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Death Comes for the Archbishop: A Map of Intersecting Worlds

Evelyn Haller, Doane College

In her invocation of God's plenitude — "He takes all forces, all space, all time to fill them with universes of beauty" ("Moral Music" 178) — Willa Cather anticipated a model that she herself used in writing *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. She achieved credibility in this narrative, as she preferred to call it, by invoking the rules of a variety of genres which provide differing visions of the cosmos — a term more accurate in this instance than "world views." By juxtaposition, the four cosmic visions

or genre clusters relate to and reinforce each other because she found a subject ideally suited to her interests and her technique.

The first of these genre visions is Franco-centric and qualified by apologetic biographical tracts. The second medieval and characterized by iconography and hagiography. The third, Mexican, contains elements such as folklore, the tall tale, the ballad of violence and sex — all anticipatory of magic realism. This cluster includes references to the rites of the Penitentes and the practices of the morada (their meeting-house); folk art appears as in religious wooden carvings called bultos and two-dimensional images called santos. The fourth cluster, the Indian world of myth and ritual drawn from oral and pictorial tradition, includes ancient practices from several tribes, including the Anasazi, the Zuni, and the Hopi.

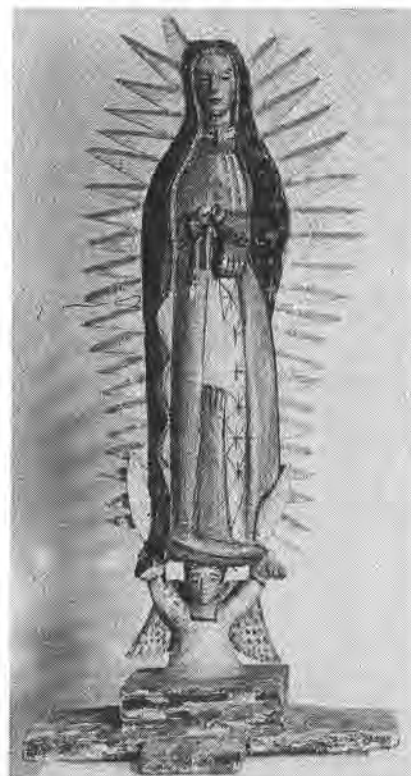
The point at issue in this delineation does not concern what Cather believed or did not believe, but how she made a literary structure for her archbishop. That Cather adapted history as found in William Joseph Howlett's 1908 biography of Bishop Joseph Machefeu (the basis for Father Vaillant) and other sources can be demonstrated by comparing her novel with Paul Horgan's 1975 biography *Lamy of Santa Fe*. The differences suggest that Cather used "history" some-

what as she used the statue of the Auvergnat Bishop Lamy which inspired her.

Clearly, "the life-size bronze" statue before St. Francis cathedral became a monumental bronze, if not a colossus, in her imagination. It was "something fearless and fine and very, very well-bred — something that spoke of race" ("On DCA" 7) — that the statue communicated to her that inspired her to structure her "biography" of Bishop Lamy toward heroic myth. A visual disparity between Lamy the bronze statue and Lamy the man becomes clear when one compares the three-dimensional heroic image with the portrait of Lamy in the Palace of the Gover-



Coatlicue: Museo — Nacional de Mexico



Virgin of Guadalupe: Taylor Museum of Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center

nors showing a worn old man with a narrow mouth and erased features. As E. K. Brown suggested almost fifty years ago, Latour corresponds to Cather's ideal of a person of aristocratic sensibility at peace in an aesthetically severe landscape and provided a subject that suited her profoundly (192-93).

At the center, then, of Cather's novel is the statue of Bishop Lamy standing in front of his golden cathedral — a truly golden structure ("Yellow, a strong golden ochre, very much like the gold of the sunlight that was now beating upon it" [*Archbishop* 240]) in contrast to the grotesque illusions generated by the greed of the Conquistadores. Like gold beaten to "an airy thinness" to illumine medieval manuscripts, the novel on re-reading is bathed in a golden light. As Clinton Keeler observed, "[A]s in a legend, light is a correlative of belief The sunlight and distance of the Southwestern landscape are important subjects of the narrative" (126).

The novel's intersecting worlds are akin to medieval levels of meaning or, perhaps more appositely, concentric circles, for that scheme also approximates the Indian layered view, and Cather relates Bishop Latour's life through a cyclical pattern whereby, from a medieval perspective, all time is present as it is to God. On the other hand, if we combine Latour's name (the tower) with the linear structure of traditional biography — which Cather said she was doing when she compared the movement of her narrative to that of two white mules moving slowly forward (letter to Foerster) — we journey on a Dantean spiral.² On re-reading, we observe the working out of a foregone conclusion: the salvation of Latour. Glen Lick observes that Tom Outland is like the tower in the ruin, the ordering principle in *The Professor's House*; just so Bishop Latour

himself is a tower and an ordering principle. But the centrality of the bishop in the world of the novel as well as in our consciousness corresponds to the Hopi notion of living at the center of the world in "the middle" among six points: the cardinal points of north, south, east, and west as well as the zenith and the nadir. Here we have a triple intersection: the Hopis' understanding of what it means to be alive; the hierarchical world of hagiography and iconography, and the world of historical fiction based on European values, such as history being the biography of great men.

Why is this pluralism, these four worlds or dominant cosmic visions at the heart of Cather's novel? "Everything goes by fours with our people," a Papago woman stated (Peck and Walters 218). And again, "Four is both a ceremonial and a magical number with the Pueblos; if one is asked a question four times he is compelled to answer" (Tyler 6). The Southwestern culture is saturated with such multiplicity, and Cather was drawn to the Southwest, spending many months there at intervals between 1912 and 1926. She was not a casual visitor; she wanted to learn what she could of the ways of the native people. She developed a friendship with a Belgian priest, Father Haltermann, who lived in Santa Cruz and "drove about among his eighteen Indian missions with a spring wagon and a pair of mules. He knew a great deal about the country and the Indians and their traditions" ("On DCA" 4). By 1916 Cather had absorbed a considerable amount of information about the Indians, some of it from Norden-skjold's book, as shown in her Mesa Verde essay written for *The Denver Times*.³

Perhaps another matter was at issue: contrary to her usual reluctance toward political statement, Cather intimates

covertly that because Indians had overcome oppression in the past, there might be hope for them in the 1920s. During the writing of the novel, Secretary Albert B. Fall of the Interior Department and his Indian Bureau were victimizing the Pueblos — an assault which was not resolved until 1933 when the old Indian Bureau was overturned. Though Cather could not have known that outcome, she refers to a nineteenth-century parallel in the Government's relocation of the Navajos to the Bosque Redondo: "At last the Government at Washington admitted its mistake — which governments seldom do. After five years of exile, the remnant of the Navajo people were permitted to go back to their sacred places" (*Archbishop* 296). Moreover, the Archbishop's last discernible words spoken in the text are: "God has been very good to let me live to see a happy issue to those old wrongs. I do not believe, as I once did, that the Indian will perish. I believe that God will preserve him" (*Archbishop* 297).

Here I disagree with Bernice Slote's suggestion that the novel signals the "changing of gods" ("First Principles" 110); instead, I find a simultaneity or synchronicity of the gods, for ancient gods are fixed to places, as Bishop Latour sympathetically heard Chief Manuelito explain. Some may be transported like Aeneas's lares, but others continue to live in "those inaccessible white houses set in caverns up in the face of cliffs, which were older than the white man's world Their gods were there, just as the Padre's god was in his church" (*Archbishop* 295). I would suggest that rather than being "a Catholic novel" — an idea Cather set straight by writing to the editor of *Commonweal* ("On DCA" 3-13) — her novel is the work of a pluralist, delighting in plenitude and multiplicity. The signs indicate that Cather's earth-yearning visions are congruent

with those of an ancient tribal people rather than the dominant white view. As Frank Walters makes clear, "the Hopi [will not] view . . . the universe as an inseparably interrelated field or continuum [in a way to] be quite palatable to those who tacitly accept the role of man as a rational entity created to stand apart from nature in order to control its politically ordered cosmology with an imperialistic mechanization" (xiii).



St. Augustine - Florence: Church of Ognissanti, Florence

For a novel to include a variety of cosmic visions within a single narrative so that they spin together well enough to promote the willing suspension of disbelief that constitutes poetic faith, requires a brave new structural device: worlds ostensibly within a Christian celestial sphere containing un-Romanized multitudes. The armillary sphere provides a visual analogue, such as the one in Botticelli's portrait of another bishop, Augustine of Hippo. (See note 4 and the reproduction of St. Augustine.) In any case, appreciation of the novel's structure requires a tolerance for diversity if not ambiguity. As Jamake Highwater insists, "Indians don't believe in a 'universe,' but

in a 'multi-verse.' Indians don't believe that there is *one* fixed and eternal truth; they think there are many different and equally valid truths" (5).

By the end of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* we have found not a synthesis but rather an overlapping of spheres with each retaining its integrity in large measure. Cather's structure permits a multi-faceted simultaneity or synchronicity whereby many things go on at once: Lamy is idealized; Father Vaillant believes in miracles and has the resiliency of a Golden Legend saint; the cosmic view of the artisans who carved the santos out of cottonwood is congruous with the landscape; but the Ancient People as well as later tribes provide the foundational culture because the story is revealed in New Mexico. Meanwhile, the novel testifies to friendship and fidelity as realized through the objective correlative of the two white mules who work together in harmony and are most content when each is in the presence of the other.

It is Latour, however, who dreams of building a church and succeeds. He understands why Our Lady of Guadalupe would want a church built on the site of her apparition, but he does not appreciate the vernacular architecture, thinking it disrespectful to make God's house out of mud. Although Father Vaillant does not concern himself with such distinctions, he is emphatic that miracles like Guadalupe can be accommodated in this world. Vaillant sees a miracle as "something we can hold in our hands and love," while Latour says a miracle is "human vision corrected by divine love" (50). Latour sees God in nature, "but his dear Joseph must always have the miracle very direct and spectacular, not with Nature, but against it" (29). Both are right.

