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THE MUSICAL LANDSCAPE OF SINCLAIR ROSS'S *AS FOR ME AND MY HOUSE*

PHILIP R. COLEMAN-HULL

In his essay "Sinclair Ross in Letters and Conversation," David Stouck recounts Ross's humble reactions to the array of criticism given to his first and most famous novel, *As For Me and My House*:

"You understand the [Bentleys] perhaps better than I do, or at least did when I was writing. For when I was writing I was participating and when you participate you often don't understand or see. More was coming I suppose than I knew." In this same vein he has often remarked that critical articles about the novel amaze him—discussions of Chopin and George Sand, of

Dante, El Greco, or Michelangelo's *Pietà*, because he had no conscious intention of making them part of the design of his book.¹

That the articles Stouck and Ross refer to deal chiefly with the diaristic novel's immersion in and reference to the artistic worlds of painting and music should come as no surprise to those familiar with the text, for it is a novel about art and artists. *As For Me And My House* holds a position in the Canadian literary canon similar to the fiction of American Great Plains authors O. E. Rolvaag or Frederick Manfred with its realistic and threatening portrayal of prairie life. Dick Harrison, in his seminal work *Unnamed Country*, even places the novel in the forefront of Canadian prairie fiction because "Ross's narrator, Mrs. Bentley, expresses so well the reactive, defensive function of the imagination confronting the prairie."²

As Ross states, much has been written on his deliberate use of artists or painters in the novel, and criticism has often singularly treated El Greco, Chopin, or Michelangelo. I would like to suggest an even greater deliberateness on the part of the author in choosing a variety of composers (Chopin, Debussy, Liszt

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and Beethoven) and painters (Gauguin, Romney, El Greco, and Gainsborough) who cross artistic boundaries, demonstrating in their art affinities toward music and painting. As these intersections are explored, we discover further to what extent Ross was "participating" in the construction of his text, violating the Emersonian advice not to pay homage to the European muses, and looking with Eastern eyes. Harrison defines this exclusively Canadian mindset when discussing the nineteenth-century prairie traveler, Sir William F. Butler. At a loss for metaphors to define his experiences, he "draw[s] from the old culture the familiar seascape which would have been part of the experience of most of his intended British readership"³—an image that recurs in the works of Cather, Rolvaag, Richter, Ross, Stegner, and Kroetsch, to name a few. With the musical and artistic references in *As For Me and My House*, we discover Ross engaging in a similar looking back at the old culture, looking back with Eastern eyes as a way to broaden his audience, make the prairie experience more accessible, and make his Saskatchewan novel part of the larger Canadian—and therefore, European—canon. Through this process of assimilating European painting and music traditions with the Great Plains experience, Ross gives his readers a text whose richness and depth of meaning increases, and his readership discovers an author who knew and cared about art and music so well that he could choose appropriately artists, musicians, and compositions without actually consciously "choosing."

The criticism that discusses Mrs. and Philip Bentley's roles as artists invariably centers on the conflict or lack of cohesiveness in their relationship, interpreting their artistic gifts not as interlocking, complementary, or reciprocating, but as incompatible and dissonant as their marriage. Harrison, for example, isolates Philip as "the artist about whom we are most concerned"; "sketches and paintings" serve as an "anti-journal" to Mrs. Bentley's text, "contradict[ing] her point of view"; while "the artfulness of writing" is veiled in the novel

since "generally speaking diaries are not considered art." Mrs. Bentley often is depicted as the undedicated "dilettante" contrary to Philip's committed artist.⁴

But if these critics insist on investing one character with greater artistic talent, with creating an artistic hierarchy in which Philip is privileged, at least Barbara Godard acknowledges the differences in the couple's artistic views: "Mrs. Bentley embraces an expressive theory of art, wherein she stresses the artist's bond with his public; Philip advocates formalism, wherein art refers only to itself."⁵ And while she admits, quoting Maurice Beebe, an artistic "scale of values" in which "the composer would rate higher than the performer, the original painter higher than the engraver or copyist," nevertheless, "art has been the keystone of the Bentleys' marriage . . . the metaphor of harmony is thus linked with both marriage and artistic themes."⁶ Rarely does Godard actually center on Mrs. Bentley's art; reference is made to her piano playing, and she dominates the narrative, but Philip stands as the primary artist, and so Godard chooses to focus primarily on the connections to El Greco, Gauguin, Gainsborough, and Romney. It is not until we read Frances Kaye's perceptive analysis of Sand and Chopin as models for the Bentleys that we discover an interpretation of the novel that indeed "emphasizes Mrs. Bentley's abilities both as an artist in her own right, and as a successful and benevolent, if not always comprehending, guardian of her husband Philip's artistry."⁷ If Godard and Kaye help in uncovering some of the complex artistic patterns in *As For Me and My House*, they do so, in my opinion, by completing half the circle—at best creating a whole when considering the two interpretations together.

