

"THE CHILD IS FATHER TO THE MANUSCRIPT":
SINCLAIR ROSS AND HIS WOMEN

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Writers create worlds for themselves in their books; they tell parables; they offer allegories of the self. When they express these in the form of fiction or poetry or drama we have the work of a transfiguring imagination which uses symbolic statement and myth to disguise autobiography. (Leon Edel. *Stuff of Sleep and Dreams. Experiments in Literary Psychology*. New York: Harper and Row, 1982, 60.)

Experience largely controls the imagination. Not only does the writer's life give us important insights into her or his work, but the text reveals important truths about the author's life experiences of which he or she may not be fully cognizant. A consideration of Sinclair Ross's fiction demonstrates the significant extent to which his fiction and his life illuminate each other.

In Leon Edel's words, "If we knew enough about any artist we could redissolve his art and find in it the biographical ingredients that shaped it" (1955, 171). In the shaping of Ross's art, the most pervasive and enduring "biographical ingredient" is his mother. Born in Edinburgh in 1876, Catherine Foster Fraser was the daughter of the Reverend John Foster Fraser, Unitarian minister, and Jessie Patterson. Catherine was proud of her father's background, descendant of Simon

Fraser, the first Lord of Lovat, loyal to Prince Charlie, and the last man beheaded in the Tower of London (1988, 83). Disowned for marrying into a family in trade, the Reverend Fraser had established a reputation for preaching when he died at the age of thirty, leaving his widow with five small children. An intellectual who bought books when his wife was "at her wits' end sometimes for stockings and jam" (Ross, 1988, 85), Fraser had a library which brought his widow fifteen hundred pounds. Catherine's mother married Thomas Holmes, who obtained a job with the Canadian Pacific Railway and emigrated to Prince Albert, Saskatchewan with his wife and three stepchildren, Catherine and her two brothers, one girl having died in childhood and the eldest son John remaining in Scotland to complete his education. Catherine became a schoolteacher in Prince Albert and met Peter Ross, whom at one time Sinclair Ross referred to as a carter (McMullen, 1977, 15), and later quoted his mother as referring to as "a lumberjack who could scarcely sign his name" (1988, 85). Peter Ross was not considered a suitable match for a descendant of the first Lord of Lovat. Catherine's mother discouraged the match, and wrote to her eldest son, still in Britain, who supported her against the marriage. Like her father before her, Catherine ignored family objections, marrying Peter Ross, eight years her senior.

Peter Ross and his wife homesteaded twenty-five miles from Prince Albert. Born 22 January 1908, James Sinclair Ross was the youngest of their three children; his sister Euphemia was ten years older and his brother Stuart seven. From his earliest years Ross recalls arguments, shouting, and abusiveness. He remembers that the family had a larger house than other homesteaders, and that they had an organ, a damask tablecloth, lots of books, red plush curtains (1980, 92-93). All of this meant getting deeper into debt every year. Catherine blamed her husband's abusiveness and their quarreling on his change of personality after a serious accident (McMullen, 1977, 16). Whether it was this or the increasing stress of heavy debts from Catherine's spending, the couple were unable to resolve their differences. Catherine

left her husband, taking her youngest child, then three years of age, with her. She attempted a reconciliation several times during the next few years, but from the age of seven Sinclair Ross never saw his father.

According to Ross, his mother was "a fighter," supporting herself and her son as a housekeeper on Saskatchewan farms. Despite the nature of her work, she kept her family pride. "I may have to cook for you but I'm better born," she would say, forgiven for her remarks because she was an efficient housekeeper and a good cook, (1988, 83). As she moved from job to job, she always brought emblems of a better life, such as her mother's worn silver-plated coffee-pot, and a cut-glass bowl, originally a wedding present but now badly cracked (Ross, 1988, 94). And having her father's love of reading, she packed many books, thereby providing her son with a more intellectual ambience than was usual on a prairie homestead.