Soon after we meet Latour he is engaged in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius Loyola as he

kneels before a cruciform tree, putting himself within the human nature of Christ to imagine what He experienced during His life on earth. But it is Vaillant who finds the bell from Chaucer's time whose ringing transports Latour to Jerusalem where he has never been. Later when Vaillant sets out to the new mission field of Gold Rush Colorado in an oddly triumphal cart which tumbles down mountain sides, the many accidents from which he recovers suggest the durability of martyrs in Jacobus da Voragine's *The Golden Legend*.⁵ Certainly both Vaillant and Latour serve God in the loneliness of the desert of the New World as the founders of monasticism had in the deserts of Egypt. Their activities are exalted intersections of French nineteenth century biography and da Voragine's legends of devotion and courage for medieval Christians.

Two motifs appear in all four of the novel's intersecting worlds: the figure of Death and the figure of the Maiden/Mother.

Not only was the Virgin Mary a means of offsetting the patriarchal emphasis of Roman Catholicism; it is also evident to one who studies classical literature, as Cather did, that Mary was a means of satisfying the needs of early converts familiar with Latin and Greek female divinities. Latour recognizes Hidden Water as a sacred spring and remembers how, in the Auvergne, "Roman settlers had set up the image of a river goddess at similar places" (32). The concern of Father Machebeuf, Vaillant's prototype, that "blind devotion" to the Blessed Virgin "sometimes mixed with fanaticism and superstition" and "needed to be explained and properly directed" (Howlett 180-181) suggests an ancient foundation for the practice which the Christian Virgin Mary continued rather than initiated.

Howlett implies the ubiquity of Marian devotion when he in-

forms us that in Santa Fe around 1851 there were three chapels for the public, all dedicated to the Blessed Virgin under her appellation of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Our Lady of the Rosary, and Our Lady of Light. "This last chapel was under the special charge of Father Machebeuf" (Howlett 178). Machebeuf's devotion to Mary had grown so much a part of his life that he saw in its unfolding, a pattern of her many feasts. Cather retains much of the Marian matter in her characterization of Latour as well as Vaillant. After feeling acutely deprived of the company of Vaillant and of nieces and nephews he would have enjoyed in France, Latour attains serenity, and perhaps joy, through contemplation of the Blessed Virgin whom he regards in lyric mode suggestive of the undeclared title "Mediatrice of All Graces":

A life need not be cold, or devoid of grace in the worldly sense, if it were filled by Her who was all the graces; Virgin-daughter, Virgin-mother, girl of the people and Queen of Heaven; *la reve supreme de la chair*. The nursery tale could not vie with Her in simplicity, the wisest theologians could not match Her in profundity. (256)

Though Bishop Latour could not accept adobe churches because he was unable to see beyond their mud construction, he was charmed by the Mexican santos, wooden figures, likely inspired by Franciscan devotional practices, carved and painted by Mexican craftsmen. Thomas J. Steele suggests that santos anticipate later developments in Western art (2), and Cather's own delight in santos emphasizes her recognition of experimental modern as well as folk forms. Her description of "one of these nursery Virgins, a little wooden figure, very old and very dear to the people . . . about three feet high, very stately in bearing, with a beautiful

though severe Spanish face" (*Archbishop* 256-257), fits a statue brought by Father Alonso Benevides when he arrived in 1626 as Superior of the Indian Missions and as Commissary of the Holy Office. Though the statue represented the Assumption, before long "the people were calling it *La Conquistadora* or Lady of the Conquest." Then, as now, the restored statue was kept in its own chapel in the most significant church in Santa Fe (Chavez 4). Cather goes on to spin analogies with European monuments of Marian art:

These poor Mexicans, [Latour] reflected, were not the first to pour out their love in this simple fashion. Raphael and Titian had made costumes for Her in their time, and the great masters had made music for Her, and the great architects had built cathedrals for Her. Long before Her years on earth, in the long twilight between the Fall and the Redemption, the pagan sculptors were always trying to achieve the image of a goddess who should yet be a woman. (256-257)

The continuation of Mexican devotion to the Virgin signaled by the passage above is epitomized in the old woman Sada, victim to low-caste Protestants to whom she was enslaved. "[T]he little silver medal, with a figure of the Virgin" which Latour presses on her so "she would have a treasure to hide and guard, to adore while her watchers slept" is an "Image, the physical form of Love!" (214-216). Significantly, Cather blurs theological distinctions about the kind of attention Mary — let alone an image — is entitled to from the Faithful: strictly speaking, she is not to be adored; rather than adoration or *latria*, to which she is not entitled, Mary receives *hyperdulia*, a higher form of the *dulia* rendered to saints.

"Adoration," however, links Sada's Kind Woman in Heaven to Tonantzin, the ancient Aztec mother of the gods and the

predecessor of Our Lady of Guadalupe, an account of whose appearance in 1531 is told Latour and Vaillant by Padre Escolastico Herrera, a man of nearly seventy (46-50). Later in the sixteenth century Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, who had learned Nahuatl quickly, thought the use of the title Tonantzin "should be remedied, for the correct [native] name of the Mother of God, Holy Mary, is not Tonantzin but rather Dios inantzin." He knew, furthermore, that on "a small mountain called Tepeyacac . . . they had a temple dedicated to the mother of the gods [Cioacoatl] whom they called Tonantzin, which means Our Mother. There they performed many sacrifices in honor of this goddess." He further observed that of the many churches dedicated to the Blessed Virgin, this was the one that drew multitudes especially before the seasonal rains for which the people felt obliged "to take their offerings in appreciation." Sahagún was convinced that "in the minds of the common people who come there, it is nothing other than the ancient custom" (Sahagún 1:90-92).

From that perspective Frank Walters describes "the dark Madonna of the Tepeyac," "La Virgen Morena," whose festal gathering he saw in a crowd of half a million people in the mid-twentieth century. She is

Goddess of the earth and corn, related to Tlaloc, god of rain. Clad in her mantle of sky-blue, dotted with stars like toasted maize grains . . . This was the idol behind the altar, the kachina within the mask, which the people still worshipped. Tonantzin's new Spanish name of Guadalupe did not deceive them. It only lent official and ecclesiastical sanctity to their forbidden pagan worship. (37-40)

Significantly, Our Lady of Guadalupe does not crush a snake beneath her foot, unlike most Tridentine representations of the Blessed Virgin. Her

predecessor on Tepeyac, Cioacoatl, who, writes Sahagún, "is also called Tonantzin" (92), may wear a skirt of snakes. Guadalupe does, however, stand on a crescent moon, signifying iconographically the triumph of Christianity over Islam and thereby showing European influence.⁹

But the presiding genius of Cather's narrative is Death. Though Cather tells us the title "was simply taken from Holbien's *Dance of Death*," there is more to it than that. Cather had



The Death Cart: Taylor Museum of Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center

expressed her preference for the old adobe churches in the hills, churches that had not been Americanized with vulgar manufactured plaster statues. She wrote: "In lonely, sombre villages in the mountains the church decorations were sombre, the martyrdoms bloodier, the grief of the Virgin more agonized, the figure of Death more terrifying" ("On *DCA*" 11, 5). She speaks of the santo.

"The Triumph of Death" was close to the bone for Cather, for she had observed in a letter to Irene Miner Weisz that after one reached forty it rained death.

The image itself of Death on a cart drawn by Penitentes during Easter Week did not carry a scythe, like Holbein's figure, nor was he safely in two dimensions. Rather, this Death carried a bow and arrow aimed at spectators and was himself "a multiplicity of axes" thereby resembling the overlapping worlds of Cather's narrative. There is, moreover, an appositeness about this icon of death, for despite the bow and arrow's probable origin in the Spanish theatre, this weapon "fitted well into the New Mexican scene, where the Indian archer constituted a threat for anybody's life" (Wilder and Breitenbach pl. 32).

And what of Archbishop Latour's relation to the Death that comes for him? Unlike Everyman, Archbishop Latour does not say to Death that he has come when he had him least in mind. Rather, Latour's life as shown through the narrative has been a preparation for that encounter and planned with taste and diligence out of a temperamental necessity for order. Moreover, Cather describes Latour as lying on his bed meditating on his catafalque with the implication that he is preparing for the time he will lie in his cathedral in front of the altar before lying beneath a stone slab until Judgment⁷ as if he were to lie in a French cathedral in the Auvergne.

There remains the specifically Indian dimension of Death in the form of the Pueblo god Masau'u or Skeleton Man, who relates to Latour's readiness to "die of having lived" (269). "To the pueblo Indian," Hamilton A. Tyler writes, "the antithesis between life and death, and in particular the distinction between this world and the other world, does not have the same force that it has for us" (3). The photographer Edward S. Curtis tells us Masou "is connected with fire. He is also in a sense of god of the dead, his name being used as the term for corpse, but

the connection here lies merely in the fact that both Masou and the spirits of the dead inhabit the underground region. Most important of all, Masou is a god of germination; and here the connecting idea seems to be the conception that the growth of plants is dependent on warmth, and warmth is the product of fire" (60). According to some accounts Masu'u is found in a garden where crops grow abundantly though in the dark. When Latour dies, his garden has been blooming extravagantly.

How had Latour lived to merit metaphoric inclusion after death in a sphere additional to that of his own culture? Though Latour was chosen for New Mexico because of his French ability to arrange, he prides himself on his willingness to leave others alone except in instances of dire abrogation of church discipline. We are shown, analogously, how he gives horses their heads in trusting them to find water, aware that they know more than he does. Latour, the tower, has the ability to see afar. Therefore, though Latour is at the center of the structure which is, ostensibly, his biography, the implied linear biography has in effect moved away from Rome, where the novel opened, to Santa Fe. The center of the structure is where Latour is and chooses to be, not least because of the heavenly air. He visits Rome in his pattern of duty as a bishop; but his spirit dwells in Santa Fe, and there he chooses to die.

