Strategies for Survival: Daily Trot and Sudden Insights in Sinclair Ross’s “Cornet at Night”

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The lives of Sinclair Ross’s characters are full of quotidian drudgery and constant tug of war against nature. They plod along with little hope for a reward, and the suspense the reader experiences with them takes on an existential dimension. The questions underlying Ross’s fiction and answered inconclusively are these: Will they have their crops? Will they survive? The readers’ and the characters’ concern with these dilemmas renders all other issues insignificant by comparison. The relentlessness of oppressive circumstances drains the characters’ energy and makes them seek strength and hope, which are indispensable to survival, in beliefs and stories whose vestiges are recognisable in their verbal and non-verbal behaviour. John Barth once compared readers to ducks which “take a breath, take the plunge, take [their] tidbit, and soon surface” (quoted in Curnutt 1). It seems that this statement applies just as well to the characters in Ross’s short narratives. Not that they are avid readers in the primary sense of this word. They are readers, however, in the sense of absorbing and internalising already available models of behaviour. They take occasional plunges deep beneath the surface of their daily routine to gather nourishment and strength.

This paper studies the partial and unreliable wisdom the characters in “Cornet at Night” (first published in Queen’s Quarterly in 1939) derive from a variety of sources. The story has been selected for analysis because it is both typical and exceptional among Ross’s narratives. Its cast of characters – a close-knit, nuclear family consisting of mother, father and son – resembles other stories by Ross. In spite of mutual affection, each member of the family chooses to serve a different deity, and each adopts a different strategy for surviving. The story is exceptional among Ross’s œuvre in its narrative technique. Along with “The Outlaw” and “The Runaway,” “Cornet at Night” is one of the few texts in which Ross “venture[s] from third-person into a retrospective first-person narrative voice” (Gadpaille 33). Very much like Conrad Aiken in his famous “Silent Snow,
Secret Snow,” Ross endows an observant boy with adult eloquence thus fusing two characters: the young boy who can experience without evaluating and the adult man for whom retrieved experience equals naming and evaluation. One would be tempted to say that in “Cornet at Night,” Ross gives voice to the voiceless and power to the powerless. And yet, the composite nature of the first-person narrator (he is both a boy and an adult man) makes the situation more complex. The voice and the power emerge as the benefits of socialisation. In one respect the story is a true boy’s narrative; namely, it provides no information about the social or political context. To the boy, the prairie is the whole world, and historical contingencies do not exist. It remains for historians of Canadian literature to explain that his short fiction “is a legacy of the drought years of the thirties on the prairies – the depression moving imperceptibly into the war years” (Djwa 190). As Lawrence Mathews observes, however, As For Me and My House is characterised by similar ahistoricism: “it is remarkable that so much of what realism normally includes has been edited out of Ross’s depiction of Bentleys’ lives” (158). Matthews argues further that in Ross’s novel “[t]here is no serious examination of political and social issues, no indication that collective action may be as interesting or important as individual action” (158–159). This statement applies to “Cornet at Night” as well.

Indeed, as in Ross’s novel, in “Cornet at Night” “[t]he significance of the protagonist’s experience is personal; that is, it is to be understood in terms of his or her individual growth, development, identity” (Mathews 159). The short story dramatises the crucial moment of Tommy’s development as a social being. Challenged to choose one of the available adult roles, he looks further afield than his home and family, and finds his own mode of existence. In his narrative, the mother emerges as a grotesque character whereas the father remains a marginal figure. Waging a never-ending war against each other, both parents treat their son as a territory to be claimed and appropriated. Both want to have their ways perpetuated in the youth, who in spite of the pressure, finds teachers elsewhere. Seen in retrospect, both parents are larger than life and stand for irreconcilable notions and traditions.

The boy’s mother, Mrs Dickson, who takes refuge in exaggerated piety, appears to be a ludicrous figure. She insists that on “the Lord’s Day” her husband should not do any work (Ross 35), and her son should do nothing but behave like a Christian and a gentleman (37). The narrator consistently inscribes her in the semantic field of religious principles. She spends with her son “an austere half-hour in the dark, hot, plushy little parlour,” which the son labels as “a kind of vicarious atonement.” The boy submits to this practice because he realises that his mother is “in no mood for granting dispensations” (36). He notices the august tone in her voice, the “unappetizing righteousness” of the atmosphere she creates, and decides that his mother is “a case of downright bigotry” (37). The very objects surrounding her serve as symbols of her religious beliefs. The plushy parlour is furnished with “straight-backed leather chairs” facing “a big pansy-bordered motto on the opposite wall: As for Me and My House We Will Serve the Lord” (36). The motto is the ever-present vestige of the Bible, from which on Sundays the mother also reads to the boy (37).