Of the four painters Ross mentions in his novel—Romney, Gainsborough, El Greco, and Gauguin—all have storied connections to music, whether drawing on it for inspiration, using it as a form of entertainment, or boasting some historical connection to musical history. Godard deals only cursorily with Romney and Gainsborough in her essay "El Greco in

Canada,” simply noting that, like them, “Philip specializes in landscapes and portraits.”⁸ These affinities to an English tradition prove “life-denying” for the “Canadian artist who must cope with the Canadian landscape as it is,” and like the dog, El Greco, who becomes “tamed and domesticated” by the Bentleys, Philip figures as the manipulated artist unable to fully “cope with the wilderness.”⁹ But Philip’s correspondences to Gainsborough run deeper. Of the eighteenth-century painter, biographer Isabelle Worman writes, “He was very musical, passionately interested all his life in every aspect of music.”¹⁰ So much so that he joined a local music club in Ipswich, where he met the famed violinist Felice Giardini. And while he never really had the talent to seriously pursue a career as a musician, a friend “readily acknowledged that he was ‘possessed of ear, taste, and genius’” when it came to music, and another remarked that “he may have been ‘too capricious to study music scientifically’ but his ear was so good, and his natural taste so refined.”¹¹

A contemporary of Gainsborough, George Romney not only shared Gainsborough’s love for Giardini but also apparently flirted more seriously with pursuing a career in music: hearing the violinist Giardini play “had a [profound] effect upon Romney, who, for some little time after hearing him perform, hesitated whether to make music or painting his profession.”¹² Though he chose painting, Romney “retained his love of the sister art throughout his life,” joining a music club, playing a violin (of his own making), and drawing upon music as a source of inspiration for his pictures.¹³

These two artists, while mirroring Philip in the subject matter presented in their painting, only vaguely resemble him in their passionate pursuit of music. Formalistic in painting style, Philip is equally staid in his musical tastes, opting for what Mrs. Bentley considers the drier Bach over Debussy and Chopin. But it is music that brings Philip and Mrs. Bentley together, her precise rendering of a Liszt rhapsody that produces an obvious emotional

response in Philip: “He stood waiting for me afterwards, erect and white-lipped with a pride he couldn’t conceal. And that was the night he asked me to marry him.”¹⁴ However, this distant event seems to represent the emotional apex of their relationship as well as the height of Philip’s emotional response to music. Instead of enjoying Mrs. Bentley’s piano music, finding in it a stimulus for his imagination and artwork like Gainsborough and Romney, he retreats to his cold study, “refus[ing] to come out where it’s warm with me” (141).

In naming the two artists, Mrs. Bentley, in effect, projects upon Philip the kind of artist she would like him to be: emotionally connected to her art, unified in a symbiotic relationship between painting and music. But if anyone mirrors Gainsborough’s and Romney’s love for music, it is Mrs. Bentley, not Philip. As a young girl learning to play piano, she too discovers an attraction to the violin, played by the neighbor boy, Percy Glenn. “He had a squint, and red hair, and skinny knees”—hardly the kind to elicit a passionate response; but they “helped each other studying harmony and counterpoint,” and during an exchange of letters with Percy years after her marriage Mrs. Bentley “worried Philip with amorous attentions in the middle of the afternoon” (77). Having experienced the rapturous effect another artist can have on one’s work, Mrs. Bentley hopes that her music inspires her husband and draws him out of his cocoon. But instead we witness a greater distancing as Ross’s use of Gainsborough and Romney stresses the ever-widening gap in their relationship. The more those artists fail to represent Philip, the more they parallel Mrs. Bentley’s life, or what could have been: she, too, fell in love with the violin at an early age and longed to pursue music as a career—or pursue music with Percy; and she desires to see a greater emotional link between her husband’s art and her own—she longs for unity, wishes music to help “break through the tangle grown between us,” whereas all it does is emphasize gaps in their relationship, create more division, and, on the isolated prairie, serve to

isolate Mrs. Bentley further as she becomes walled out from her husband (141).

Additionally, Mrs. Bentley makes a verbal and written attempt at strengthening the bond between her and Philip. Her examples represent artists who are drawn passionately toward music. Yet in Philip we discover an aversion to music and thus a weakening in his parallels to them. Certainly it was music that brought the two of them together, but now it appears that music contributes to pulling them apart. Godard asserts that Philip's artistic sensibilities are most in line with El Greco, and musically this is true as well. Pál Kelemen mentions that not only did musicians play while the artist dined but also his Cretan heritage tied him to a long tradition in Orthodox church music—notably the Byzantine chant.¹⁵ Such affinities to music, and especially church music, can be found in El Greco's masterpieces. Many of his religious artworks, among them *The Annunciation* and *The Martyrdom of St. Mauritius*, depict an angelic choir singing from an antiphony (drawn with clear, readable musical notation) and playing on traditional instruments: recorders, virginals, lutes, viols, and harps. So while El Greco himself was not necessarily enraptured by church music per se, his paintings and family tree indicate an immersion in this tradition.

