between his "sickness" and (criminal) deviancy: "There must have been a moment when the key clicked and turned—a moment of decision, involving *me*—but when I go back I find only the door, first closed, then open, never the act of opening it" (114). Sonny's inability to account for his impending criminal act—even as he confesses it in the retrospective chronicle constituting *Whir of Gold*—reveals his interest in the evasive nature of metaphor. Yet if we consider his evasion to be genuine, in that he really is confused about his slide into felony, what are we to make of that "moment," literarily realized here as both a lapse in understanding and a space of readerly opportunity?

Not unlike Mrs. Bentley, Sonny also faces a door, albeit a metaphorical one, which he sees as always closed or open; he is powerless, moreover, in influencing the circumstances which cause the door to open or close. And again like Mrs. Bentley, he intuits that the movement—locking or unlocking—of that door somehow involves him. The enactment—the meaning behind the door's opening and closing—is, however, beyond his understanding. So too might I shorten that "enactment" to speak of only the *meaning behind* the door, like the meaning behind Mad's "meaning," as another way of suggesting that the door, as either revealing or barring sight, to see what is *inside*, reveals the operative imperative of allegory in the work of Ross.

The chapter, which begins with Sonny's moment of resolution, above, heralds what Morton Ross calls a sequence of six chapters (21 through 26) "unlike anything [Ross] has previously written" (1991, 28); and of this chapter's opening, he writes that Sonny's decision is both surprising and disappointing since "Sonny must confess an almost complete ignorance about his motives," an admission which is made "in genuine perplexity" (29). McMullen also writes of the chapter's commencement, that to Sonny

> it seems that in committing this crime he has stumbled into a totally different world, "a looking glass world" (*Whir* 128). That his own criminal action seems unreal to him is confirmed by his later words equating the hold-up with a drama, in which he felt like a last minute substitute playing a part which is not right for him. [...] [H]e is never able to explain satisfactorily to himself why he made the leap from ordinary, law-abiding citizen to criminal. (1991, 93-4)

It is tempting to look at McMullen's examination of Sonny's part as being "not right for

him," as an echo of Mad's declaiming to Sonny, that "there was something funny about the way you said it" (*Whir* 26), and Sonny's comment regarding Charlie's addresses to women, that his is not "the voice for the occasion" (6-7). Might it be, rather, that what is perceived to be not normatively "right" is indeed *correct* or *apt* for the socio-cultural context of the narrative?

Sonny's inadequacy in explaining himself recalls the narrator's impotence when faced with "explaining" Peter Dawson in "Barrack Room Fiddle Tune" (62). Again, "explaining" that which (or who) cannot be made plain since "valid" discourses prohibit such an exegesis exhibits Ross's investment in creating "meaning" through an allegorical narrative which both touches and dramatizes "difference" itself. Mad, in another burst of clarification, tells Sonny about what she was thinking at work: "Just knowing you're be here—the difference something like that makes. Never happened before. Never so *much* difference" (*Whir* 69). The narrative scales tip uneasily with this emphasis on "difference," in that such attention calls ironic notice to the reason for the *stress*: Just why so *much* difference? In response, Sonny again proffers a rather incomplete elucidation of his own; he calls Mad's assessment: "A statement of fact, an appreciation. One of the right ones—I would understand. Sonny and Mad—why pretend? Why play games with each other? The little subtleties and stratagems of man with woman—not for the likes of us!" (69).

An ironic reading of Sonny's rhetoric takes his statements as literally self-evident: What is there to understand? Why pretend indeed? Just before committing the robbery, still under the self-delusion of pretence, he asks Charlie, with a rising awareness

colouring his rhetoric: "You mean you've smelled me out?" (132). Charlie responds with the "takes one to know one" barb, adding that "[u]nderneath . . . if we dig for it, there's maybe what I'm looking for. I think so and tonight I'll know" (132). Sonny later that night finds that the robbery "went like the performance of a well-rehearsed play. . . . I had been told the action, given my lines, and now I walked on blindly, dazed. . . . [...] The trouble was the role itself; it wasn't right for me" (138). Again, the remonstrance that what is occurring is "not right" intimates that Sonny's performance is *narratively* correct in its ironically underscored difference from what might be normally *perceived* to be (read) "right"; and this difference remains not elucidated, not unlike the paradoxes entailing Sonny's "clear" ability to state his perplexity or Mad's strong avowal in describing a nebulous "difference."