And yet, the mother’s religious fervour has clear social underpinnings, which the composite boy-adult narrator unfailingly exposes. Her strictness is the front she puts on for the sake of others, the wealthy Aunt Louise in particular. The Sunday visitor is supposed to see that mother and son remain “uncontaminated by [the] father’s sacrilege,” and that at least the boy is brought up decently (37). Since the plushy room can hardly impress the relative, Mrs Dickson invests in her son’s music lessons to boast of
him as “a man-child and prodigy” able to eclipse Aunt Louise’s motor-car (38). In spite of Mrs Dickson’s stated intention, the two do not go to Church after all. When it becomes obvious that no visitors are coming, the mother allows the boy to play lighter music, to put on his comfortable clothes, and then to run in the fields. Mrs Dickson’s affectionate inconsistency, along with her social concerns, takes the edge off her religious strictness. Far from enforcing any of her principles on either her husband or her son, she is reduced to mere sulking.

When the thin veneer of religion is scratched off, the mother’s social ambition becomes a glaring contrast to Mr Dickson’s life in, for, and by nature. Whereas the mother is to the boy a repository of social values, the father stands for nature. This is how Tom describes him at the outset of the story: “Ordinarily my father was a pleasant, accommodating little man, but this morning his wheat and the wind had lent him a sudden steel” (35). Apart from uniting the temporal and the spatial, the alliterating metaphor evokes with astounding economy the image of nature as an army, and of a farmer as a fighting soldier. The above quotation may well substantiate Gadpaille’s claim that Ross “perfect[ed] in his stories the use of landscape as a symbol – fusing man and prairie in interlocking metaphors” (32). However, Gadpaille’s argument that all men in Ross’s fiction belong “to the gang of futility” (31) needs to be qualified. It is a sign of power that Mr Dickson is the first person to speak in the whole narrative, but what he says is a declaration of his powerlessness. His first words are: “Can’t help it” (Ross 35). And yet, in his skirmishes with his wife, who stands for social values, he always has the upper hand. He remains helpless only in confrontation with nature, from which he also derives all heroism he is capable of. When the musician fails as a farm hand, the narrator realises that his father’s accusations come from helplessness and not from anger. “Helplessness to escape his wheat when wheat was not enough, when something more than wheat had just revealed itself” (50).

It is neither his middle-class mother nor his farmer father whom the boy chooses as his role model. He inevitably and inadvertently takes after both; like his father he accepts the manly challenge of an unaccompanied ride to town, like his mother, he is concerned with his social status. However, he consciously learns from others. One of his preceptors is the old horse Rock, who leads him to the town. The other is the musician Philip whom he meets in the town and brings home. The very name of the horse suggests stability, reliability, and imperturbability. Repeatedly personified, Rock is “philosophic enough to meet motor-cars and the chance locomotive on an equal and even somewhat supercilious footing” (39) and to relish “oats even within a stone’s throw of sophisticated Main Street” (42). The boy tries to emulate Rock’s behaviour. And yet the old, reliable Rock, the boy’s surrogate father, goes berserk when Philip begins to play his cornet on the way home. “But there was only one note – only one fragment of a note – and then away went Rock. I’d never have believed he had it in him” (46).

The horse runs away shortly after Philip has enlarged on the difference between the boy’s wild pony Clipper and the “sleepy old plow-horse” like Rock, drawing an analogy between horses and humans. Rock’s unpredictable outbreak of wildness may well be viewed as a protest against this unfair classification. And in retrospect, Philip’s philosophic monologue may appear as a challenge of both the old horse and the boy’s parents, whom the horse substitutes. The distinction Philip draws is not, however, a value judgement. The etymology of his name, which means horse-lover, suggests that he offers himself in his art to all alike. The boy’s and the musician’s eyes meet for the first time “in the big
mirror behind the counter” in the Chinese restaurant, where the boy comes to have his soda (43). Before they enter a companionship in reality, it exists as a reflection in both meanings of this word. This first sign of understanding reached between the boy and the musician in the mirror suggests a level of communication beyond reality, where one person can mirror or even become another.

The illusion of mixed or exchanged identities does not hold, however. The boy’s possessiveness derives from three impulses he develops or inherits: his love of music, his mother’s social ambition, as well as his father’s responsibility for others. The boy looks at the musician travelling with him and muses: “This stranger with the white thin hands, this gleaming cornet that as yet I hadn’t even heard, intimately and enduringly now they were my possessions.” In front of his sceptical parents, the boy tries to “champion” the musician (47). Tom’s companionship with Philip has every appearance of the communion between kindred spirits. The musician does not tell any stories, as if the two “had always known each other and long outgrown the need of conversation.” Nor does he explain “where he came from, why he should be here to do [the] stooking” (48). There is music, instead, which gives “life expanse” and “float[es] up against the night” (49). Both parents listen and acknowledge the high art, which is, nevertheless, useless to them (50). They are polite and considerate, but the crops are far more important to them than an artistic whim. The final sentence is a maxim which the narrator ascribes to his mother because he seems afraid of admitting his own complicity in the betrayal of art: “A harvest, however lean, is certain every year; but a cornet at night is golden only once” (51).