The archbishop's decision is congruous with the Pueblo cosmic view which holds that the people (Pueblo ancestors) emerged from just under where they live, and when they die themselves they will return to the underworld at an entrance within walking distance of their community dwelling. The congruity of Archbishop Latour's dying but a short distance from where he is laid in state before being buried in the cathedral which he has brought into being

— “fathered,” if you will — brings together Franco-centric biography, hagiography, and fundamental Pueblo myth to achieve a quietly resounding resolution to the novel, the hole in the floor of the golden cathedral resembling the sipapu of the kiva, an umbilical cord to the earth goddess.

In the concluding chapter entitled “Death Comes for the Archbishop,” a passage summarizes the intersecting worlds of Latour’s life:

He observed . . . that there was no longer any perspective in his memories He was soon to have done with calendared time, and it had already ceased to count for him. He sat in the middle of his own consciousness; none of his former states of mind were lost or outgrown. They were all within reach of his hand, and all comprehensible. (290)

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NOTES

¹I am indebted to my husband, Robert S. Haller, for his observation that the figure of Death on the wall of the morada at the Old Cienega Village Museum at El Rancho de las Golondrinas fifteen miles south of Santa Fe probably had something to do with Cather’s title. This essay grew out of that idea. We were in New Mexico because of James Work’s third expedition to Cather country in May, 1986.

²See John Murphy, “Cather’s New World Divine Comedy: The Dante Connection.” *Cather Studies* 1 (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1990) 21-35.

³Susan J. Rosowski and Bernice Slote, “Willa Cather’s 1916 Mesa Verde Essay: The Genesis of *The Professor’s House*,” which includes the text of Cather’s essay.” *Prairie Schooner* 58 (1984) Winter: 81-86 (for Cather).

⁴See, for example, the reproduction of “St. Augustine in His Cell” from the Church of Ognissanti, Florence. The armillary sphere in this portrait of St. Augustine provides a narrative image for the cosmic visions or genre clusters contained within the structure of the

novel. Augustine is shown in an architectural setting as if he were a saint within a cathedral niche. In Botticelli’s painting, however, he is not only enlivened but shown at emblematic work which summarizes how his life has been spent and what has made him a figure of heroic sanctity. He leans toward a Gothic bookrest and writing board; he holds an inkwell with an extruding quill pen in his left hand. Behind him a scientific treatise is open on a ledge together with a clock indicating the first hour after sunset which is also the hour when Archbishop Latour dies. Foregrounded with Augustine is an armillary sphere. It is fitting that the gaze of the Bishop of Hippo, whose diocese included Carthage, was, by implication, sometimes directed toward an armillary sphere that could signify non-Christian world-views that continued to be held in North Africa and the Mediterranean — world-views which had influenced Augustine himself. In Cather’s novel, Archbishop Latour — as distinct from the historical Lamy — ponders the changes he has seen and acknowledges that there remains much that he does not understand about the rites and beliefs of the indigenous people as well as those of New Spain whose practice of Christianity differs from his French style.

⁵*The Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine*, trans. and adapted from the Latin by Granger Ryan and Helmut Ripperger (1941; New York: Arno P, 1969). A thirteenth century compilation of readings (*legenda*) in saints’ lives for the laity to accompany the ecclesiastical year, it was one of the most popular books of the Middle Ages and was translated and printed by Caxton in 1483.

⁶For another iconographic interpretation, see Thomas J. Steele’s discussion of the Guadalupe image signifying the Virgin’s triumph over Quetzcoatl, 97-104.

⁷The fact that Lamy was buried in “a deep pit” dug “in the center of the old transept” rather than in “a burial vault or crypt beneath the Cathedral sanctuary” invites comparison with the kiva. See Chavez, *Sante Fe Cathedral*, 26, 28.

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Shadows on the Rock: Cather's Miracle Play

Merrill M. Skaggs, Drew University

In the first sentence of *Shadows on the Rock*, five units of time are running out. Hour, day, month, year and century begin to expire as the novel opens, and by the end of the second sentence, the last link with ordered security — the ship *La Bonne Esperance* — sails out of sight. The philosopher apothecary of Quebec looks down at a world which seems "empty." From the facts we can reconstruct of Cather's life at this time, her world must also have looked empty, with time running out. In her preceding novel, she had thoroughly explored the concept of miracle and now she must have thought she needed one.¹ Cather consciously summoned her miracle in *Shadows on the Rock*. This polished play on miracle became, by deliberate analogy, her miracle play.

For at least a decade and probably more, Cather had longed for medieval times. Edith Lewis reported that in their travels of 1920 Cather said "she wanted to live in the Middle Ages. And we did live in the Middle Ages, so far as was possible" (Lewis 119). What happened at the time she wrote *Shadows*, I'm suggesting, is that fertile ideas she had been gestating for years came to term. Though the 1697 date on which action begins here is not "middle ages," the Quebec lifestyle, as we shall see, was medi-

eval. Through a seventeenth-century hamlet that preserved a more archaic lifestyle, she created a community which could experience miracle. Her method was to keep *miracle play* in mind both as genre and metaphor. She wrote Governor Cross, "You seem to have seen what a different kind of method I tried to use from that which I used in the *Archbishop*." And again, "I . . . tried to develop it into a prose composition not too conclusive, not too definite: a series of pictures remembered rather than experienced; a kind of thinking, a mental complexion inherited, left over from the past, lacking in robustness and full of pious resignation" (*On Writing* 14-15). Her own immediate need may have impelled her, but her desire bloomed as a fiction which made the play of miracle itself concrete and real.

The happy days which the previous novel *Death Comes for the Archbishop* initiated lasted about six months, though reading proofs for the novel seemed "like having a gorgeous party all over again" (Woodress 412). By summer of 1927, however, the party was over. In a traumatic upheaval, Cather was forced to leave her Bank Street apartment. To avoid the turmoil she went west to visit her brother Roscoe in Wyoming, and coming back by way of Red Cloud, was on hand when her father suffered a

heart attack. She cancelled her planned trip to Europe and stayed in Nebraska until he recovered. When she returned to New York City, she found that storing her belongings was "like having a funeral" (Woodress, 413). Two months in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, left her unrestored. She had no ideas for new work and experienced her first "let-down" or involuntary "let up" in five years. Her "temporary" New York lodgings were in the Grosvenor Hotel, but she was back in Red Cloud from Christmas until late February.

One week after she returned to the Grosvenor, her father died. Cather reacted so quickly that she reached Red Cloud via train at 3:00 A.M., the morning after she got the news. Her arrival in the dark gave her time to sit quietly alone with his body until daybreak. But after the body was moved for the funeral, "she paced frantically back and forth between the house and the . . . church . . . , wringing her hands, apparently unable to conquer the grief and panic which overwhelmed her. Acquaintances felt that her grief was not unmixed with . . . fury . . . that time, her greatest enemy, could effect such changes" (Bennett 28-29). After her brother Douglas took their mother to California to recover, Cather stayed on alone in the old family house for over a month, to find healing in the silence, as Myra Henshawe had once advocated. After a while, "She felt rested and strong as if her father himself had restored her soul" (Woodress 414).

During this solitude, Willa spent hours getting the house ready for her mother's return and doing things as she thought her mother would like to have them done. When *Shadows on the Rock* eventually appeared, the daughter's driving desire to follow an absent mother's system of housekeeping is crucial to the emotional thrust of the book. Finally, however,

Willa embarked again for New York, arriving "absolutely tired." She had done no writing for six months and was in no physical shape to begin any. "Life does beat us up sometimes, she wrote [Mary] Jewett, and we must take our drubbing" (Woodress 414).

By Edith Lewis's report, their newly-built cottage on Grand Manan "seemed the only foothold left on earth" (Lewis 153). For the sake of novelty, they decided to travel to it the long way — by way of Montreal and Quebec — and see new country. According to Lewis, "from the first moment that she looked down from the windows of the Frontenac on the pointed roofs and Norman outlines of the town of Quebec, Willa Cather was not merely stirred and charmed — she was overwhelmed by the flood of memory, recognition, surmise it called up; by the sense of its extraordinarily French character, isolated and kept intact through hundreds of years, as if by a miracle, on this great un-French continent" (Lewis 153-4). In other words, just at the point when her old homes disintegrated, Cather glimpsed a new emotional home, full of recognizable and beloved things which had been kept intact for centuries, as if just for her. She must have felt like Tom Outland discovering Cliff City.

Cather began historical research on the place immediately, while Lewis experienced a well-timed attack of the flu. Then after two restoring months on Grand Manan, Cather returned to New York and "began writing *Shadows on the Rock* that Fall at the Grosvenor She was working with . . . energy and concentration . . . when, in December, she got word that her mother in California had had a paralytic stroke; and broke off her writing" (Lewis 156). It was another terrifying reminder of the inexorable march of time.

By the signs we can read, then, in Quebec Cather spotted a new place which grippingly represented what she yearned for: miraculous stability and un-disrupted cultural continuity. In her letter to Governor Wilbur Cross Cather said,

To me the rock of Quebec is not only a stronghold on which many strange figures have for a little time cast a shadow in the sun; it is the curious endurance of a kind of culture, narrow but definite. There another age persists. There, among the country people and the nuns, I caught something new to me; a kind of feeling about life and human fate that I could not accept, wholly, but which I could not but admire. (On Writing 15)

The kind of life she glimpsed there was not unlike the fantasized medieval life she longed for. In it, a commonly shared faith or "myth structure" unified a culture.

In Quebec, Cather's imaginative energy revived with a tale set in the past, conveying a unified Kebecois feeling about life. The tale would extoll a coherent life pattern developed by a cohering community which honored loving and daughter-nurturing fathers. She had barely started her fiction, however, when she was forced to confront not only the mortality of fathers but also of mothers. The novel appeared within the month her mother died. In fact, in her mother's failing years it served as Willa Cather's rock of refuge (Woodress 423).