Ross recalls how hard his mother worked during these years:

Up to her eyes in extra harvest hands...harried and irritable, face flushed and sagging with near-desperation weariness, untidy wisps of hair whipped across her forehead ... killing and plucking chickens along with churning and scrubbing and cleaning just as usual - feet and ankles swollen twice their normal size...swearing at the dog to get the cows out of the garden - the half-acre vegetable garden that was her responsibility, spring to freeze-up - onions and peas, beets and carrots, a few bachelor's buttons and nasturtiums squeezed in, no time to look at them or smell them...the same as the two-acre potato patch - planting, hoeing, digging - Yelling at me if I had finished my chores to get on with my homework, never mind what's going on in the stable or what the hired men are saying...afraid I'd be Pete Ross all over again, determined never to let it happen. (1988, 96)

When he was old enough, Jimmy, as Ross was called, helped with chores on the farm. His mother bought him a horse so that he would not miss school when all the farm horses were needed for planting or harvesting. Her name was Lady.¹

After Ross completed high school at the age of sixteen, he took a job with the Union Bank of Canada in Abbey, Saskatchewan. Now the familial situation reversed itself. Ross supported his mother, who lived with him in the small Saskatchewan towns where he worked, and then later in Winnipeg, where he was transferred in 1933. During the Second World War, Ross joined the army and was sent overseas; his mother remained in his Winnipeg apartment. On his return he was transferred by the bank (now the Royal Bank of Canada) to Montreal; his mother, however, remained in the West, and Ross continued to support her until her death in 1957.

This strong woman was clearly the major influence on her son's formative years; their close relationship endured throughout her life, and beyond. Alice Munro, conscious of her difficulty resolving her conflicting emotions toward her mother, makes frequent use of the mother-daughter theme, which, she says, "probably obsesses me ... because I had a very intense relationship with my own mother" (Hancock, 104). The effect of Ross's relationship with his mother, while less directly and less consciously expressed, is equally central to his writing. As one Ross protagonist says of his mother: "She was there. Like a fly in the ear, too deep for match or pin. As if instead of putting her in her coffin, they had buried her inside me" (1970b, 104). She is buried inside her son, existing in Ross's fictional women and serving as the key to the relationships between men and women in his stories and novels. Edel writes that the "when a writer sits down to write, all his past sits behind his pen" (1973, 54). Catherine Ross, looming large in her son's past, continues to sit behind his pen as he writes.

In his early stories, Ross consistently portrays farm women who are, like his mother, of better background and better education, and sometimes obviously more intelligent than their husbands. In "The

Painted Door," Ann, of better education and background than her dull, plodding husband; in "A Field of Wheat," Martha, clever enough to urge her husband to buy hail insurance, advice he ignores with disastrous results; in "A Lamp at Noon," Ellen, from a better background than her husband, and, even though town bred, more knowledgeable than he about crop rotation. In each of these stories, the women, superior to their husbands in background or education or intelligence, or all of these, end up badly — insane or dead or haunted with guilt for a husband's death.

Furthermore, Ross incorporates his mother's homesteading tales into his early stories. The central image of Ross's first story, "No Other Way," is that of a farm wife chasing the cows out of the turnips; the story begins and ends with this action, the cyclic structure indicating her entrapment. In "The Painted Door," a woman ties a rope around her waist before she attempts to make her way from the house to the barn. Catherine Ross recalled a similar incident among her homesteading adventures: "I naturally had to look after the stable [when her husband was away for several days]. Sometimes there'd be a blizzard and so I wouldn't be blown away I used to tie a rope round my middle, I had cut it just the right length, and one day I fell and lay thinking my last hour had come but there was a lull, just in the nick of time, and so I'm still alive after all." (1988, 89).

In Ross's novels, where there is more opportunity for character development and for an exploration of human relationships, we see most clearly the effect on his art of his relationship with his mother. His women are all strong, and, whether wife, mother, or lover, are ultimately maternal figures. "Writing is a metaphor for the unconscious," Perry Meisel affirms (22).