But such paradoxes are not new to Sonny. At Charlie's, with another scotch in hand, Charlie confronts his new friend with a question to which they both already know the answer. Sonny looks away from Charlie but still finds that "[m]y back was to the mirror but I could see myself" (42). That he conflates his literal and figurative abilities here implies that doing either, when he likely wishes he could not achieve this certain "insight," invariably solicits a perpetually unresolved difference which colours his personality. If he were to *look directly* at Charlie, the resolution of the metaphor's contradiction might be all too clear. Charlie constitutes the "menace" (26) who never really goes away, in that Chris fears how Charlie sees him and, more pointedly, how he himself sees Charlie seeing. It is as though he, through an exchange of looks, has internalized Charlie's maxim of "takes one to know one," with "knowing" metaphorically

denoting a type of insight. Sonny also fears that he is unable to control Charlie's vision, the one that gives rise to doubts about what he sees in himself. Sonny's narcissistic vision of desire also depends not just on Charlie but on Mad, the two others who, in this small boarding house room, reflect competing visions of how they might effect a future for the object of their respective desires, Sonny.

(iv) Making it perfectly queer

Charlie's desires win out, and if we are to understand the robbery as the culmination of these desires, then McMullen is correct in asserting that the chapters delineating the crime constitute the novel's "central tension," though she sees this as a "structural imbalance" (1991, 99). In much the same manner as the previous novel, however, once the central tension is elaborated and concluded, little remains but for Ross to close the framing narrative that is, here, the relationship of Sonny and Mad. Without Charlie's active "menace," the novel founders upon the duo's amorous connection, a bond that not surprisingly deteriorates. But as in *The Well*, Ross's conclusion might be better understood, in tandem with his literary project, as an allegory of (hetero)normative failure: if Sonny is in any way queer, then it is not surprising that his attachment to Mad should cease.

In the two short stories that follow *Whir of Gold*, Ross abandons his examinations of the failure of homosocial triangles, but does not yet directly depict an unambiguous homosexual character, an act left for his last novel, *Sawbones Memorial*. It is somewhat inescapable to point out that the murderous father of "The Flowers that Killed Him" might

be, in some senses, homosexual; however, a distinction must be made respecting Old Creeper's evident ephebophilia which *converges* with what might be homosexual desire. In the case of "Spike," George, another father, does not actively seek out the (older) teena ged "boy" he inadvertently "picks up," but the story's homoeroticism is nonetheless undeniable.

Perhaps it is "subtextual" discomfort that has led critics to completely ignore the story, save for McMullen's paragraph on it. She writes that Ross "reverses the usual crime story by revealing the threatening young hitchhiker as a lovelorn young man merely trying to get home to his girl friend" (1991, 41); in other words, Spike uses George to hasten the journey. Yet this "reversal" also extends to the entire story: the ironic inversion is that it is George, not Spike, who does the figurative "picking up," although George protests his own complicity in literally giving Spike a ride. In describing George's first sight of Spike hitchhiking at the roadside, the narrator writes that it is a "trick of his eyes." George's evident conflict in deciding whether or not to give the "boy" a ride results in a "retinal no-danger signal that . . . fail[s] against the flurry of alarm" (99). Certainly, George's sight—that "trick of his eyes" which is commensurate with that he "knew" (99)—reveals a blind desire underscoring the ensuing brief relationship between the two men.

Spike's own eyes are "bright, guileless, blue . . . and frank like a little boy's" (100); the narrator's own selective omnipresence stands in as George's, and his insistence on seeing Spike as somehow helpless, if not younger than his "nineteen or twenty" years (99), recalls again Ross's characters who have abiding and somewhat disturbing interest

in attention to youths. Not unlike Larson's solicitation of Chris, George buys Spike something to eat at the diner; and again, Spike, like so many Ross male characters before him, is over six feet tall. George, in looking the young man over, notices that Spike has the "*wrong* shoulders"; there is "[s]omething about the eyes: as he turned and met them, he felt a sudden twinge of doubt, almost of if it were the *wrong* boy" (101, emphasis added), recalling how in his last work, Ross ironically signals queerness by things which are "not right."