As theatrical expression of rocks of refuge, miracle plays grew out of the rites of the medieval church. Those rites established and celebrated communal order. Miracle plays remained popular for centuries.² Such theatrical forms also, Cather's novel plausibly asserts, flourished in seventeenth-century Quebec, directed at the Ursuline school by Sister Anne de Sainte-Rose. This nun, we read, invites Cecile "to the little

miracle plays . . . the *pensionnaires* give at Christmas-time . . ." (*Shadows on the Rock* 61). We understand that dramatic celebration of the Nativity and saints' lives and miracles was natural in a place like Quebec. Walking abroad in the autumn fog "was like walking in a dream. . . . Not even the winter snows gave one such a feeling of being cut off from everything and living in a world of twilight and miracles" (61-2).

Indeed, in every season the Kebecois assume the possibility of miracles. Miracles occur daily here. Some, of course, are more flamboyant than others. When the town survives bombardment, one church is renamed "in recognition of the protection which Our Lady had afforded Quebec in that hour of danger" (64). As a matter of fact, celebrating the miracles of Our Lady was a primary purpose of the most popular miracle plays.³ And on solemn feast days in Quebec, "all the stories of the rock came to life for Cecile; the shades of the early martyrs and great missionaries drew close about her. All the miracles that had happened there, and the dreams that had been dreamed, came out of the fog; every spire, every ledge and pinnacle, took on the splendour of legend" (95). Pierre Charron, one of the semi-skeptical citizens, believes in miracles because he has personally experienced them. Jeanne le Ber, his childhood sweetheart, promised to pray that he would not die unexpectedly before having a chance to adjust his soul; he can assert, "I have certainly been delivered from sudden death" three times, as a result of her prayers (180). The entire community's acceptance of miracle is a crucial point in this reading. R. George Thomas reminds us, the pageants were a confirmation — through the media of speech, action, song and spectacle — of the living faith and powerful assumptions of an entire community which be-

lieved itself to be an integral part of a wider community (or *ecclesia*) which encompassed all space and all time. (12)

In *Shadows on the Rock*, Quebec is not only that kind of coherent community out of which miracle plays developed; it also physically suggests the manger scenes which brought such dramas alive:

Auclair thought this rock-set town like nothing so much as one of those little artificial mountains which were made in the churches at home to present a theatric scene of the Nativity; cardboard mountains, broken up into cliffs and ledges and hollows to accommodate groups of figures on their way to the manger (5)

Three-tiered Quebec in fact resembles the two- or three-storied sets of medieval pageant wagons, with church and heaven at the top and sin and hell at the bottom.

Quebec's physical characteristics suggest, by the writer's intention, the kind of theatric backdrop familiar to the Norman French who not only founded Quebec but also originated the first trope-writing activities from which liturgical drama, and eventually medieval vernacular church drama, evolved. The still-extant Rouen Nativity play, given at Christmas, is one of the earliest, simplest, and loveliest of the type (Williams 23). And from the first pages of Cather's novel, Quebec is associated with such Nativity plays and with a permeating Christmas spirit, even though the actual time when the novel begins is late October. Soon after that beginning Cecile reports to Count Frontenac, "Oh, everything we do, my father and I, is a kind of play" (58).

I take Cecile's assertion to be a book-defining statement. It leads us to make comparisons between medieval Norman theatrical tastes and those the Quebec citizens brought with them when they founded the

town. It also leads us to remember Cather's scholarship. She researched this novel thoroughly, but she gravitated to that task because she had been admiring medieval Norman culture for years.

The metaphor of a miracle play directs episodes in this book and explains the pronounced oppositions David Stouck comments on (156), the folk elements Marilyn Callander catalogs (66), the emphasis on the Holy Mother which Susan Rosowski highlights (184), the unrelieved virtue of the central character that bothers James Woodress (430), and the conservative nature of the Catholicism John J. Murphy discusses (37). A miracle play employs flat characters. It also juxtaposes brutal mishaps and mutilations with better-than-life virtues. Its order includes miracles and saints.

One expected element in miracle plays is dramatic conversions, and we have several examples of them in *Shadows on the Rock*.⁴ Medieval cycle plays also emphasized the crucial occasions in the church calendar year, as this novel follows a year in the life of twelve-year-old Cecile Auclair. Cather often used seasonal and cyclical time as a structuring device, but this novel stands out as a carefully contained one-year-with-epilogue organization, analogous to the structure of medieval cycle plays. Cecile may do little else than duty, but in the context we've now placed her we can see that she is fashioned to function as the hope of the New World. It is no accident that this budding adolescent is as good in the novel's middle as in its beginning or end. Cecile's personal development is not necessary for a character in this form. The novel celebrates communal growth, which is made possible by female stability and dependability.

But the central event in a miracle play is a miracle. For all the wonder of sinless Cecile, there's a more dramatic source of miracle here, which thrills all of Canada. And one feels somehow back in closer touch with the familiar Willa Cather after realizing that the greatest saint in *Shadows on the Rock* is also, by the novel's implied or community standards, its greatest sinner. Jeanne le Ber, the one visited by angels, is the one who betrayed her father's fondest hopes and broke his heart, denied her mother's deathbed wishes and refused a final kiss, rejected her lover's pleas, sending him into the forest, cut herself off from all elements of the community, embraced hunger and cold and discomfort — everything the colony works to conquer; and took on all the sin and misery of the continent. In short, the maverick is the saint who provides the miracle they all long for. As reward for having "thrown the world away" (182), Jeanne earns a voice "harsh and hollow as an old crow's — terrible to hear!" (80). She wears "a stone face . . . [which] had been through every sorrow" (182), and walks full of "resignation and despair" (183). But angels work for terrible Jeanne. And the news electrifies Canada. "The people have loved miracles for so many hundred years, not as proof or evidence, but because they are the actual flowering of desire. In them the vague worship and devotion of the simplehearted assumes a form" (137). The most important event in the novel, then, is not only a miracle a whole culture can celebrate. It is also a miracle brought about by the bad girl — the willful, family-disrupting and -rejecting daughter who chooses to take on the awful knowledge of the sins of the world. Thus considered, Jeanne is not unlike her creator. Through her story this novel extolls a fully committed life which by artful focus becomes itself a rite, a drama, and a miracle.

NOTES

¹In a recently completed dissertation Barbara Caspersen thoroughly explores Cather's use of this term, (*The Flowering of Desire: the Sources of Cather's Miracle*, unpublished dissertation, Drew University, May 1990); however, I believe Cather was exploring ungranted miracles in *My Mortal Enemy*.

²"Actually, changing social and historical conditions have made the plays differ little in spirit from their sources, predecessors, and successors: the same naive reverence and faith in heaven's omnipotence occurs in the thirteenth-century miracles of Gautier de Coincy and Rutebeuf, in the sixteenth-century miracles of Jean Louvet." Grace Frank, *The Medieval French Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960 [1954], 119).

³"Interest centres in the Virgin's intercession, her aid to sinners, however wicked, who have repented. This moral may be tucked away in various exciting tales intended to keep a restive medieval audience entertained, yet it is always there. Modern taste may be offended by the way in which the worst of criminals have only to offer opportunity prayers to be forgiven. But the spectators who first witnessed these miracles performed were concerned in paying homage to their tutelary saint, and the greater the crime the greater the power of the Mother of God." Frank, *Medieval French Drama*, 119.

"When "an English sailor lay sick at the Hotel Dieu, Mother Catherine de Saint-Augustin ground up a tiny morsel of bone from Father Breuf's skull and mixed it in his gruel, and it made him a Christian" (125), and so forth.

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pastoral themes and imagery. In them, Cather traces the promise, the decline, and the death of the pastoral as an ideal of human life.

In *Obscure Destinies*, Cather returns to pastoral themes she had explored in many of her earliest stories and novels, when she, like Virgil, was bringing the Muse to her homeland. Like *My Ántonia*, *Obscure Destinies* reflects her deep familiarity with Virgil's *Georgics* and other classical literature. Much, however, had changed for Cather since she had written her early pastorals. Increasingly alienated from the society around her and saddened by the recent death of her parents, she was questioning the foundations of her earlier beliefs. For Cather herself, as much as for the narrator in "Two Friends," *Obscure Destinies* memorializes the passing of the certainties of youth.

Pastorals are characterized by retreat from the complexities of urban society to a secluded rural place such as a farm, field, garden, or orchard, where human life is returned to the simple essentials of the natural world of cyclical seasons, rain and drought, love and fertility, birth and death. According to David Stouck, "Mythically, pastoral seeks to recover a 'Golden Age' when existence was ideally ordered and there was no conscious separation of self from the rest of the world — no separation of subject and object, all things sharing an identity of order and purpose" (35-36). Presumably written for an urban audience, the agrarian pastoral as exemplified by the *Georgics* celebrates the joys and virtues of working the land and reaping its harvests, of tending work animals and herds of cattle, of loving home, family, and continuing generations, and of holding fast to one's own local area or patria. In the pastoral, too, the vices of society are condemned by

The Passing of a Golden Age in *Obscure Destinies*

Kathleen A. Danker, South Dakota State University

Obscure Destinies has been recognized as containing some of Willa Cather's strongest writing. Yet, how its three stories, "Neighbour Rosicky," "Old Mrs. Harris," and "Two Friends" tie together has received relatively little attention. Indeed, at first glance, the stories seem not to have much in common. Although they are all set in rural communities recognizably based on Red Cloud

Nebraska, they have no overlapping characters or events, and the first story takes place later, in the 1920s, than the second and third, which are set in the late 1880s and the mid 1890s respectively. Those studies that have considered the volume as a whole have focused on ideas of romanticism (Rosowski) and strategies of narration (Leddy). I propose that these stories are unified also by Cather's use of

means of contrasting city ills with country virtues.

"Neighbour Rosicky" establishes the pastoral ideal in *Obscure Destinies* in ties to land, work, farm animals, home, children, traditions, and community, as well as in image patterns of life and death. The story is set on a Nebraska farm where the Czech immigrant Anton Rosicky lives with his wife Mary and their children. His oldest son Rudolph and American daughter-in-law Polly live nearby. The Rosickys are hard-working, humble, affectionate people with only enough money to keep them out of debt, people such as are described in Gray's "Elegy" — "Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,/Their homely joys, and destiny obscure" (9) — from which Cather derived the title of her volume.