Ross intended *As For Me and My House*, the story of Philip Bentley, to be narrated by his wife, who could reveal him more honestly and perceptively than could Philip himself. But Mrs. Bentley became more central than her creator had anticipated (McMullen, 1979). As the novel begins, she establishes herself as a possessive maternal figure:

“sometimes broodless old woman that I am, I get impatient being just his wife, and start in trying to mother him too” (4). But Philip does not want a mother. He rejects his mother, who died when he was fourteen, for he blames her for the ridicule his illegitimacy brought him as a child. “Towards her memory he remained implacable,” Mrs. Bentley tells us (30). While not wanting a mother, Philip does want a father as a role-model; learning of his father’s artistic ambitions, he decides that he, too, will become an artist. But marriage having trapped him into a life he hates, as minister in a religion he does not believe, he is not free to direct his energies to his chosen field. From the novel’s beginning, there is a correlation with the author’s situation — like Philip, Ross was trapped in a relationship with a strong, possessive woman; wanting to be a writer, he is unable to quit the job he dislikes to devote himself to his writing because he must support her; trapped in a life with a woman he calls “as difficult to describe as she was to live with,” (1988, 83), and again, as “domineering, unreasonable, with a sharp and sometimes reckless tongue,.... insultingly taking for granted you were too stupid to see through her - “(1988, 96).

In *As For Me and My House*, time after time Philip walks into his study, white-faced and silent, shutting the “implacable” door behind him, shutting his wife out of his life. “Implacable,” here denoting Philip’s attitude to his wife, is the word the narrator chooses to describe Philip’s attitude toward his dead mother. Philip’s silence has its parallel in Ross’s own experience. Catherine Ross says of her son: “He’s getting terrible to live with. Such a glum look, the weight of the world on his shoulders. And never a word out of him unless he’s got something to say” (1988, 96).

Aware of the role of the unconscious in creative writing, Ross wrote in 1970: “Artists themselves as well as psychologists seem pretty well agreed that the ‘creative sources’ are in the subconscious, and the psychologists are also agreed that self-analysis can seldom do more than scrape the surface....So if I don’t understand myself - my ‘creative processes’ if you like, why I did this and not that - how could I possibly

write about them?" (1970a). In *As For Me and My House*, Ross is unconsciously writing not so much the story of the artist or frustrated artist as the story of a complex relationship between a man and a woman. As with most first novels, he is writing autobiographically, albeit unintentionally so. He is writing about the would-be writer, trapped in a relationship with a strong, intelligent and possessive woman, a woman for whom he feels both love and hostility, gratitude and resentment, whom he admires and yet at times finds somewhat ridiculous. For her part, Catherine Ross, loving the son she worked so hard to educate and instil with family pride, expects much in return — an appreciation of the sacrifices she has made for him and of her family's aristocratic heritage. And, she expects to retain control, even after her son is an adult. Like her son, she sometimes feels hostility, resentment at his periods of silence, perhaps jealousy of the success which lessened his dependence on her. "She and I quarrelled often...." Ross reports. "She was often critical and unfair" (1988, 95). So her feelings toward her son are as mixed as his toward her. There is love; there is also resentment.

Psychologists' studies of the mother-child relationship, in particular those of Otto Rank and Georg Groddeck, help toward an appreciation of the role Catherine Ross played in her son's writings. In the understanding of human psychological development Rank shifts emphasis from the male-oriented Oedipus complex to the mother-child relationship, explaining the mixture of love and hate within this enduring bond; for the mother, the child remains an extension of herself even after birth. A strong empathetic tie continues: when a conflict occurs between assertion of self and empathy for the other, with the will of the child opposing the will of the mother, guilt results.² The atmosphere of *As For Me and My House* is oppressive with guilt — Philip's guilt at his hypocritical role as minister in a religion he does not believe, Mrs. Bentley's at failing to give her husband a child, at luring him into marriage with her music, at preventing him from being the artist he longs to be.