When George acquiesces to giving Spike a ride, their eyes meet and lock, and George's consciousness—specifically, what he fears he has just *seen*—is narrated intimately:

> Just imagining things, the eyes hadn't changed. *Couldn't* have changed. . . . Good thing, in fact, he was going to have him to talk to. Company, just what he needed. . . . But it was no use: he had seen something and it wouldn't shake.
>
> Alerted, that was it, as if he had suddenly become aware of George, a possibility. (101)

The narrative consciousness, in the last line, above, shifts the use of "he" to signal Spike, though a first reading, before encountering the word "George," would flag the older man. The confusion indicates perhaps another use of free indirect discourse to blur and intermingle the psyches of the two men. Ross, as we have seen, has used such duplicitous commingling before in *The Well* to gesture toward sexual "abnormality." George's reading of Spike here also recalls how, in *The Well*, Chris "reads," in the initial meeting, the look in Larson's eyes, which, when talking about freedom, "had taken on a rapt,

childlike look. . . . Chris sensed that he was in the presence of something *abnormal,* perhaps *exploitable*" (9, emphasis added).

This time, however, it is the older man interpreting the younger one's "awareness" of him, George, as "a possibility." Of course, the intimation is that the older man is seen as prey, but the conflation of the ownership of the *sight*—of insight, of *knowing*—with a "fearful" emotion indicates that George (or Chris, or Larson) wishes to suppress, in a fashion, an unstated attraction. George, rather, translates what he sees as Spike's "desire" into the "possibility" of robbery. At the height of George's nervousness, the narrator again closely details George's thoughts, again with the result that "he" is freely used to describe George, Spike, or either: "So still he could hear the boy chewing and swallowing, the faint smack of his lips. He glanced around again: still in profile. B[ut] he knew. He remembered, didn't need confirmation. . . . He had looked George over and decided he would do" (*Race*102).

"He knew." What either man "knows" is again elided in the key scene detailing George's admission of Spike into the car. Spike is shivering outside the door, and once inside "[h]e shivered again and George felt reassured. For now there was no need of pretence, no need to be polite. George was trapped. He knew" (104). Yet who is it that "knows" here? It could be *Spike*'s understanding, or what George *himself* realizes, or, more likely, that George, subconsciously selecting what he *sees*, both desires and fears the potential "threat" that is Spike. Ross again insists on some vaguely defined "knowing," and George's (conflicted) self-reassurance gives way to compliance, almost a kind of passivity, in the pick-up. The narrator concludes that George, "in opening the door . . .

had delivered himself. Spike could do with him whatever he wanted, when he wanted" (104). The panic George ostensibly feels has its underpinnings in dissembling *friction* as much as Ross's allegory of paradoxical desire reads as a shrouded *fiction*.

Indeed, George cannot bring himself to sound "firm" but only, rather, "weak, apologetic" (104-5). He makes a puzzling comparison between his daughter and Spike, both in terms of age and hair: "Just about your age. [...] Blonde, hair just about like yours" (105). Spike shifts, "as if to see George better," and George informs him that "My problem's the boys. All crazy about her. And if you saw the one she's taken a shine to. Long hair, pimples, tight pants—" (105), recalling George's earlier attention to Spike's "cotton jeans" (103). In disparaging the falseness he sees in Spike's pride in having Nancy as a girlfriend, George thinks "sourly" that his own wife "had a silly crush on me once too, but I dug in, tried to make something of myself" (105). Yet he finds a similar falsity in his own family, that after twenty years, "he had everything and nothing"; his "miracle, the dream come true" is, he concludes, undone by the exemplary attitude of his daughter who had earlier that evening answered his call with a listless "Oh, it's *you*" (106). George's (apparently) unwitting portraiture of an androgynous Spike, attendant upon the relative failure of family life, suggests that George seeks, or has been open to, yearnings for something different, or at least something different *from* the norm. If we recall that the very notion of "difference" signals the key to "explaining" non-normative desire in Ross, George's indecision—his paradoxical insight and knowing—structures itself in the narrative as a part of the allegorical representation of desire.