As a child, Rosicky had "formed those ties with the earth and the farm animals and growing things which are never made at all unless they are made early" (32). He had spent his young adulthood struggling with poverty and restlessness in London and New York City before emigrating when nearly middle-aged to Nebraska, marrying, and settling down on the land. There he devotes the remainder of his life to the care of his farm and family. After he dies, he is buried in the country graveyard near where his horses work in summer and his cattle eat fodder in winter. His death seems a natural part of the cycle of life seen in the recurring seasons and holidays of the year.

The imagery Cather uses throughout *Obscure Destinies* is consistent with pastoral emphasis on the essential elements of the natural world: earth, water, sun, stars, moon, seasons, animals, plants, birth, life, and death. Her use of food in "Neighbour Rosicky" is particularly striking. Food in this story is not only a necessity of life, but the product of the Rosicky family's labor on the

land, an expression of Czech heritage, and a means of showing affection for and creating ties with family, friends, and even animals. Cather writes that with Mary Rosicky, "to feed creatures was the natural expression of affection, — her chickens, the calves, her big hungry boys" (10). In true pastoral fashion, Mary is associated with the fruit of the bough, the field, and the vine. She makes her own wild-grape wine, cooks up plum preserves to go with hot biscuits, sends prune tarts to Polly and Rudolph, serves her husband apricot kolaches, and urges Dr. Burleigh to marry so she can take his wife some nut bread.

The Rosickys eat family meals together, during which they exchange family and local news, tease one another, and tell stories. At Christmas dinner, Mary recalls a Fourth of July family picnic, and her husband follows with a story from his London years about begging money for food on Christmas Eve. Later, Polly decides to invite her in-laws over to supper — on New Year's Eve. These repeated celebrations of public and religious holidays emphasize continuities over time and space: connections with previous years and with cultural traditions of national and international scope.

Life in "Neighbour Rosicky" is emphasized over death, and there are few images of sickness. Even Rosicky does not "look like a sick man" (4). The major death imagery appearing in the story involves dust and drought, when the dry earth cannot support the life of growing plants, and bitterly cold weather without snow, when seed freezes in the ground. Beyond that, there is a burial motif which makes a connection between the earth, death, and human traditions. Cather uses this motif to contrast the country with the city, a pastoral theme reminiscent of *Georgic II*.

In "Neighbour Rosicky," country burial is associated with human caring, continuity with life, and connection with the earth; while city burial, treated as a money-making business, means human indifference — being forgotten. Rosicky is "distrustful of the organized industries that see one out of the world in big cities," preferring his own rural community where "if you died, fat Mr. Haycock, the kindest man in the world, buried you" (60). And Dr. Burleigh contrasts the country graveyard where Rosicky lies to "city cemeteries; acres of shrubbery and heavy stone, so arranged and lonely and unlike anything in the living world. Cities of the dead, indeed; cities of the forgotten, of the 'put away.' But this was open and free, this little square of long grass which the wind for ever stirred. . . . Nothing could be more undeathlike than this place . . ." (70-71).

Pastoral themes and imagery established in "Neighbour Rosicky" continue through the other two tales in *Obscure Destinies*. Before the story told in "Old Mrs. Harris" begins, Hillary and Victoria Templeton have already severed their tie to the land by selling Grandma Harris's comfortable country home in Tennessee and moving to a little rented house in the small town of Skyline, Colorado. With them, however, they have brought the entire family: their fifteen-year-old daughter Vickie, the twins Adelbert and Albert, young Ronald, baby Hughie, Grandma Harris, and the bound girl Mandy. With them, too, they have transplanted their family cat Blue Boy, and, to the dismay of their orderly new neighbor Mrs. Rosen, their horse Cleveland and cow Buttercup.

In caring for these domesticated animals, the Templetons retain a connection with the pastoral life they have left behind. Similarly, Grandma Harris relives, in a way, the pastoral ideal by remembering her be-

loved former home in Tennessee. The themes of rural community, labor on the land, and the fruit of the bough are all present in a scene in which she recalls "the old neighbours, the yard and garden she had worked in all her life, the apple trees she had planted, the lilac arbour, tall enough to walk in, which she had clipped and shaped so many years. Especially she missed her lemon tree, in a tub on the front porch, which bore little lemons almost every summer, and [which] folks would come for miles to see . . ." (96-97). Hillary Templeton, too, finds a kind of pastoral escape during an interlude in which he rides out to the country to visit an old German couple who rent a farm from him:

The Heyses kept bees and raised turkeys, and had honeysuckle vines running over the front porch. He loved all those things. Mr. Templeton touched Cleveland with the whip, and as they sped along into the grass country, sang softly:

"Old Jesse was a
gem'man,
Way down in Tennessee".
(180)

The song that Hillary Templeton sings here makes a connection between the Heyses's farm and Grandma Harris's old home in Tennessee, while the bees and even the honeysuckle vines suggest *Georgic IV*.

This is not the harmonious world of "Neighbour Rosicky," however. In "Old Mrs. Harris," public celebrations have been reduced to ice-cream socials, and the Southern traditions that the Templetons have brought with them to Colorado set them at odds with the expectations of their neighbors in the "snappy little Western democracy" of Skyline (133). Grandma Harris and Victoria are bewildered when their way of living draws criticism from their neighbors. Insinuations that she exploits her mother as a drudge especially hurt and anger Victoria, who blames her mother for the

family's social difficulties as she does her husband for the financial problems that confine them to their overcrowded house. In this situation, in which the ties of traditional identity, family affection, and community relationships are all strained, Vickie seeks the means to accept a partial college scholarship, Victoria is dismayed to find she is once again pregnant, and Grandma Harris realizes she is dying.

In spite of their difficulties, however, the Templetons are able to hang on to their family traditions and, some of the time, at least, to their affection for one another. Although family ties and neighborhood friendships are strained, they are not broken. The tension of this strain, the sense of a precious and precarious balance, is part of what makes "Old Mrs. Harris" such a powerful story. It is a tension that appears even in the story's concluding paragraph, which describes how Grandma Harris's death will affect Victoria and Vickie:

Thus Mrs. Harris slipped out of the Templetons' story; but Victoria and Vickie had still to go on, to follow the long road that leads through things unguessed at and unforeseeable. When they are old, they will come closer and closer to Grandma Harris. They will think a great deal about her, and remember things they never noticed; and their lot will be more or less like hers. They will regret that they heeded her so little; but they, too, will look into the eager, unseeing eyes of young people and feel themselves alone. They will say to themselves: "I was heartless, because I was young and strong and wanted things so much. But now I know." (190)

This ending is deeply ambiguous, balancing as it does the positive values of family continuity, memory, and self-knowledge, with a sense of isolation, loss, and regret. It is a vision born of an imperfect

world, a world in which the old ideals that held life together are dying.

How seriously the pastoral ideal has been weakened in "Old Mrs. Harris" can be seen in the role food plays in the story. No longer either a tie to the land (the Templetons have no garden) or a source of social unity, food in "Old Mrs. Harris" is both a sign and a cause of family and community disunity. The Templetons eat their meals in separate groups in separate places at separate times, and Victoria's difficulties with her neighbors over her mother manifest themselves in terms of food. If Mrs. Rosen brings Grandma Harris sweets, Victoria is jealous; and when she takes one of her mother's cakes to an ice-cream social, Victoria is criticized for keeping someone in the kitchen to do her baking.

The Templetons' social malaise is mirrored by their physical ills. After leaving Tennessee, Mr. Templeton first moved to a mining-company town in Colorado where he had a good job, "but the altitude of that mountain town was too high for his family. All the children were sick there; Mrs. Templeton was ill most of the time and nearly died when Ronald was born" (133). In Skyline as well, Victoria has frequent headaches, Grandma Harris can think of numerous times when the boys have been sick, a cut on Vickie's finger becomes so badly infected that she has to carry her arm in a sling, and Grandma Harris's health declines. Even the cat Blue Boy catches distemper and dies, thereby causing another family dispute. Grandma Harris, who herself used to carry out the compassionate country rituals connected with returning the dead to the earth, is angry when Victoria tells Hillary to arrange for Blue Boy's body to be hauled off with the trash. Indignantly, she instructs the twins to "go to that crooked old willer tree that grows just where the sand creek

turns off the road, and . . . dig a little grave for Blue Boy, an' bury him right" (144-145).

Strong as they are, scenes of sickness and dying in "Old Mrs. Harris" are balanced by ones of life: Victoria nursing her baby in the parlor, Albert bringing his grandmother a glass of water, and Grandma Harris joyfully caught up in the young lives of her grandsons. Mandy, too, is associated with the most ancient pastoral values in passages where she milks the cow, does the dishes, or having finished her work at night, tends Grandma Harris's feet:

Beside the kitchen stove Mandy had a little wooden tub full of warm water . . . She put Grandma's feet in the tub and, crouching beside it, slowly, slowly rubbed her swollen legs . . . Mrs. Harris . . . never asked for this greatest solace of the day; it was something that Mandy gave, who had nothing else to give . . . Mrs. Harris dozed from comfort, and Mandy herself was half asleep as she performed one of the oldest rites of compassion." (92-93)

Reminiscent of "Neighbour Rosicky," this passage combines elements of water, warmth, labor, and human traditions, with the touch of the human hand as it makes connections and freely bestows a gift of love.

There is no comparable scene in "Two Friends," the final story in *Obscure Destinies*. In this tightly-wrought tale, the narrator recalls a friendship she observed as a child between two prominent businessmen in the small Kansas town where she grew up. She had admired these men because they were secure, established, and led more varied lives than other men in town. R. E. Dillon owned a bank and general store and rented out farms in the country, while J. H. Trueman was a wealthy cattleman. On summer nights, the narrator would sit near Dillon and Trueman on the wooden sidewalk beside the wall of Dillon's

store and listen to their banter over local affairs and farmers and their discussions of plays they had seen together in St. Joseph and Kansas City.