Like Rank, Groddeck insists on the centrality of the mother-child relationship, which begins in the womb: "The extent to which we harbour the wish to love and be loved is conditioned by this period of most intimate togetherness" (138). But the womb becomes a prison from which the child must free itself. Just as birth results from increasing aversion, so later in life, there are numerous examples of a child's aversion to the mother stemming from the unconscious and arousing anxiety and guilt. It is generally accepted today that the witch and the wicked stepmother of children's fairy tales are children's own mothers in their Shadow aspect. The mother as Smother.³ Other psychoanalysts, such as Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, point to the importance of the mother-child relationship and to the child's ambivalence towards the Good and Bad Mother.⁴ The coexistence and conflict of love and hatred which cause the child to emerge from the womb, also cause the child to turn to others — father, siblings, friends, work, pleasures. Moments of open hatred recur when the child may, for example, be ashamed of his mother before his peers. In Ross's life was his embarrassment at his mother's garrulousness, for example, at her chattering about the old homesteading days to her brother's sophisticated London friends (Ross, 1988, 88-89). For the mother, as for the child, love and hostility coexist. In *As For Me and My House*, Mrs. Bentley's belittling of Philip's manual skill is a belittling of his masculinity. "I could use the pliers and hammer twice as well myself, with none of his mutterings or smashed-up fingers either," she says as they are moving into the parsonage, claiming that it is to fulfill the town's expectations that she "let him be the man around the house" (my italics)(3). Some months later, she berates Philip, "Why can't you take hold and do things like other men?" (133). In a significant parallel, Ross recalls his mother:

She was often critical and unfair. Of my attempts to write, she said bluntly I was wasting my time. After she had read half a dozen of my early Saskatchewan stories her verdict was

"Just wind and horses", which I rather liked, except that for a while the dismissive tone rankled a bit. One day when some of her friends dropped in she said, "He's been writing another masterpiece," and thrust a *Queen's Quarterly* at them, only to jerk it away again with a toss aside before they could even glance at it. This was her way of saying he doesn't amount to much but he does get into print - her Scottish anything-but-show-it way of saying she was proud of me (1988, 96).

For Rank, the creative act represents the ultimate act of independence from the parent, the psychological birth of the child. Catherine Ross's mixed feelings about her son's success as a writer are her reaction to her son's assertion of independence.

That Mrs. Bentley, as Ross tells us, took over what he had intended to be Philip's story is evidence of the strength of Catherine Ross's hold on her son's imagination. The ambiguity of Mrs. Bentley's feelings for Philip and his for her, the contradictory and conflicting feelings of love, resentment, and hostility they have for each other, provide the spark that ignites this novel. Mrs. Bentley's possessiveness conflicts with her desire to free Philip from a life which represses his talent; her desire that he have the son she cannot provide conflicts with her jealousy of his attention to their surrogate son Steve. If the author's mother had not been, in his words, "as difficult to describe as she was to live with," a woman "you never understood; there were too many contradictions" (1988, 83), Mrs. Bentley would have had a lesser role, and the novel in which she now figures so prominently would have been very different.

Catherine Ross also continues to live in Ross's later novels: in Sylvia Larson of *The Well*, (1958), *Mad of Whir of Gold*, (1970), and Ida Robinson of *Sawbones Memorial*, (1974). Every woman of significance in these novels is ultimately a maternal figure. In *The Well*, twenty-five-year-old Chris Rowe, on the run from the Montreal police, becomes involved with an elderly Saskatchewan farmer and his much younger wife. But the conventional romantic triangle of husband—wife—lover

soon develops into a triangle of a different sort, an oedipal one of father figure — mother figure — son. Chris, born out of wedlock, has never had a father and now sees the elderly farmer as a father-figure. His wife, considerably older than Chris, takes the initiative in their lovemaking: "Her hair hung round his face and throat; he liked that. It tingled his skin, enclosed him so that he could open his eyes without her knowing, without committing himself to response or initiative. Her hands and lips moved with gentle insistence, caressing, rousing, exploring, and as the rich, big-breasted warmth of her body enveloped him he felt small and childlike again, infinitely at peace" (1958, 127).

Although Chris ultimately resists Sylvia's demand that he kill her husband, he does become implicated in the murder of the father figure when he helps get rid of the body. This action has its counterpart in Ross's own life: his mother, whom he loves, discards his father by the less drastic expedient of leaving him, but with the same result that Sylvia temptingly suggests to Chris as his reward, there will be just the two of them.