George's irresolution becomes, here as in the earlier fiction, illustrative of the

narrator's inability to resolve the quixotic nature of George's ambiguous desire within a normative framework. The story moves from pick-up to hold-up, though Spike's "crime" is softened by his apologetic explanation of his motivation: to get home to Nancy. In a manner not dissimilar to Charlie's rhetorical dismissal of Mad—"She's what you want?" (*Whir* 105)—George questions Spike: "[Y]ou mean you did this just so you could see your *girl*?' (*Race* 109). Spike's explanation, that it is Nancy's birthday today and that her father was expecting a ring-bearing Spike to fail to show up, leaves George still incredulous: "But since you had the ring, what difference would another day have made?" (109). The explanation of the difference does not suit the still suspecting George—indeed, Spike's accounting seems rather weak as either his justification or Ross's rationale for narrative climax. George's desire for *more*—more "knowing"?—appears unsurprising in light of this. After feeling that "some kind of account should be rendered, that Spike should at least see himself," George calls after the fleeing Spike: "Some time if you're ever round my way I'd like to talk to you" (110). But George, still shaken, speaks far too softly for Spike to hear. The narrative gives way to the panic that prohibits further knowing or explaining, and the hurried climax, thwarted by a lack of explanation, becomes emblematic of that which cannot be explained, that different kind of climax not beholden to narrative (hetero)normativity.

Given the protraction of such climaxes, it would seem that Ross's next story, "The Flowers that Killed Him," is the logical extension and endpoint, an implosion, of Ross's fascination with criminal motivation, especially as it may be read as symbolizing the ineffable narrative expression of a desire once thought itself to be criminal and

pathologically-inspired. McMullen (again, very briefly) writes that Ross "does not attempt to get into the mind of the most perverse of his criminal figures" (1991, 125); and Ken Mitchell, the only other critic to mention the story at any length (which is not much), describes the story as Ross's "most experimental in structure" (25), concluding that it combines "the outraged innocence evident in Ross's earlier work with the demands of magazines for more sophisticated material and techniques" (26). Again, as with "Spike," the critical unwillingness to delve into the subject matter reveals how commentators have not been forthcoming in discussing either the story or their avoidance of giving any thoroughgoing account of the story. In reading into this silence, I will speculate that the critical history of writing up a "straight"-forward account of Ross could not accommodate *directly* addressing the issue of the story's homosexuality since to do so might require surmising about Ross's own interest in the topic.

The story's narrator, Joe, keeps secret what he obviously must know at the outset of the history he relates, and leaves it for the story's climax; therefore, the subject of the story—perversion—is metonymic of the *structural perversion* of "story," conveying *the* story of a sexual deviancy, deeply intertwined with a fiction *narrating* such deviancy itself. The reader must trust the narrator's "devious" objectivity in order to reach the climax that the narrator has himself already reached; but a departure from such trust may symbolize not only a reader's disbelief but also a resistance to sharing the narrator's "climax." The reading of difference—looking *back* for *a* difference in the narrator's own rationale for delaying climax—aptly illustrates the perversion of sexual representation which has occurred in most of Ross's fiction.

Joe's own retrospection reflects a surety of insight, as if the end—that is, his murder of his father, which occurs *before* the story—justified the means—that being the story itself, an almost defiant account of his rationale. The narrator of "One's a Heifer" also engages in a similar retrospective justification, yet the outcome of his story—allegorized as an elliptical engagement with queerness—remains indefinite. On the other hand, Joe's "confession," wherein the end is definite, results in a climax that reads as "natural": Joe's action is outside the law but is meant to be seen as "understandable," given the circumstances. In relating how his father "thought it wrong to kill garters," Joe extrapolates: "And he wanted us to grow up knowing better, so we'd never kill just for the sake of killing" (127). Joe, as part of his grounds for patricide, has literalized the *subtext* of this lesson: he kills because there is a reason to kill, though he conveniently omits that he plays, in facilitating the action underscored by the rationale, the roles of judge, jury and executioner.