"The irony of the juxtaposition of religion and art cuts deeper," Godard explains, "when Philip Bentley is compared to the religious painter, El Greco."¹⁶ But the Philip–El Greco parallel gains even more credence when considering both artists' connection to religious music. In one of the more definitive statements about Philip's art in the novel, Mrs. Bentley quotes Philip concerning his philosophy on the nexus of religion and art:

'Religion and art,' he says, 'are almost the same thing anyway. Just different ways of taking a man out of himself, bringing him to the emotional pitch that we call ecstasy or rapture. They're both a rejection of the material, common-sense world for one that's illusory, yet somehow more important. Now

it's always when a man turns away from this common-sense world around him that he begins to create, when he looks into a void, and has to give it life and form.' (112)

While this theory juxtaposes religion and art, it should also impress upon us how these views reflect Philip's musical tastes. According to Mrs. Bentley, Philip prefers the dry, religious Bach—perhaps one of the quintessential church music composers—over the romantic strains of a Chopin or Debussy. Bach, at least, compels Philip to "listen patiently a while, trying to be one of us" before retreating to his study (68). And in the church choir it is Judith West's singing that captivates Philip during the service: "It's seldom he listens to music, but as soon as she began tonight he turned in his chair behind the pulpit and sat with his eyes fixed on her all the way through the hymn. . . . Even after she had finished he sat a few minutes without stirring" (38). Just as Bach represents, for Mrs. Bentley, the antithesis of Chopin and Liszt, so too is Judith the antithesis of Mrs. Bentley. This rare musical allure is consummated in Philip's affair with Judith and the birth of their bastard son, signaling a passion and product of that passion that remains noticeably and painfully absent from the Bentleys' marriage.

If Ross's use of painters in the novel offers insight into the personalities of and relationship between the Bentleys, equally fascinating are his references to the composers Liszt, Chopin, Beethoven, and Debussy. Besides what Frances Kaye has already related concerning the George Sand-Frederic Chopin relationship, very little needs to be said about the first three composers and their works. Of Liszt, Kaye reminds us that, unlike Chopin and Beethoven, he "was never a goal, but always a means"; a way for Mrs. Bentley to manipulate people's emotions and, at the age of twenty-two, to win Philip's affections.¹⁷ That Liszt's rhapsody goes unnamed throughout *As For Me and My House* is of little concern when speaking generally of the works, for they all exhibit fairly similar characteristics as all were

written to capture the flavor of gypsy music. The Liszt rhapsody proves a logical choice for Mrs. Bentley, for it not only reflects her own artistic emotionalism, as outlined by Godard, but, with its affinities to gypsy music—improvisation, free cadenzas, and a spontaneity—it has the potential for expressing a wide range of emotions and manipulating the senses. If anything, Liszt's rhapsody characterizes the early ecstasy Mrs. Bentley and Philip feel upon first meeting: the pulling together of two artists, anticipating a promising future, ready, themselves, to live a life of spontaneity and "free cadenzas." That Mrs. Bentley fails to recapture that energy in their relationship and win Philip back using the same song merely intensifies, once again, the failure of their marriage and the stifling effect of moving from one Horizon to the next.

While Mrs. Bentley carries the Liszt rhapsody with her into marriage and tries to use it to resurrect a dying relationship, Beethoven's *Appassionata* Sonata, op. 57, and Chopin's *Polonaise* in A-Flat Major, op. 53, serve as adolescent goals that, once achieved, are superseded by another goal: conquering Philip's affections. But even if these pieces receive brief mention in Mrs. Bentley's text and are never played again after her marriage to Philip, echoes of their musical patterns and themes reverberate throughout her life and the text. Giving a brief description of the sonata, Robert Hatten states that "The *Appassionata* sonata cycle as a whole moves from a tragic first movement to a transcendent second movement before returning . . . to the tragic for an obsessive finale. Thus, the tragic frames and governs the expressive genre of the complete work."¹⁸ The form of the novel loosely follows that of the Beethoven sonata: *As For Me and My House* opens with a diary entry that expresses several of the themes and tensions to be explored throughout the novel—art and religion, the Bentleys' shaky marriage, false fronts, dreams of escape, expectations of the townspeople, Philip's love of boys, and the isolation of the prairie—and couches them in seemingly tragic fashion:

The lights on the street and in the houses are helpless against the black wetness, little unilluminating glints that might be painted on it. . . . Close to the parsonage is the church, black even against the darkness, towering ominously up through the night and merging with it. . . . Above, in the high cold night, the wind goes swinging past, indifferent, liplessly mournful. It frightens me, makes me feel lost, dropped on this little perch of town and abandoned. (5)

However, just as Beethoven's sonata segues into a steady, methodical cadence, Mrs. Bentley's diary entries settle in to a momentary hopeful rhythm as her energies turn toward nurturing Steve, forging a friendship with Paul, and stashing money away for their eventual escape from Horizon to open a bookstore. Just when things seem more hopeful, when life beyond Horizon seems likely, and that hopefulness prompts Mrs. Bentley to support Philip's artwork more emphatically, mirroring the "contemplative and dreamlike" middle sections of the sonata, those visions are equally "abruptly shattered . . . by the first hint of action": Philip's affair with Judith.¹⁹ The return, for Beethoven and Ross, is to the tragic and the mysterious, the hushed and the open-ended. And like the conclusion to the sonata, Ross's conclusion has proven problematic for many critics because of its open-ended nature, its lack of resolution, and its conveyance of tensions into a void where the author does not take us. Mrs. Bentley's final written words—"That's right, Philip. I want it so" (165)—assert her presence and at the same time hide her motives.²⁰ Thus, her final line figures as an expression of hope and duplicity, resolution and complication, endings and beginnings, presence and absence, silence and communication, and movement and stasis.

While Frances Kaye has discussed the importance of Frederic Chopin in *As For Me and My House*, little has been said of the impact other works besides the "Raindrop Prelude" have throughout the novel, notably the polonaise. Most likely, Ross's reference to

Chopin's *Polonaise* in A-flat major refers to Op. 53, the "Heroic" polonaise—an esteemed work in the Chopin canon and a favorite among pianists and concertgoers alike—not the *Polonaise-fantaisie*, Op. 61 (also written in A-flat major). A Polish dance, the polonaise was often used by Chopin to express any number of feelings toward his homeland—anger, frustration, sentiment, pride. And while several present a "stark juxtaposition of extremes" throughout, Op. 53 "[sides] this dichotomy by concentrating more intently on a single *Affekt*," perhaps best described by its subtitle, "Heroic."²¹

This polonaise, in sound and title, captures Mrs. Bentley's attitude prior to her marriage to Philip. James Methuen-Campbell, writing on the history of Chopin in performance, notes that "the A^b major Polonaise, Op. 53, was a potent symbol of liberty," and it represents a form of liberty for the young Mrs. Bentley, too.²² Prior to Mrs. Bentley meeting Philip, the piano was one of the "essentials," and she had set goals to learn the works of Chopin and Beethoven. But trapped on the prairie, confined in a marriage where her artistry suffers, and no longer experiencing the liberty of Chopin's polonaise, all she can do is recall such freedom: "And that's the hard part, remembering how strong and real it used to be, having to admit it means so little now. . . . My fingers are wooden. Something's gone dead" (151).

The only other time we find Mrs. Bentley playing Chopin she is entertaining Steve and trying to interest Philip in the music. Rather than polonaises, Mrs. Bentley pulls out marches, waltzes, and mazurkas to entertain the boy. Though described as "brisk" and "lifelike," for Mrs. Bentley (and for Chopin) the pieces hardly capture the same sense of freedom and liberty as expressed in the more patriotic polonaise. Concerning waltzes, letters that Chopin wrote while in Vienna communicate a sense of foreignness—almost an aversion—to the form: "Here waltzes are called works! . . . I don't pick up anything that is essentially Viennese. I don't even know how

to dance a waltz properly. . . . My piano has heard only mazurky."²³ And the mazurkas are indeed a native Polish dance; Chopin wrote them while in exile and did not think of them as dance tunes. Thus, the pieces Mrs. Bentley shares with Steve express gaiety, yet submerged behind them are stories of exile, foreignness, alienation, and separation. The mazurkas and waltzes, like the false-fronted buildings in Horizon, become "pretentious, ridiculous" (4), exemplary of the charade Mrs. Bentley and Philip are committing in their relationship. And so when "he let me," and Ross records the only sexual encounter between the Bentleys' after she plays the Chopin, Mrs. Bentley remarks:

I didn't know anything like that could happen to me. It was as if once, twelve years ago, I had heard the beginning of a piece of music, and then a door had closed. But within me, in my mind and blood, the music had kept on, and when at last they opened the door again I was at the right place, had held the rhythm all the way. (69)

While Chopin's mazurkas "do themselves dance, and part of their fascination lies in their compositional appropriation of dance gestures,"²⁴ the Bentleys themselves do dance and appropriate sexual gestures; however, as evidenced in Mrs. Bentley's diary entry, those gestures are neither expressive of a regular pulse, nor indicative of any positive step in mending their relationship. The door again will close; the rhythm will again hide away in her mind and blood.