The incestuous implications in the Chris-Sylvia situation are further implied by Chris's revelation of his childhood relationship with his mother: "There had been trust, of course, in the beginning. Just the two of them: a room with a cretonne curtain up a splintery stair, canned soup heated on a gas ring in the hall, stale cake sometimes that she smuggled home to him from the bakery [where she worked]. But the betrayal, when it came, made suspect even the memories of his happy times. He looked back through the hurt as through a cracked lens and saw everything askew and darkened" (1958, 54). The "betrayal" is his mother's taking of a lover. In Sylvia's scheme to murder her husband, the temptation for Chris does not come in the opportunity to share in her husband's wealth or in her sexual allure, but in the possibility of recovering those remembered "happy times," with "just the two of them," himself and his mother, Sylvia now being the mother figure.

Psychologist Marthe Robert explores "the multiple roles played by the mother in the incestuous Romance" (156), and the significance

of the bastard or fatherless child in literature as writer and hero. The bastard, being the sole object of his mother's affections, is entitled to believe that a child born out of wedlock has special gifts which invite affection. As a fatherless child, Ross takes on the mantle of the Bastard, the sole object of his mother's affections, a mother who encourages a conviction that he has special gifts. And Ross, who begins writing at the age of ten, who is interested also in music and painting, is in his homesteading community a child with special gifts.

In *Whir of Gold*, Mad, the central female character, a big, generous-hearted woman who picks up protagonist Sonny McAlpine at a Montreal bar, is, like Sylvia with Chris, like Mrs. Bentley with Philip, the initiator in their relationship; first, at their original meeting, then in moving in with Sonny to look after him. Like Chris's mother, like Ross's own mother, she has an irrepressible spirit; no matter how often Sonny tries to discourage her, she bounces back. She works to buy their food; she cooks; she tries to protect Sonny from the small-time criminal in the next room, and when he is wounded in an abortive robbery, she nurses him back to health. The name "Sonny" is an obvious clue; theirs is the protective relationship of mother and child. Mad speaks hopefully of their future together, despite Sonny's insistent reminders of the impermanence of their relationship; the child does, after all, eventually break from the mother. In the end, Sonny leaves this mistress-mother, and feels guilty, not only because aware of having betrayed her, but because he then has a sudden awareness of what he has lost. In *Whir of Gold*, the mother-figure loses her son, and the novel ends with the focus on the son's sense of guilt at having betrayed her. On the other hand, in *As For Me and My House* the possessive mother-figure won: Mrs. Bentley kept her husband-son; in fact, she gained a second son, a second Philip.

In *Whir of Gold* two other maternal figures from Sonny's past, his biological mother and his music teacher impact on the present. As the novel opens, Sonny is expressing his ambivalent feelings about his mother, now dead, as, in fact, was Ross's mother when this novel was

written. Sonny recalls: "She had been a help at first, an ally, the hands pointing the way I ought to go. `Make something of yourself, Sonny. Don't go soft - don't come down to their level. All these years it's what I've lived and worked for.'" (1). Sonny finds that his memory of his mother pulls him in opposing directions, urging him to success, but when he desperately concludes that any means to achieve success is excusable, reminding him of his staunchly moral upbringing. He blames his mother for his affair with Mad: "It was because of her, in fact, that I met Mad. Objecting to Charlie and his offer of a dirty job - that was what finally drove me out." (3) - out to the bar where he met Mad. As Groddeck maintains, the bond between mother and child leads the child to love a woman who resembles his mother in an essential way and to turn a mistress into a mother (151).

Sonny's compassionate portrait of his music teacher is laced with humour: "she couldn't play Beethoven but she knew how he should be played. And somehow, entreaty, temper, tears - plus hours, I would swear to it, on her knees - she somehow whipped me into shape to enter the provincial festival with one of the early sonatas and carry it off with a resounding ninety-nine" (73). Yet, despite his recollection of Dorothy's seminal influence, Sonny can also recall harshly: "Dorothy was a fool - big enough for even me to see" (82). His memories of his music teacher, combining derision and affection, gratitude and dismissiveness, reveal as much of Sonny as of the woman he describes. There is a similar derisory quality in Sonny's recollection of his mother's support: "Had she known that lessons were going to lead to fugues and sonatas instead of 'Trees' and 'Danny Boy' she might not have made such a fierce stand against my father's disapproval" (73). Such derision mixed with appreciation and compassion are typical, as Groddeck notes, of the mixture of love and hostility in the child seeking separation from the mother.