There is no denying the queerness—in all senses denoted—of his father; it is not allegorized, and his guilt seems clear (though never certain). However, if Joe's own action is understood as illegal (which it certainly is), his chronicle might also be read as an *illegitimate* attempt at narrative and its propensity for (hetero)normative meaning-making. Certainly, Joe liberally engages in reading the thoughts of others, to the extent that his auditing becomes omniscient. He confidently reports that his mother, overwrought at her husband's death and "scared so bad," is "[t]hinking of me" (119). The town, too, is "all wondering about me" (119) in showing up at his father's funeral. In the church audience is Ruby Blake, the mother of his murdered friend Larry, and she is

crying, but "[f]or Larry, of course, not my father. In fact—something I knew that she knew I knew—she never had much use for him" (125-26). And once, in a discussion with Red (his second friend to be murdered) concerning refurbishing the family basement, Joe says: "I could see it wasn't really the basement he was thinking about" (123).

What Joe "knows" he continually underlines with a series of "maybes" and "I've wondered," and perhaps this is meant to be understood as natural for someone so young. But his moments of "mind reading" are no doubt meant as rhetorical support for his eventual course of action. What Joe refuses to see are the moments in the story which paint a less than flattering picture of a somewhat deceptive narrator. When Joe says his mother is "[t]hinking, too, perhaps, how it was all tied in," he refers to the family move to the apartment which ironically came as a result of Larry's death: his mother feared living at the edge of town. And it is from the apartment heights his father falls to his death. Joe wonders, then, if part of his mother's "fear" is a result from her sense of complicity in her husband's fall. However, might her "fear" come from the realization that she knew her husband may have been responsible for Larry's and Red's murders, especially how "it was all tied in" to her (later-revealed) refusal to go on a trip with her husband which, in turn, may have resulted in Red's death. Or might it even come from the notion that her son might, in some way, be responsible?

Joe points out that her parent's marriage was something of a sham, since they no longer shared bedrooms, and his dissection of their failed union is very cold. When he reflects upon having overheard his mother telling a neighbour that Joe is "all I've got now" (120), Joe soberly observes: "Not that having him too—my father—made much

difference. I mean they weren't exactly what you'd call a happy couple. [...] Still, he was her husband, and now that it's over I suppose she's got a lot to think about and remember" (120). He also recalls that it was "funny" that his mother, in agreeing to her husband's suggestion to have Larry visit frequently, was "willing to go along with this suggestion when most of the time, just to spite my father, she'd back off and do the opposite" (124). Joe rationalizes this behaviour as "mak[ing]sense," in that the ostensible reason was to keep him from being too much trouble: "Me on her mind likely" (124), recalling how Joe's narcissism shores up a determination not to read too closely—or to let the reader see too closely—into his own motivations.

Joe cannot fully explain his mother's apparently irrational behaviour, in the same way he cannot (initially) account for his father's "funny" behaviour the morning of the discovery of Red's body. Also lacking explanation is his apparent jealousy over his father's camaraderie with Larry and Red. Upon inviting Red over for dinner, Joe thinks that "maybe he saw through me—us—and came anyway. Just because he wanted to come—to see how other families lived, maybe the things they talked about and ate" (123). In a manner similar to the way Joe can't "get over" Red's footloose ways, Joe can't "get over . . . the jokes. They always gave me goose pimples . . . but Red laughed. Not putting it on; he actually seemed to think they were funny" (123). He admits that "I used to be sore the way [my father] was always pushing in and getting round them. They both laughed at his jokes" (125-26).

When the playroom in the basement was finished and Larry and Red, amongst others, came over every Friday night, Joe notes that his father "didn't make much of a

nuisance of himself" and hopes that the others will remember his hospitality; but as for Joe himself,

> what I remember is Old Creeper upstairs waiting—every minute they were there I could *feel* him waiting—watching the time, sitting down with his book, coming to the basement door to listen. I used to catch myself listening too—listening to him listen; and instead of being a good host I'd sit grinding my teeth, thinking and wishing things it's not good to think and wish about your father. (128)

And when Joe's father had first suggested, to Red, that the basement be partitioned into a playroom, Joe reports: "Red said it sounded like a pretty good idea. [...] And the way he looked at my father I could see it wasn't really the basement he was thinking about. It sort of shook me" (122).