Just as Godard's discussion of Ross's use of El Greco and Kaye's unraveling of the Chopin-Sand relationship in *As For Me and My House* focus primarily on one artistic strand in the novel—either painting or music—my own discussion of art, to this point, has treated them largely as parallel, yet nonintersecting, entities. But if Godard and Kaye see El Greco and Chopin-Sand, respectively, as two of the more prominent controlling images in Ross's text, I

would like to suggest that it is through the works of Claude Debussy that Ross most deliberately and articulately brings together the disparate worlds of Mrs. and Philip Bentley. Certainly readers of the novel recall his mentioning of the French composer's *Gardens in the Rain* (1903), but Ross also specifically names *Golliwog's Cakewalk* (1908) and *The Sunken Cathedral* (1910), employing all these tunes as a way of intensifying images presented throughout the novel and crossing boundaries between the musical and plastic arts.

Although named later in the novel and composed toward the end of Debussy's life, *Golliwog's Cakewalk* and *The Sunken Cathedral* are perhaps best discussed first, since the third piece appears to have a much more profound, albeit no more or less important, relationship to the novel. Written in 1908 as part of a series of works called *The Children's Corner* that celebrates Debussy's devotion to his daughter, Chouchou, *Golliwog's Cakewalk* takes its name from a black doll and represents, with its bouncy, jazzy, humorous sound, the puppet shows and circus acts enjoyed by Chouchou in the park.

When we are introduced to *Golliwog's Cakewalk* (and *The Sunken Cathedral*) in *As For Me and My House*, Mrs. Bentley relates that Mrs. Bird espied the French-titled works sitting on the piano. After having the titles translated, Mrs. Bird decides they are just what she needs for "atmosphere" at her formal tea. But playing the jocular *Golliwog* and the more melancholy *Cathedral* would seem to create the wrong type of atmosphere, two extremes that hardly communicate elegance. The associations between Mrs. Bird and *Golliwog* serve to heighten our impressions of the doctor's wife as an absurd, clown-like figure.²⁵ Just one of several women—Mrs. Finley, Mrs. Wenderby, Miss Twill, Mrs. Ellingson among them—who live in Horizon and put on airs and belong to the Ladies Aid Society, Mrs. Bird fashions herself as the most intellectual, most refined, and therefore most culturally isolated and deprived of them all. But like *Golliwog's Cakewalk*, absent of elegance and

reminiscent of the circus clowns, Mrs. Bird, while perceived by herself and others as culturally elite in Horizon, can only be described in clownish terms by Mrs. Bentley: "She's a short, round, tubby woman, with horn-rimmed glasses. . . . She has on an odd, old-fashioned little tweed hat, and a khaki-green jacket buckled in so tight above her hips that the tail stood out as if she were going to use that side to make a curtsy" (21).

Another feature of *Golliwog's Cakewalk*, located toward the middle of the piece, is the parody of the first several bars of the Tristan chord of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. One of Wagner's most studied and famous operas, *Tristan* recounts the story of Isolde the Fair and Prince Tristan, who have fallen in love in spite of the death of Isolde's lover at the hand of Tristan. Despite their mutual affection, Tristan marries Isolde of the White Hands while Isolde the Fair weds King Mark, and in the end a tangle of events leads to the death of both Tristan and Isolde the Fair—broken-hearted yet eternally in love. In *Golliwog's Cakewalk*, Debussy introduces the Tristan chord principally in the sixty-first measure, not as a complete unit but broken up in a series of eighth and sixteenth notes (e.g., mss. 91). By splitting up the Tristan chord and adding a ninth, Debussy parodies Wagner, in a sense poking fun at the seriousness with which so many treated Wagner's music at that time.

It would be incorrect to say that *As For Me and My House*, too, represents a complete and deliberate parody of *Tristan and Isolde*; however, neither are the Bentleys modeled after the star-crossed lovers. Rather, their marriage appears as a gross parody of the mysteries of love and unconsummated passion. True, Mrs. Bentley and Philip rarely make love, but infrequent intercourse results from a distinct lack of passion, not from circumstances barring them from regular sexual encounters. So while on one level Ross's inclusion of Debussy's *Golliwog's Cakewalk* exposes Horizon for what it is, a town full of people who are performers in a circus act, clowns and puppets, false-fronted performers; on the other hand, it points

to the Bentleys' relationship as an equally parodic performance—but one that seems as inevitable and dismal as the end of *Tristan*.