Ross's last novel, *Sawbones Memorial*, which centres upon a small town doctor, is concerned with the past forty-five years that Doc Hunter has been the community doctor. Not least in the recollections of the town are the women in his life. With a frigid wife, Doc has found

consolation with several of Upward's women: Ida Robinson, a strong, determined woman of the town's pioneering generation; Maisie Bell, "the closest thing to a scarlet woman Upward has," also the most caring, her kindness to the troubled and the ill being well known; the silent Ukrainian cleaning woman, known only as "Big Anna," who provides a son for Doc. Doc Hunter, then, has a trinity of women to fulfill his needs: the capable, superior Ida, the nurturing Maisie, and the biological mother, Big Anna. Together the three provide the ideal mother figure.

The most colourful of these women is the determined, domineering Ida Robinson, grandmother of the town's present leading citizen. Like Ross's mother, she dominates her weak husband, and she finds some consolation and escape from her dull husband and the rigours of homesteading with the young doctor, newly arrived in town. Ida becomes one of the mythic characters of the town, a symbol of its pioneering spirit:

A lot of the women had it just as hard, some of them far harder, but she stood out because she had standards, her own laws. She didn't just survive, she came through with her head up, telling a joke on herself, ready for more. When she had to, busy times... she'd put on a pair of old overalls and a smock and go out slopping round the stables, feeding pigs, milking cows - I've seen her - but she never slopped inside. Always dressed. It might be an old dress, patched and faded, but it was always clean and it always hung like a dress should hang. And she was always clean herself, always had her hair combed.(26)

Ida, proud of her superior Ontario upbringing, is not averse to reminding her family of it: "There had been a seven-roomed house with a red carpet and white lace curtains in the parlour, beautiful curtains"(60). Quoting the description of Ida Robinson in his memoir of his mother, Sinclair Ross says, "Maybe when I wrote that I knew in a vague, half-

mindful way that I was lifting my description of Ida Robinson from life, maybe not" (1988, 92). It was only in thinking back twelve years after writing the novel that Ross began to see that he had drawn his mother in this character. As he himself once said, "Artists themselves as well as psychologists seem pretty well agreed that the 'creative sources' are in the subconscious, and the psychologists are also agreed that self-analysis can seldom do more than scrape the surface" (1970a, 94).

From his first story published in 1934, describing not only the harsh and lonely life of a farm woman no longer loved by her husband, and containing a specific incident from Catherine Ross's life, to his last novel forty years later, Ross has been writing unconsciously about his mother and his complex and difficult relationship with her. He began his memoir, "You never understood her; there were too many contradictions" (1988, 83). Yet throughout his stories and novels, he continued, albeit unconsciously, to try to understand her and their relationship: "She was there. Like a fly in the ear, too deep for match or pin. As if instead of putting her in her coffin, they had buried her inside me" (3).

Reviewing a book relating writers' works to their formative years (John Halperin's *Novelists in Their Youth*), P.N. Furbank wrote, "The child is father to the manuscript." With Sinclair Ross, the correlation of manuscript and life reveals the pervasive and enduring influence of Catherine Ross on her child as the crucial clue to his personality and his works. In his memoir, Ross writes that "maybe he knew ... in a half-minded way" that in his last novel he drew upon his mother for the pioneering woman his protagonist loved. He seems never to have realized the extent to which all of his fictitious prairie women are drawn from that same model. Writers are not aware of the extent to which they reveal themselves in their writings. Ross has never knowingly revealed much of himself, but, as Edel says, "The subject [of a biography] may throw up roadblocks, he can never completely stop the traffic" (41). The biographer dismantles the roadblocks.

Endnotes

- 1 Lady was a spirited horse like the young boy's horse Isabel in "The Outlaw" and *Whir of Gold*. She was also the prototype for the boy's horse in the story "A Day with Pegasus"; when the boy wished to name his horse King or Prince, his practical mother suggests, "Bill. Short and sensible. Or Mike, or Joe. We had a Buster, once." (McMullen, 39).
- 2 See Esther Menaker's *Otto Rank: A Rediscovered Legacy*.
- 3 See Sylvia Bruce's discussion of this idea in "Entering the Vision: A Novelist's View of *Phantastes*."
- 4 See David Winnicott's *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*.

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