It may be that Joe, within his retrospection, cannot help but naturally inveigh against his father, since we are to assume that Old Creeper is the agent of Red's and Larry's demises. Yet Joe's own motivations—he was, he relates, alone at a cinema until midnight the night Red was murdered—call attention to the notion that he may have played a greater role in his friends' ends than he is willing to admit. If we are to believe that Joe's father is the killer, then Joe's rationale and plan for pushing him over the balcony is perhaps the weakest link of all. Joe intimates that Red, in having reportedly fought against his attacker, had scratched his father's face, and that his father was in his mother's room (while she was in the shower) in order to procure makeup to cover the scratches. The broken glass Joe has put on the pavement will, he implies, account for the scratches on his father's face, so that, in the end, his father will not be suspected but at

least he will have received punishment. Yet Joe cannot be certain, in pushing his father over, that his father's face will meet the glass, or that the forensics department, in looking at the scratches, would automatically never assume that the cuts on the father's face could be caused by anything but glass. Does a tear caused by falling on glass so closely resemble the trajectory of a scratch that no questions would be asked?

The question as to whether or not this is just bad art or flawed storytelling might be broached. But the failure of the story to "explain itself"—its inability to account for the rhetorical and factual gaps—is more illustrative, I would argue, of what occurs when the homotext is, as Edelman argues, "constructed to bear the cultural burden of the rhetoricity inherent in 'sexuality' itself" (xvi): the rhetorical freight placed on the narrative by the (presumed) suppression of the story's queer subject results in the text's encrypting of curbed deviance. It is as though the breaking point has been reached, whereupon the homotext foregrounds its (homo)sexual subject only as a pathological manifestation: not only does the allegorized difference begin to show cracks, but the cracks are also reflected at the level of story. "The Flowers that Killed Him" does not fail because of a pathologized homosexuality (or homosexual) which haunts it but, rather, because the unutterable homosexuality which does haunt it—and all of Ross's fiction—finds no narrative outlet, either allegorically, stylistically, or thematically.

The arrival of Benny Fox, in Ross's last fiction, *Sawbones Memorial*, is almost something of a relief. Although Ross does not spare Benny the somewhat passive homophobia of Upward's citizenry, the portrait of the put-upon Benny reveals a man remarkably free of any kind of neurosis (though I do not mean to imply that he should be

afflicted). Rather, Benny's somewhat brazen attitude appears to be out of step with the times, especially given that his open secret does not cause a great deal of consternation amongst the townsfolk. It is not difficult to imagine the kind of conservatism that would plague a small prairie town in 1948 (let alone the fact that it still does today), and so Benny comes across as a kind of anomaly, as if Ross had transplanted his vision of an emerging liberated homosexual circa 1974 into the novel.

Although indeed it may be imaginable that people were tolerant of homosexuality in 1948 Canada, the polite reception Benny receives from everyone in the novel is a bit much. The only thing that ever afflicts Benny, beyond the childhood cruelty fostered by his own mother, are "raised eyebrows" (28). Even Benny's own (acerbically stated) outlook—"A very broad minded-town" in which "[e]verybody knows about him, everybody winks behind his back" (102)—sounds more like wish-fulfilment than social reality. As Benny says of Doc Hunter's supportive disposition: "[Y]ou [a]re one in a million" (103).

I wonder, then, if Benny turns up in the novel simply because he *could*, given the changing social climate of 1974 (though, I would add, the climate changed mostly in larger urban centres). Benny allows Ross to explore, in a limited fashion, the social response to homosexuality, although much of the disapprobation he describes is not altogether surprising. Ross does, though, take a swipe at the biological understanding of homosexuality as something caused by gender confusion and reversal. When Rose wonders if the dandified clothes Benny wore as a youngster "made him turn," Nellie replies: "Well, [Benny's mother] and Sam were certainly normal enough—at least judging

by the fix they got themselves into—so he didn't inherit it" (45). The women are at least willing to admit that biological inheritance plays no role, but they will not go so far as to appreciate how they themselves, as part of a (perhaps understandably) ignorant "dominant" group, contribute to the perpetuation of a public milieu inimical to the lives of people like Benny. Rather, they speculate that the lack of enforcement of normative gender codes, such as clothes, should not be violated. Nellie, in wondering about what kind of sex gay men might have, rhetorically asks: "What *can* they do?" (45), implying that consummation of desire depends upon a heterosexually inscribed model of intercourse between a man and a woman. The repetition of this attitude by Duncan might signal Ross's own unwillingness to abandon a stereotype, though it must be admitted that the notion of a male homosexual as frustrated in his expressions of masculinity and femininity was in wide circulation. Duncan points out that the young Benny, despite shedding his rather prissy clothes, was "still like a little girl, he couldn't help it" (40).