The friendship between the two men was destroyed, however, when they quarreled over Dillon's avid support of William Jennings Bryan's monetary reforms. Soon after, Dillon died suddenly, and Trueman left for San Francisco without attending the funeral, selling his ranches and other property in Kansas. For the narrator, the "breaking-up of that friendship between two men who scarcely noticed [her] existence was a real loss . . . and has ever since been a regret" (229). To her it represents "a truth that was accidentally distorted — one of the truths we want to keep" (230).

The imagery used in "Two Friends" portrays a ghostly, lifeless world, one in which the pastoral ideal is a thing of the past, like the narrator's story itself. The earth here is a grave: ankle-deep dust which absorbs moonlight, muffles sound, and lies "soft and meek like the last residuum of material things, — the soft bottom resting-place" (212). Scenes recalled by the narrator occur mainly at night, under "the rich indolence of a full moon, or a half-moon set in uncertain blue" (210). Physically, the two friends are bloodless, as if made of stone. Trueman is heavy and immobile, while Dillon, below his jet-black hair, has skin that is "very white, bluish on his shaven cheeks and chin . . . a face in many planes, as if the carver had whittled and modelled and indented to see how far he could go" (194-195). The men are associated in the narrator's mind with the windowless, "blind," brick wall of Dillon's store against which they sit at night. In the moonlight, this wall appears carnelian red, the color of blood, but hard and inanimate (211). After moving to the city, Trueman seals himself up in the mausoleum of

"an office in a high building" where he sits "morning after morning, apparently doing nothing . . ." (229).

The narrator who wanders through the graveyard landscape of "Two Friends" is an unsubstantial figure — a lost and ghostly child. She has no name, no playmates, and virtually no body — we only surmise she is female because she plays jacks, usually a girl's game. She neither eats nor drinks, almost no one in the story does. Nor does she or the others get sick; only living creatures can become ill. Sent on "countless errands . . . day and night" (197) by parents who are "glad to have the children out of the way" (210), she seeks out Dillon and Trueman because they seem "solid" to her, like Dillon's store, wall, and sidewalk (197). Yet she never speaks to the two men, and they rarely speak to her.

Witnessing an occultation of Venus with Dillon and Trueman late one summer night, the narrator thinks that "Wonderful things do happen even in the dullest places — in the cornfields and the wheat-fields" (212). Yet, in the occultation, a bright and swiftly-moving "star" disappears behind the moon only to re-emerge as a "wart" and a "planet" which no longer seemed to move. Only, the "inky blue space between it and the moon seemed to spread" (213). This "wonderful" occultation is really a celestial omen of misfortune such as can be found in *Georgic I* and throughout classical literature. It prefigures the death of the friendship between the two men.

As influential and wealthy business men with connections in big cities, Trueman and Dillon represent "success and power" to the child who looks up to them (194). That they can "accidentally" distort (230) the "unalterable" reality (193) of their friendship in a quarrel over politics and money, however, throws doubt on the values they

exemplify, as well as on the foundations of the narrator's faith. Although the country town setting of "Two Friends" evokes ironic echoes of "Neighbour Rosicky," Trueman and Dillon represent a vastly different world, a world in which money is the highest value, farms and cattle are investment properties, children are unwanted, community is expendable, traditions are forgotten, funerals are unattended, idleness means success, and home is abandoned for exile.

While Anton Rosicky's hand communicates a gift of love to his daughter-in-law that brings "her to herself" (67), the two friends give their young admirer empty material substitutes for human caring: a handkerchief she must return to Dillon and a red carnelian seal Trueman drops into her hand for a "keepsake," as he "evasively" calls it (228). Her memories of the men bring her "sadness" and "uneasiness" (229-30); they leave her no "anchors" to give her "courage" (193). Her plight here anticipates that of the young heroines of Cather's two final novels, *Lucy Gayheart* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Illusions of youthful security disintegrate also for Lucy Gayheart and Nancy Till when they come of age into worlds where self-interest overshadows disinterested love and support. For them, pastoral retreats are dangerous deceptions: neither the country skating-hole nor the

home orchard is safe. Without the support they need, Lucy Gayheart and Nancy Till cannot stay in the rural communities of their youth; to run away into the unknown becomes their only recourse. Thus Cather ends her lifelong story of the pastoral with cautionary tales about a world of exile in which there is no Golden Age, no rural haven — a world where the pastoral idea remains merely as an invisible measure of what has been lost.

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spiritual ideal in a seemingly dissociated world — lies at the heart of Cather's fiction.

Nathan A. Scott, Jr., argues that the major movements in contemporary literary criticism speak, one way or another, of "tragic losses, and of losses ultimately rooted in the loss of God" (Scott, *Broken Center* 78). The operative postulate of the twentieth-century imagination is that "we ultimately face . . . a Silence, an Absence, a threatening Emptiness at the center" of reality (79). Scott stresses, however, that this has not always been the status of literature. Expanding on arguments posed by Erich Auerbach, Scott finds the kernel of Western imagination in the Judeo-Christian ethos. The two constitutive elements of that ethos are creation and incarnation. The Genesis accounts of creation assert dramatically that, despite the contingency and fragmentation which fester on this planet, the sublunary world is neither illusory nor evil, but rather the essentially good donation of a beneficent Providence. The heart of the Jewish, and thus Christian, understanding of the cosmos finds expression in Genesis 1:31: "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (110). The saga begun with Creation continues with the call of the Israelite nation and the event which galvanized a powerful religious sentiment, the Exodus, wherein it is believed God intervened dramatically in the temporal, natural sphere on behalf of the Chosen People.

But the climax of the Judeo-Christian story comes in the Incarnation, by which humanity wins a ringing legitimation. "The doctrine of incarnation," notes Sallie McFague TeSelle, "shows concretely that this inescapable finitude and temporality of man is both his structure and his possibility" (TeSelle 62). Moreover, the human enterprise proves not to be a disjointed

"A World Above the World":

Transcendence in Cather's Fiction

Steven P. Ryan, S.J., University of Texas at Austin

That which is essential to Cather's writing and renders her art so refreshing to the modern imagination is her view of this world as a window to the transcendent. Uprooted from their homelands and cast in the wild, Cather's characters yearn for

stability and purpose. They evoke recollection of the Jewish Exodus — for the Israelites, too, left a familiar land in order to pursue an unknown, and hopefully transcendent, destiny in the wilderness. This quest — the seeking and finding of a

succession of events, but rather an all-encompassing sweep from creation to the *parousia*. The episodes of history do not transpire haphazardly; instead, they anticipate, recall and illumine each other. Such a view enabled people to see their milieu as deeply meaningful, as a " 'glass of vision' into the ultimate mysteries" (Scott, *Wild Prayer* 7). Scott's observations draw from Auerbach's concept of the *figura*, i.e., an understanding of the basic relationality of all that exists, and especially of the mundane world to the occult realm. The course to transcendental reality is thus through the created world. But this is a difficult passage for contemporary humanity to negotiate, because of the prevailing control-oriented and manipulative outlook it bears. "The things of earth," cautions Scott, "are to be approached in a spirit of homage, not aggressively or exploitatively . . . since it is in them and through them that the advent of Being becomes manifest — to him who waits" (Scott, *Negative Capability* 84). Thus, the stance of the modern individual before the universe needs be patient and reverential. The purpose of this paper is to trace the quest for transcendence which lies at the core of Cather's fiction. This pursuit, we shall find, arises from Cather's perception of the sacramentality of this world, i.e., a vision by which "reality is encountered in its dimension of depth, of inexhaustibility, of radical mystery" (102). We find in Cather's works the exception which proves the rule of a literary age lost of a sacramental principle.

Repeatedly throughout her fiction, Cather casts her characters into an untamed and cruelly inhospitable wilderness. Jim Burden, a ten-year-old newcomer to unsettled Nebraska in *My Ántonia* finds "there was nothing but land: not a country at all" (7). The missionaries in *Death Comes for the Arch-*

bishop are commissioned "to carry the Cross into territories yet unknown and unnamed," into "a succession of mountain ranges, pathless deserts, yawning canyons and swollen rivers" (41). In *Shadows on the Rock*, French settlers carve out a community "on a grey rock in the Canadian wilderness" (4). The settlement of Quebec quivers between two threatening realms: behind it "the wastes of obliterating, brutal ocean" (25), before it the impenetrable "black pine forest . . . [which] stretched no living man knew how far" (6). Midwestern homesteaders in *O Pioneers!* soon learn that "the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes" (15). Human effort seems inconsequential, for even after seasons of striving, "the record of the plow was insignificant, like the feeble scratches on stone left by prehistoric races" (19-20).

Finding themselves in an unrelenting, antagonistic wilderness, and lacking the familiar conventions of human reference, the pioneers suffer the disturbing misgiving of somehow having become lost in the universe. This apprehension is given poignant expression in *O Pioneers!* in an image of Alexandra Bergson and Carl Linstrum as they stand by the Hanover roadside:

The two friends stood for a few moments on the windy street corner, not speaking a word, as two travelers, who have lost their way, sometime stand and admit their perplexity in silence. (10-11)

Cather's wilderness seems resentful of human encroachment; the immigrants are unneeded, unwelcome nomads. Huddled in a sod hut on a winter day, one can hear "the wind singing over hundreds of miles of snow" (*Ántonia* 101) and experience the unspeakable loneliness known only to the prairie settler. This "stern frozen coun-

try" (*Pioneers!* 15) exacts a terrible toll on the human spirit of some pioneers. Jim Burden, recalling the suicide of a struggling neighbor, "knew it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda" (*Ántonia* 101); the Old World artisan "had . . . been so unhappy that he could not live any longer" (103). Alexandra's father, defeated in his struggle with the land and staggering to a premature death at forty-six, contemplates "his white hands, with all the work gone out of them" (*Pioneers!* 24).