The other Debussy composition Mrs. Bird requests, *The Sunken Cathedral* (*La Cathédrale engloutie*), belongs to his first collection of preludes, written between December 1909 and February 1910. Inspired by French legend, *La Cathédrale* stands as a musical representation of the tale of the village of Ys on the Brittany coast. There, during the fifth century, the sorceress Dahut governed the town, and because of her wicked deeds and the "impious attitude" developing among many of the cathedral's parishioners, the church supposedly sunk into the sea.²⁶ Only once a century is the church allowed to rise out of the ocean, serving as an example to others. So as the piece progresses, one gets a sense of the church rising out of the water and fog, receding again toward the end; overall, the mood is sombre and bleak: "sometimes [through] the rootlessness of . . . common chords . . . a bland, almost expressionless region is then suggested, the bleak hinterland of the imagination."²⁷

While Saskatchewan is landlocked, the prairie in *As For Me and My House* exhibits the same expansiveness as the ocean. Laurie Ricou, in *Vertical Man/Horizontal World*, asserts that the town "Horizon itself . . . takes its name from a dominant feature of the prairie landscape," where "the dream must confront the inalterable reality."²⁸ Similarly, this is the feature of the sea that Debussy remembers from his childhood: "the sea stretching out of the horizon . . . the railway came out of the sea or went into it . . . whichever you like."²⁹ For both, there is that sense of the bleak hinterland that simultaneously threatens and intrigues. Ross's inclusion of *The Sunken Cathedral*, with its attendant legend, reinforces the sense of exposure felt on the ocean-like prairie. Like the Brittany cathedral, Horizon's church stands "black even against the darkness, towering ominously up through the night and merging with it" (5). Frightened, "insignificant and waiting to be reclaimed," Mrs. Bentley undoubtedly experiences on the prairie what

those in Ys feel as they watch a cathedral rise as a warning against impiety.³⁰ Indeed, the prairie signifies a bland, expressionless region where artistic accomplishments are stifled, and Mrs. Bentley recognizes the need to escape; but, as if mirroring the closing measures of *La Cathédrale*, "the feeling of suffocation mounts" in *As For Me and My House*.³¹ Like the French cathedral destined to rise every hundred years, the Bentleys appear caught in a cycle of Horizons, illegitimate sons, and failed artistic goals fated to repeat itself.

Virginia Raad writes at length about another possible source of inspiration for Debussy's *La Cathédrale engloutie*: French impressionist Claude Monet's series of twenty paintings on Rouen Cathedral (see fig.1).³² However direct or indirect an influence Monet's paintings may have had on this particular Debussy piece is unsubstantiated, but it is well known that artwork generated by many of the great French painters of his time had a profound effect on several of his works. Having spent part of his childhood near the sea while in Cannes, Debussy for a time toyed with the idea of becoming either a sailor or a painter. Although he pursued neither of these as a career choice, influences of water and impressionist art can be found throughout his canon.

Debussy himself never denied the connection between his compositions and impressionist paintings; however, with his music often being described as impressionistic, he resented the term and, like many of the impressionist painters, thought it an unfair and inaccurate description of his work. He preferred to be called a symbolist. Whatever category we use to describe Debussy's compositions, their relationship to painting cannot be gainsaid. And while *La Cathédrale*'s alliance with Monet's work is weak, the third Debussy piece Ross refers to, *Gardens in the Rain* (*Jardins sous la pluie*), has more substantiated links to the painter's brush and canvas.

Completed in 1903, *Gardens in the Rain* is the last of three extended piano pieces that make up the grouping titled *Estampes*, mean-



FIG. 1. Rouen Cathedral Facade and Tour d'Albane (Morning Effect), 1894, by Claude Monet (French 1840-1926), oil on canvas, unframed 106.1 x 73.9 cm (41 ¹³/₁₆ x 29 ¹/₈ in.). Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Tompkins Collection, 24.6.

ing "prints" or "engravings." According to Paul Roberts, Debussy's interest in this topic, given contemporary artistic currents, should not surprise us, although "the title *Estampes* on the front cover of an album of piano music would have had a resonance and breadth of suggestion quite lost on us today."³³ At the time of *Estampes*' composition, color technology had advanced to the point where color reproduction became quite inexpensive, thus making the poster industry both popular and somewhat lucrative. Perfected in the 1890s, the color poster flourished under the talents of such artists as Toulouse-Lautrec, Gauguin, and Pissarro (see fig. 2). Fascination with posters derived, in part for the symbolists, from the Japanese print, whose "delicacy and precision of the visual image . . . draws attention to colour and line as much as to the subject depicted . . . a certain rightness of design which has pared away everything superfluous to the presentation of a distinct picture."³⁴ In other words, the Japanese, and in turn French poster artists, concentrated on showing enough of an image to create an impression in the viewers' minds, allowing their imagination to fill out the landscape and action beyond the canvas or paper.