Benny's conversation with Doc Hunter looks like an opportunity for Ross to reveal that homosexuals are not altogether dissimilar from their heterosexual counterparts. But Benny's explanation of himself, by turns plain and bitter, seems ironically to underscore Doc's benevolence—the understanding and sympathetic listener—as the stable and wise filtering intelligence underscoring society. Ross's foregrounding of the character of the unambiguously straight Doc in the novel recalls how (narrated) homosexual reality is shaped by a heterosexual one. Or is it that Ross merely gestures towards this an inescapable facet of homosexual existence, that the narration of otherness inescapably occurs at the site of heterosexual cognizance, and that a profitable delineation of such

difference can achieve a homotextual visibility through a "perversion" of heteronarrative discipline?

Ross promises as much in a short chapter in which two unnamed characters discuss the moral "failures" of others. The chapter is rife with ambiguous references to "it," especially as the pronoun refers both to Bertha's affair with Cliff and to her subsequent abortion. As one character says, in response to the other's implication of Doc's involvement in "it," "Figure it out for yourself" (70), a perfectly sound allegorical phrase for what is imputed but never spoken. The marker "it" then shifts from referring to the fallout from the affair and the abortion, to Cliff's suicide and Doc's ensuing operation on Bertha (to abort the foetus). When one of the two protests that Doc, despite being a "decent doctor" who could have lost his license, "did it anyway," the interlocutor avers that "He did it after Cliff did it. There's a difference" (71). The moral gambit over meaning becomes laughingly confused in the mirrored phrasing when "it" is pressed into a tight corner of economical expression. The assertion that there *is* a "difference" ironically highlights the imprecision fostered by an engagement with ambiguous grammar, in which everything is *context* and *denotation*.

Ross links this allegorized "difference" to Benny's own existence, when one character muses analogously that it is "a pity [Doc] didn't do it for Benny's mother too. Better than going through with it and then doing away with herself. And poor Benny—the way he's turned out he wouldn't have been much of a loss either" (71). "It" refers to the abortion procedure and the pregnancy, respectively; then the pronoun "he" is used to refer to the *results* of each "it": "going through with it" and Doc not "do[ing] it" results in

"the way he's turned out" (71). The difference in grammatical meaning becomes insignificant at the level of denotation in which there is no *appearance* or *marker of* a signified "difference" at all. Everyone knows Benny is gay and is therefore different, yet nothing is said of his otherness. That "there's a difference" is allegorized throughout all of Ross's work in which such distinction could never appear as textually marked. Homosexual meaning is at once elided and made visible through Ross's engagement with a homotext supplanting and replacing heteronarrative.

Significantly, Ross gestures toward the possibility of generational change in one of his abiding markers of homosexuality, that of being "musical." Ross makes plain (as "plain" as metaphor might be in this case) the propensity of musicians to be gay when Benny says to Doc: "[M]usicians, you know, a lot of them are like that" (102). The budding musician in Upward is 13-year-old Joey Caine, who, according to his mother, "just worships the ground [Benny] walks on" (46). This chapter, appearing immediately after the one which ends with Nellie rhetorically asking Rose "What *can* they do?" (45), reports the exchange between Mrs. Caine and the Assistant Secretary of the Ladies Auxiliary. The two women allusively barter over a piano Doc has donated to the hospital, the very instrument that Benny is playing at the moment. Yet Ross insinuates that the allegorical topic is Joey's own bent of "being so musical" (47). Mrs. Caine discloses that on nights when there is a local dance, "I have a terrible time with him. He slips out on me and goes down to the hall to listen. They let him in free—depending on who's at the door. At thirteen he's naturally not there to dance" (46). The secretary agrees that it is "a wonderful way for a thirteen-year-old to spend his time," but quickly clarifies: "at the

piano, I mean, not with Benny" (46).