Unlike the protagonist of Aiken’s “Silent Snow, Secret Snow,” Tom does not hold on to his illusion, and becomes socialised. This happens when he suppresses his desire to rebel “against the clumsiness and crudity of life,” and passively accepts his father’s decision to bring the musician back to the town and to look for a better worker. The reader is prepared for such an outcome because the boy’s readiness to oblige and comply has been mentioned before. For example, when the parents quarrel early on over the boy’s ride, Tom does not rebel “for the hope that by compliance [he] yet might win permission for the trip to town with Rock” (37). In retrospect, the narrator thus excuses his behaviour:

“For while it was always my way to exploit the future, I liked to do it rationally, within the limits of the sane and probable. [...] I have always been tethered to reality, always compelled by an unfortunate kind of probity in my nature to prefer a barefaced disappointment to the luxury of a future I have no just claims upon.” (38)

The final scene and the mother’s maxim concluding the narrative illustrate the introspective generalisation quoted above. And yet, although a precious possession is lost, much is won. Read as a story of a budding musician (a reading encouraged by the narrator’s concern with sound effects and rhythm), “Cornet at Night” dramatises the moment when freedom is discovered in music and through music. Ross supposes cautiously “you could call it an aesthetic wakening” (quoted in McMullen 19). The boy is at first surrounded with the sounds which belong to the respective spheres of his parents: nature and society. He hears Rock munch unconcerned, and realises his own nervousness (41). He hears Clipper whinny as if in invitation for a ride, only to resist the temptation (36). The squeaking of his Sunday-best corduroys is an unbearable affliction (36–37). The boy plays either wooden Church hymns or else marches which inevitably end “in the bitter dust of dissonance” (38). It is only Philip’s cornet that has the power to transform reality. “Somehow its gold and shapeliness persisted, transfiguring the day, quickening the dusty harvest fields to a gleam and lustre like its own. And I felt assured, involved.
Suddenly there was a force in life, a current, an inevitability, carrying me along too” (47). Thus the boy discovers a power which eclipses that of nature or society. He complies with his parents’ decision to find another farm hand, but he gives to his reminiscence the title “Cornet at Night,” and in so doing contradicts his mother’s wisdom. Far from being golden only once, a cornet at night gleams and lives every time the story is read, remembered, and mentioned.

The title, which subverts the interpolated moral, proves that the apparently powerless have their strategies for keeping forbidden dreams. It seems that on the whole too much is being made of the tragic quality of Ross’s fiction, its “relentless realism,” its “depiction of suffering, its “stoic humanity,” and its exploration of “the everyday trials and tragedy of ordinary people” (Gadpaille 34). The same critic argues that the “debunking of the soft, romantic prairie myth,” characteristic of Ross’s work, “creates a myth of its own – of the prairie as a place of trial, tragedy, and catharsis” (32). If it is indeed so, at least in the case of “Cornet at Night,” the tragedy has a comic lining. Not only does the story contain humorous touches (e.g. the parents’ squabble (35), the sense of victory experienced by all three (38-39), the parents’ secrets (39), Philip’s recommendation (44)), but it virtually hinges on irony (which Lorraine McMullen notices “in most of Ross’s writings” (17)) and self-irony. Read in this fashion, the narrative carries the following message: It may well be as difficult to make a farm hand out of a musician as it can be to make a musician out of a country boy. In that case, the only legacy of the chance intrusion of a musician into the prairie town is the story itself. Paradoxical though it may seem, Margaret Laurence’s observation about the unflagging optimism of Ross’s fiction holds true (12). Ross’s artistic optimism did not go as far, however, as to help him materialise the plan of making “a group of short stories having to do with the same boy” (quoted in McMullen 19). The unity of such narratives as “Cornet at Night,” “Circus in Town,” “A Day with Pegasus,” and “One’s a Heifer” remains in the eye of the critic.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


ABSTRACTS

Cet article est consacré à « Cornet at Night », nouvelle de l’auteur canadien Sinclair Ross. Pour composer ce récit d’initiation l’auteur adopte le point de vue d’un jeune garçon qui vit avec ses parents dans une ferme. D’une part sa mère, qui personnifie la société dont elle honore ordres et préceptes, de l’autre son père, qui représente la nature avec laquelle il est en union, constituent deux modèles au sein de cette famille nucléaire que le jeune protagoniste doit respecter et suivre. Cependant, l’enfant découvre la musique et en est fasciné. Si, à la fin de la nouvelle, le jeune protagoniste finit par embrasser les valeurs que lui imposent ses parents, l’histoire ne reste pas moins un hymne au pouvoir magique de l’art, pouvoir dont la réalité touche aussi surtout le lecteur.