While Mrs. Bentley speaks of *Gardens in the Rain* in connection with herself and Percy Glenn, Philip is indeed the poster artist cast in the mold of Gauguin. The Gauguin reference, made by Paul, is oblique: "Why there was a French artist who decided one day he couldn't stand his business or family any longer, and just walked off and left them" (128). Godard contends that Paul issues this statement to reassure "himself that Mrs. Bentley is a black romantic of the Gauguin type who will abandon her partner. Later Mrs. Bentley makes the same association with Philip when she is aware of his involvement with Judith" (65). In temperament, Philip is the brooding, moody Gauguin, and in action he commits to making some posters for the play a local ladies group will be performing. While he works at producing an artful poster, these are not the posters of a Gauguin who, booted from the Paris Expo,

successfully displayed his prints elsewhere, or a Toulouse-Lautrec who deftly combined color and action to define the modern poster tradition. They are "printing and lettering"—something Philip hates; yet, like the Japanese print whose image is presented so compactly, it is an activity that falls within the narrow borders of Horizon. And for Philip,

There have always been Horizons—he was born and grew up in one—but once they were a challenge. Their pettiness and cramp stung him to defiance, made him reach farther. Now in his attitude there's still a defiance, but it's a sullen, hopeless kind. These little towns threaten to be the scaffolding of his life, and at last he seems to know. (17)

But the potential for success ultimately lies beyond Horizon, resides with a more appreciative public, and exists in Mrs. Bentley's imagination. She imagines the possibility of living in a world beyond Horizon but cannot fathom the specifics. Action, hope, and a sense of redemption exist beyond the limits of the poster page, but rather than being clear images they are still obscure, ill-defined goals that fade and evaporate into the horizon: always scaffolding and false fronts; never solid foundations and well-formed structures.

Gardens in the Rain finds its antecedent in the *Images* of 1894, which comprise of a sketch "inspired by the gardens (in the rain) of the Hôtel de Croisy at Orbec (Calvados)."³⁵ Of that much we are certain. Drawing on segments of two popular French nursery rhymes, "Debussy unerringly paints the French scene, and includes in it the presence of children."³⁶ Though somber in the opening, the piece eventually resolves to the major mode, painting a scene of "sparkling brilliance" as the children seemingly return to play in the garden after the storm.³⁷

Consistent with Ross's use of music throughout *As For Me and My House*, his presentation of *Gardens in the Rain* conjures up several of the controlling images in the novel. Mention



FIG. 2. Jane Avril, 1893, by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (French, 1864-1901). Brush and spatter lithograph in five colors. Image size: 50 1/2 x 37 in. Courtesy of the San Diego Museum of Art (Gift of the Baldwin M. Baldwin Foundation).

of *Gardens* occurs not while Mrs. Bentley sits at the piano or converses with Philip, but during a walk with Judith and Paul toward the railroad track to make dust angels. As the music recalls a spring rain, growth, and refreshment, and even as "the sound of raindrops punctuates" the novel,³⁸ W. H. New reminds us that "The overall impression left by the book is certainly one of aridity: of dust and heat, the Depression on the prairies and the drought which went with it."³⁹ Mrs. Bentley frequently speaks of her own garden but describes it principally as an arid, barren, scorched plot of ground. Ideally the garden would represent a place of solitude and escape, Mrs. Bentley's own plot of land to cultivate and nurture. In essence it did: when Mrs. Bentley was younger, playing *Gardens in the Rain* with Percy in a recital, she shared the carefree sense of possibility exhibited in the song. However, unlike Debussy's garden, which echoes with the laughter of children after the storm, Mrs. Bentley's garden now echoes with the emptiness of the wind, paralleling the emptiness and barrenness—physical and psychological—that she feels in her life. Along with the fuchsias, geraniums, onions, and potatoes that die slowly, Mrs. Bentley experiences a simultaneous dying of her artistic passion: "I haven't roots of my own any more . . . I dry and wither. My pride's gone" (151).

As with *La Cathédrale*, the dominant image in *Jardins sous la pluie* is water, specifically falling rain. Kaye, during her discussion of Sand and Chopin, cleverly and cogently connects the legend behind Chopin's "Raindrop Prelude" to the cumulative melancholic effect rain has throughout the novel. If *La Cathédrale*, with its funereal mood, suggests the sense of loss, hollowness, and oppression with which rain is associated in *As For Me and My House*, then *Gardens in the Rain*, as Kaye remarks, reflects "Mrs. Bentley's abandoned career as a concert pianist."⁴⁰ "Contentment is associated with the impressionistic vision of rain in *Jardins sous la pluie*," and one might project a more content life for Mrs. Bentley had she stayed by Percy Glenn's side.⁴¹ And while Mrs. Bentley

enjoys "walking in a drizzle" and admits "[t]here was a safe, peaceful swish on the windows" during a rainstorm, Debussy's composition nevertheless helps us anticipate the downward spiral of Mrs. Bentley's life (118). Arpeggios and staccato punctuate *Jardins*, producing

the ecstatic, whirlwind pieces in quick tempo, in the nature of a perpetuum mobile, spiral-like constructions which, however, for all their animation, do not proceed towards a goal. . . . [The] music . . . seems to plunge into space [using] [e]ffects calculated to produce an impression of space and distance.⁴²