The newcomers inevitably fall upon their own traditions as a means of bringing order to an existence which would otherwise have none. Venerable for her efforts in this area is Madame Auclair, who in *Shadows on the Rock* resolutely carries on the timeless art of homemaking in the Canadian wilderness. "You will see," she tells her daughter, Cecile, "that your father's whole happiness depends on order and regularity, and you will come to feel pride in it" (24). Cather valued the careful maintenance of folkways and felt the French to be particularly gifted in this respect. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Father Vaillant prepares an exquisite onion soup from scant ingredients, and Bishop Latour recognizes it as a product spanning the generations.

The conservation of long-established practices proves a means of sheltering the pioneers from the surrounding chaos. The Shimerdas bring their favorite delicacy from Bohemia — dried mushrooms — and offer handfuls as prized gifts. Throughout the bitter Canadian winter Cecile Auclair carefully guards the parsley plants which her family brought to the New World. The preservation of tradition and the maintenance of an orderly manner of proceeding enable human life to cohere beyond the boundaries of civilization. They give shape

and meaning to a life which would otherwise descend to the brutish. Even common household tools take on a deep significance. Ordinary domestic utensils become the very building blocks of immigrant life for Cecile: "These coppers, big and little, these brooms and clouts and brushes, were tools: and with them one made, not shoes or cabinet-work, but life itself" (*Shadows* 198). A carefully tended home provides a refuge for the settler, a secure ark in an ocean of desolation. Recalling the winters of his youth, Jim Burden remembers "the basement kitchen seemed heavenly safe and warm in those days — like a tight, little boat in a winter sea" (*Antonia* 65).

The need for an established manner of living extends beyond the individual household. The traditions of the church likewise help to anchor the tiny human communities. The bishops of Quebec take care that their liturgies are performed as elaborately and splendidly as anywhere. Bishop Laval renews his decades-old ritual of ringing the church bell to summon worshipers to five o'clock Mass, an act representative of the determined constancy of all the Quebecois. And the ability to bring order to an environment is a prime virtue in Cather's Southwest missionaries.

Moreover, this longing and ability to bring order to one's environment is not limited to Europeans, but is found to an equal degree in Native Americans as well. In *The Professor's House*, Tom Outland and two associates marvel at the remains of a lost Indian civilization discovered on an isolated mesa. The extinct tribe developed sophisticated methods of agriculture and irrigation, and facility in the crafts of weaving and pottery. The discoverers realize that long ago, in the same raw landscape where they now stand, a hopeful people once lifted itself off the desert floor,

"without the influence of example or emulation, with no incentive but some natural yearning for order and security" (221).

Related to this observance of life-sustaining customs is a deeper, profounder theme of awareness of and spiritual communion with ancestral peoples. Throughout her fiction Cather is continually enlarging, in ways both small and large, the scope of her narrative to encompass the larger sweep of human history. For example, the pottery Tom Outland uncovers resembles Mediterranean crockery of antiquity. Some of the wares still bear soot — "from when it was on the cook-fire last," Tom explains, "and that was before Columbus landed, I guess" (*Professor's House* 119). Through the world around them, Cather's characters are inexorably drawn into a binding affinity with their forebears. In *O Pioneers!* Marie Shabata sits beneath a tree and tells a friend of her people's ancient belief, and reveals that it survives somewhat in her:

"The Bohemians, you know, were tree worshipers before the missionaries came The old people in the mountains plant lindens to purify the forest, and to do away with the spells that come from the old trees they say have lasted from heathen times." (152)

Likewise, a desert spring becomes for Bishop Latour a stepping-stone into the remote past:

This spot had been a refuge for humanity long before these Mexicans had come upon it. It was older than history, like those well-heads in his own country where the Roman settlers had set up the image of a river goddess, and later the Christian priests had planted a cross. (*Archbishop* 32)

Some critics suggest that the opening lines of some of Cather's novels, e.g., *Death Comes for the Archbishop* ("One afternoon in the autumn of 1851 . . .") (17) and *Shadows on the Rock* ("One afternoon late in October of the year 1697 . . .") (3), recall the customary preface

to legend: "Once upon a time" Such introductions lend her stories the aura of saga, of archetypal and ageless tales of human quest. One idle summer afternoon by the river, Jim Burden entertains Antonia and several of her friends with stories "about Coronado and his search for the Seven Golden Cities" (*Antonia* 243).

The girls had begun to wonder among themselves. Why had the Spaniards come so far? What must this country have been like, then? Why had Coronado never gone back to Spain, to his riches and his castles and his king? I couldn't tell them. I only knew the school-books said he "died in the wilderness, of a broken heart." (244)

Remembering her own father, and perhaps all who suffered a similar fate, Antonia adds softly, "More than him has done that."

In Cather's world, the past is always accessible. Not only can it be felt, but it can be seen and touched — in dusty potsherds; in the soot, lingering on prehistoric walls, of long-dead fires; in cliff dwellings "preserved throughout the ages by a miracle" (*Professor's House* 244). These relics whisper the deepest secrets of nearly forgotten peoples. Thea Kronberg in *The Song of the Lark* receives just such a communication when she visits northern Arizona's Panther Canyon. Thea is most deeply affected by two remnants of the long-extinguished Indian civilization: the canyon stream and the native crockery. The brook had been the very life-source of the inhabitants, and the manufacture of vessels to reserve its precious cargo a solemn commission.

But the meanings of the past do not belong to the past alone; they pass on to those sensitive enough to intuit them. Thea bathes daily in a pool created by the stream, her bath taking on a meditative and ritualistic aura. During one cleansing, she expe-

riences a moment of penetrating illumination. She recognizes her struggle as an artist as the continuation of the struggle of the ancient people, binding her to them so that in her own career in the opera she must "help to fulfill some desire of the dust that slept there" (306). Tom Outland, too, finds that his excavations link him deeply to the perished tribe, calling its revered ceramicists "my . . . grandmothers" (*Professor's House* 243). Clearly, for Cather the past is neither exhausted nor lost, but rather a vibrant reality lying at one's feet or at one's fingertips, begging to be tapped so that it might bestow its precious secrets of continuity and meaning.

The realization of the fundamental continuity of all human life, though perhaps not as prevalent in Cather's plains fiction, nonetheless does appear in a strategic way in her first Nebraska novel, *O Pioneers!* In their adult years, Alexandra and Carl Linstrum reflect on the passionate struggle of their youth and recognize that it lives on in others. Carl muses:

"Isn't it queer: there are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes for thousands of years." (119)

Cather's characters find affinity with ancient explorers and peoples because of her own abiding belief in the basic changelessness of the human ethos. For Cather, "human life, even on its simplest level, is reaching out toward 'something else'; indeed [she] seemed to be suggesting that there is no truly human life without this reaching out" (McFarland 33-4). For this reason her fiction gravitates toward quintessential seekers: pioneers and artists. There may be variations — different continents, different races, different obstacles — but the human en-

terprise goes on, renewing itself in each succeeding generation.

Alexandra Bergson is especially gifted at intuiting the incipient fertility of the grudging prairie. The ineffable power abiding within the slumbering grasslands touches her in a manner that is vaguely incarnational:

Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman. (*Pioneers!* 65)

Alexandra's insight distinguishes her from her brothers. Oscar, for example, has a face with "an empty look" and works "like an insect" (55). Alexandra's brothers flounder in their spiritual poverty, suffering in their inability to grasp the sacral dimension of the plain. Though they work the land hard — even harder than Alexandra — they do not share in the consolation of her vision. Laboring slavishly and soul-lessly over what is, to them, an unfathomed land, they transcend nothing. While her father and brothers have struggled — fruitlessly — to *subdue* the plain, Alexandra *submits* herself to it, knowingly and lovingly. Through her devotion, therefore, Alexandra takes possession of the prairie in a way no mere conqueror ever could, and in the only way any mortal can ever hope.

Alexandra's surrender to the prairie is perhaps best seen in her recurring fantasy of willful abandonment to a shadowy but gentle lover-god. Olympic in stature and redolent of the harvest, this mystic husbandman personifies the "Genius of the Divide" with whom Alexandra shares spiritual communion. A god of fertility and ripeness he is, inevitably, a god of death as well. Every living thing has its season, Alexandra knows, and when hers is over, she will submit to her mortality as naturally

as she has to her vitality. Her reverence for the land, which in her fantasy approaches passionate love, enables Alexandra to see that, while the rolling grasslands endure, all that lives upon them eventually passes away. Like Bishop Latour in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, she too will one day "die of having lived" (269). Her tranquility with this reality perhaps serves as the finest measure of the depth of her submission to the land.

Joining Alexandra in this worshipful stance toward the land is Crazy Ivar, a harmless, though mistrusted, eccentric. Ivar lives alone, in a manner wholly consonant with the natural world around him. He makes a home "in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done" (*Pioneers!* 36). Like Alexandra, Ivar's respect for the land is borne of a deep spiritual awareness:

He expressed his preference for his wild homestead by saying that his Bible seemed truer to him there. If one stood in the doorway of his cave, and looked off at the rough land, the smiling sky, the curly grass white in the hot sunlight; if one listened to the rapturous song of the lark, the drumming of the quail, the burr of the locust against that vast silence, one understood what Ivar meant. (38)

This abandonment to the land is woven throughout the fabric of Cather's prairie stories. In "Neighbour Rosicky," the soil again emerges as the medium of spiritual wholeness. To Rosicky, a genial Bohemian farmer in his mid-sixties, landlessness is tantamount to non-existence. "To be a landless man," he reflects, "was to be a wage-earner, a slave, all your life; to have nothing, to be nothing" (93). Here Rosicky echoes Antonia, who confides to Jim Burden, "I'd always be miserable in a city. I'd die of loneliness. I like to be where I

know every stick and tree, and where all the ground is friendly" (*Antonia* 320). Rosicky's many years of farming have led him to a rich spiritual insight. Walking across the fields one December evening, he pauses to take in the vista which opens up before him — from his family's modest farmhouse to the sweeping farmlands to the soaring vault above:

He stopped by the windmill to look up at the frosty winter stars and draw a long breath before he went inside. That kitchen with the shining windows was dear to him; but the sleeping fields and bright stars and the noble darkness were dearer still. (94)

Here, Cather's theme of union with land opens up to encompass the entire natural world. Rosicky's affinity with, first, the land and, also, the cosmos enables him to find his spiritual bearings with remarkable effect. The old farmer stands "like a tree that has not many roots, but one tap-root that goes down deep" (88-9), a man with an unshakable sense of self and of the basic goodness of human living. He is able to face disasters such as crop failure and droughts with uncanny equanimity, for he recognizes them as mere momentary perturbations in a prevailing pattern of benignity. In his deep affinity with the natural world, Rosicky is the masculine counterpart of Alexandra. For both Alexandra and Rosicky, the horizontal dimension of life is the gateway to its vertical dimension.