She intimates, through her explication of what she "means," that the subject of Benny's homosexuality silently converges with "being musical" in the town and that, therefore, Benny must, ironically, be made visible in order to *deny* the possibility of his homosexuality occurring elsewhere. Her negative expression of what she "means" —"not with Benny"—recurs when Mrs. Caine inadvertently marries the piano's "tone" to Benny's "lovely touch"; again, the secretary anxiously stipulates what she "means" by musical "tone": "Not Benny, the piano—" (46). But Mrs. Caine is blithely indifferent to the secretary's vexation, and the secretary, no doubt impatient to make a sale, later capitulates: "[Y]ou keep saying it's got a lovely tone." Mrs. Caine reprises: "Yes, when Benny's playing" (48). Her insistence on combining Benny with musicality results in the frustrated secretary abandoning clear "meanings" involving denial; instead, she makes an amusing juxtaposition: "Well, the sooner Joey gets started the sooner he'll have a lovely tone too" (48). Like Benny, Joey too will have "a lovely touch."

Ross's optimistic use of Joey, then, points suggestively toward the notion that the future of the depiction of homosexuals who are well-adjusted—they are "in tune"—is yet to be written. Ross's temporal leap *back* to 1948 verges on an attempt to rewrite the "musically" inclined characters, such as Philip Bentley and Sonny, as the more "accomplished" (read: "completed" homosexual) Benny, or Tommy Dickson and Peter Dawson as Joey, who is setting out to become as "musical" as Benny.

Chapter Seven

The Open Mind

What might be construed as one of the problems in my analyses is that I relate the instability or ambiguity of Ross's fictions to "difference," especially as to how that difference may denote homosexuality. I believe that this argument, while attractive, has the tendency to rob Ross of any agency, that indeed Ross may have been writing something new that can be comprehended *only as* instability or ambiguity since those attempting to "decipher" the fiction most often use tools themselves constructed from heteronormative understandings. Yet compounding my rebuttal is my own implication in using such tools, as I am in part a construct of them and have at times found them useful. Regardless, I have attempted as often as possible to stand outside such "straight"-jackets in order to reformulate many of the useful critical paradigms they proffer.

With that in mind, I wonder if it may be productive to examine those ambiguities in Ross which might *not* suggest sexual otherness and thus further confound the comforts of easily discovering homosexual "subtexts." Similarly, I fear that trying to reconstruct Ross with an emphasis on sexuality itself might suggest that that is all there is to be discovered in Ross or that sexualities are the most important markers in thinking about the power of literary forms as they may relate to social strata. The presumption of a "resolution" of sexuality in Ross's corpus would be a false move since sexuality cannot be the prime concern but, rather, one of many *interrelating* factors, such as class and race

(categories underdeveloped in my analyses). Furthermore, the association of homosexuality with forms of instability, while potentially liberating, have more often than not been restricting, if one considers the medicalizing I have in part outlined here.

Regardless, I have submitted that adherence to heteronormative critical discourses and theories has resulted in the dismissal, elision or disregard of the possibility of homosexuality in Ross's work. This reveals, as Leo Bersani writes, that relations among people "are always constructed, and the question to be asked is not which ones are the most natural, but rather what interests are being served by each construction" (38). It is evident, I think, that, as far as Ross is concerned, the interests being served have not been agreeable to homosexual histories, literary or otherwise, in Canada.

I would like to inscribe, at the centre of Ross criticism, a contestable politics that seeks to (re)conceive homosexual subjectivity and how it has played (or not) and can play (or not) an important role in the formation of Canadian literature. The multiplicity at the core of Ross's writing is evidence, in part, of what Silverman calls "the homosexuality which structures authorial subjectivity" (340), especially in relation to the social spheres in which Ross wrote. New readings of Ross will, I believe, result in critical encodings and framings which are, in themselves, inevitably unstable, but nevertheless revealing of how any reading of Ross can never be one thing or another (or everything all at once) but always simply "other" (and thus multiple) and available to desire. These readings will not seek to close off queer subjectivities, and homosexual ones in particular, but rather to celebrate their contributions to the *open* mind of Canadian critical discourse.

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