In like fashion, it is the drumming of rain that accompanies us and Mrs. Bentley as she, too, does not proceed toward a goal. Her aspirations have been jettisoned, and the rain stresses the accumulating voids in her life: the prospect of living in Horizon, another dead-end town; the loss of Steve; her discovering Philip with Judith; and the lasting impression of "the bare, rain-stained walls" as they leave Horizon for the unknown (164). Thus, the "impression of space and distance" created in the music finds its counterpart in Mrs. Bentley's life as rain highlights moments of separation and intensifies feelings of isolation and despair on the prairie: "It frightens me, makes me feel lost, dropped on this little perch of town and abandoned" (5).

Debussy's "gyratory virtuoso music," it must be remembered, creates not only the sensation of aimless spiraling but also mirrors the carefree spirit of children playing in the rain, as evidenced in his use of nursery rhymes.⁴³ Adolescence marks a time of dancing, of celebration; and though a spring storm, with its ominous thunder claps, inspires fear, those fears soon dissipate when the sun comes out. As stated above, when Mrs. Bentley refers to the song, it recalls her promising adolescence and occurs when she is making dust angels—a decidedly juvenile activity—and reflects her desire to have children of her own. Whereas childhood for Debussy still retains its idealis-

tic stripe in *Jardins*, for Ross, children, often on the cusp of adulthood, lead or anticipate complicated and unsettling lives. Mrs. Bentley's artistic aspirations are compromised on the eve of adulthood; Steve, still very much a child, becomes the target of a denominational tug-of-war. The teenaged Paul, an intellectual and wordsmith, "suffers" in a town that offers no outlet for his intellectual energies, and he straddles the fence between immaturity and maturity through his infatuation of Mrs. Bentley and "a kind of avowal" of love for her (161). Philip, who idolized his father and resolved to be a artist-preacher, is a bastard child who fathers a bastard child seemingly destined to continue the cycle. If youth promises free-spiritedness, Ross ultimately counters that idealism with the growing complications of getting older. Debussy's idealism, in a sense, shatters before the harsh realities not only of prairie life but of life in general.

Again, whether Ross's use of music in *As For Me and My House* constitutes a calculated and deliberate attempt on his part to weave together more intricately the threads coursing through the novel is suspect—and moot. Certainly Mrs. Bentley's avocation as pianist and Philip's as painter are central to understanding and interpreting the text, but Ross's naming specific composers and painters whose talents cross artistic boundaries, at first glance, seems inconsequential. However, what Ross accomplishes with the blending of the musical in the literary text echoes in the words of Maurice Denis and Paul Roberts's extrapolation of those ideas:

'Remember that a painting—before it is a warhorse, a nude woman or some anecdote—is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.' Denis's words need little transcribing to be an apt description of Debussy's *Estampes*. The pianist should remember that a piece such as 'Jardins sous la pluie,' before it is an aural depiction of rain, or even the evocation of a mood—and certainly before it is

anything like an Impressionist landscape painting—is essentially an exercise in broken chords assembled in a certain order.⁴⁴

As For Me and My House is essentially a dimensionless surface covered with words assembled in a certain order: flat like the prairie land it describes. But music aids in adding texture and relief to the novel, helping to assemble more coherently the broken chords within the book. And in *As For Me and My House*, a book filled with a cast of characters who live lamentable, pathetic lives, some essence of assembly, of order, of dimension needs to occur. Laurie Ricou speaks of the pioneer's need to assert oneself on the barren, flat, empty landscape—that people and artificial human-built structures become symbols of dominion and presence. In a similar fashion, music functions as a device that asserts itself throughout the book, bringing together art and music to form a composite whole. Ross reaches out to an audience that may at first envision the colors and sounds as indistinct and unrelated, but may ultimately use the musical texts to construct and reconstruct their own warhorses, nudes, and anecdotes.

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23. Quoted in Thomas, "Beyond" (note 21 above), p. 153.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 155-56.

25. As the description in the golliwog doll above suggests, this popular toy belittled the African or

Polynesian peoples, emphasizing their racial difference. Furthermore, the cakewalk, now a mainstay at church bazaars and fairs, had its beginnings as entertainment among black slaves and soon found its way into the black minstrel shows. Given this history, Ross's inclusion of *Golliwog's Cakewalk* may also speak of Horizon's self-righteous attitude toward Steve, Judith, Paul, and to a certain extent Mrs. and Philip Bentley.

26. Reginald Haché, "The Legendary Cathedral of Brittany," *Journal of the American Liszt Society* 19 (June 1986): 67.

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