The expansion of this theme, from union with the land to union with the universe, continues in *My Antonia*. Early in the novel, Jim Burden recalls his arrival on the Nebraska tableland. Strange and wild and initially disconcerting as his new surroundings are, he nonetheless soon experiences a moment of pregnant self-surrender to the universe: "that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great"

(18). The land is able to be the medium of uplifting simply because of the transcendent possibilities inherent in the natural world. Jim recalls his first autumn on Nebraska's golden reaches in a passage that stands as one of the finest examples of Cather's skill at richly evocative description:

As far as we could see, the miles of copper-red grass were drenched in sunlight that was stronger and fiercer than at any other time of the day. The blond cornfields were red gold, the haystacks turned rosy and threw long shadows. The whole prairie was like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed. That hour always had the exultation of victory, of triumphant ending, like a hero's death — heroes who died young and gloriously. It was a sudden transfiguration, a lifting-up of day. (40)

Here, Cather represents creation itself as reaching out longingly for transcendence. Her characters have the ability not only to apprehend nature, but to respond through it to the supernatural, to the divine force dwelling within:

Alexandra drew her shawl closer about her and stood . . . looking at the stars which glittered so keenly through the frosty autumn air. She always loved to watch them, to think of their vastness and distance, and of their ordered march. It fortified her to reflect upon the great operations of nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security. (*Pioneers!* 70-1)

The untamed land and the overarching heavens become the meeting place of the pioneer and the mystic. Through the sacrament of the macrocosm, Cather's voyagers gain insight and union with the sacred.

The land, the primary symbol in Cather's prairie stories, yields to the rock in her later writing. The Quebecois of *Shadows on the Rock*, in building a community on a Canadian promontory, merely renew the heroic

project of the lost Indian peoples who figure so prominently in *The Song of the Lark*, *The Professor's House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. The same spiritual significance the land bears for Alexandra, Jim Burden, and Rosicky reappears in the Southwestern desert mesas and the escarpment in New France. Bishop Latour marvels at how literally the native peoples realized and fulfilled the depth of their spiritual yearnings:

The rock . . . was the utmost expression of human need; . . . it was the highest comparison of loyalty in love and friendship. Christ Himself had used that comparison for the disciple to whom He gave the keys of His Church. And the Hebrews of the Old Testament . . . their rock was an idea of God, the only thing their conquerors could not take from them. Already the Bishop had observed in Indian life a strange literalness, often shocking and disconcerting. The Acomas . . . actually lived upon their Rock (*Archbishop* 97-8)

The Indian mesas and their descendent, Quebec, rise altar-like out of the surrounding, inhospitable wilderness — rocks of visible, tangible transcendence, and expressions of the ageless human need to find, as Tom Outland would say, "a world above the world" (*Professor's House* 240).

In Cather's fiction one finds a movement from the generally undefined religious sentiment of *O Pioneers!* to a more specifically Christian and even sectarian focus in her later narratives. For example, Roman Catholicism constitutes the spiritual heart of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*. While protagonists such as Alexandra develop a generic spiritual belief, the Quebecois and the French missionaries bring the full force of their religion to the struggle in the wilderness. An early episode in *Death Comes for the Arch-*

bishop sets the tone for the entire saga. The incident before the cross-shaped evergreen reveals the primary assumption of the novel, that is, the sublunary world is neither meaningless nor opaque, and even seemingly mundane objects, events, and persons have specific religious reference. The evening star reminds the young bishop of *Ave Maria Stella*, an early Marian hymn often sung in his seminary days. From on high, people and animals look "like figures of a child's Noah's ark" (165). The Indian people thresh their grain in the same manner as "the Children of Israel" (30), and a flock of goats brings to mind a chapter in the *Apocalypse* (31). The world, seen through the missionaries' eyes, is charged with religious association. Even events as ordinary as the Canadian sunset suggest such meaning:

The crimson flow, that effulgence at the solemn twilight hour, often made Cecile think about the early times and the martyrs [viz., Jesuit missionaries Isaac Jogues, Jean de Brebeuf, et. al.] — coming up, as it did, out of those dark forests that had been the scene of their labours and their fate. The rainbow, she knew, was set in the heavens to remind us of a promise that all storms shall have an ending. Perhaps this afterglow, too, was ordained in the heavens for a reminder. (*Shadows* 233-4)

A significant barometer of the importance of the theme of faith is the motif of the Virgin Mary qua protectress. In the earlier novels, *Alexandra* and *Antonia* emerge as beneficent quasi-goddesses — *Alexandra* a corn or earth goddess, *Antonia* a goddess of life itself. In these roles, the women further serve as guardians. *Alexandra* watches over her younger brother, *Emil*; the younger *Carl*, who looks to her for strength; the friendless *Ivar*; and, ultimately, over a bountiful prairie. *Antonia* looks after her large brood of children

and, after a manner, the adolescent *Jim* — whom she fears may be falling to the amorous clutches of a scheming *Lena Lingard* — and, certainly, presides over the vital forces of life. But nowhere does the protectress theme appear as fully as in the Catholic novels, where the mother of *Jesus* appears as a benign demigoddess as well as a symbol of the church. Her name is on everyone's lips: a host of characters pray to her. *Father Vaillant* aspires to devote himself to her by a life of contemplation; a Mexican child in a hidden village startles *Bishop Latour* with the greeting, *Ave Maria Purissima, Senor* (24); the school in *Santa Fe* is named *Our Lady of Light*. In *Shadows on the Rock* *Mary* is considered protectress of *Quebec* and especially of the unfortunate waif, *Jacques*.

The stories of the Canadian settlers and the French missionaries present the church as the indispensable font of life. Before *Bishop Latour* and *Father Vaillant* make their entrance into *Santa Fe*, they observe from on high that "the long main street began at the church [and that] the town seemed to flow from it like a stream from a spring" (*Archbishop* 22). On Christmas Eve, the Canadian faithful flow toward their spiritual harbor:

Across the white ledges that sloped like a vast natural stairway down to the Cathedral, black groups were moving, families and friends in little flocks, all going toward the same goal, — the doors of the church, wide open and showing a ruddy vault in the blue darkness. (*Shadows* 113)

The cathedral expresses in stone and mortar the value of religious faith to the immigrants.

Cather's pioneers thus evolve from deracinated nomads to secure citizens of the universe. Those achieving transcendence do so by virtue of their ability to see through the natural world to the supernatural realm both

within and beyond. Divine reality does not descend from an alien sphere, but rather emanates from the whole of the natural world. The land, the sky, the heavens — these become the meeting places of the pioneer and the mystic, and through them Cather's seekers glimpse divine being and purpose. The world of *Willa Cather*, rather than being opaque and meaningless, is readily transparent to ultimate reality.

Thus, *Willa Cather* emerges as a modern writer of rare gifts. We find in her a vibrant and expressive figural imagination. Her writing affords us a vision of a benign and ordered universe freed from any dichotomy between the natural and supernatural. In her stories we see the continuity of the human saga and the sacramentality of the macrocosm.

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Works on Cather

1989-90: A Bibliographical Essay

Virgil Albertini, Northwest Missouri State University

Although the number of pieces devoted to Willa Cather during the last year — book-length studies from 1989 to early 1990 and articles since the spring of 1989 — is not as great as in some previous years, criticism and scholarship on Cather shows no sign of abating, and Cather is in no danger of neglect. This survey of Cather criticism includes twenty-two articles, five books, and a chapter in a book. As the following discussion indicates, many of the studies are substantial.

I will begin with two review essays of recent criticisms and then evaluate a "tour," a note, and a general discussion about Cather and baseball before commenting on major items. In "Willa Cather: Reassessment and Discovery" (*Contemporary Literature* 30:444-447), Linda Wagner-Martin acknowledges the importance of James Woodress's *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* and Sharon O'Brien's *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* but praises Marilyn Arnold's concise and precise *Willa Cather's Short Fiction*. Wagner-Martin proceeds, and not surprisingly, to attack Robert Nelson's *Willa Cather in France: In Search of a Lost Language* as unconvincing, but then, and surprisingly, she is critical of Brent Bohlke's collection *Willa Cather in Person*, although she praises Bohlke's editorial work. Wagner-Martin ends her review on a somewhat contradictory note by calling all five works important contributions to the study of Cather's work. "Speaking of Silence: Willa Cather and the 'Problem' of Feminist Biography" by Elaine Sargent Apthorp (*Women's Stud-*

ies 18:1-11) is a discussion of both the Woodress and O'Brien biographies. Apthorp discusses the underlying disagreements critics have with the two works and gives her own honest and fair assessment: "... each book offers a superb contribution to Cather studies — Woodress's as a lucid, richly comprehensive resource for research, and O'Brien's as a stimulating interpretation of Cather's early life and work." She skillfully compares the biographies and offers interesting commentaries on how Woodress handles the question of Cather's sexuality and how O'Brien focuses on the youth of the creative individual. Biographies serve different needs, and Apthorp finds the two indispensable because "they serve exquisitely the different purposes for which they are designed."

Wayne Fields does the commentary and Jill Enfield supplies the appropriate photographs for "Cather Country" (*American Heritage* 41:79-89). His discussion on the town of Red Cloud and the surrounding country is nothing new, but he neatly parallels the Nebraska novels with Cather's literary materials — the house on Cedar Street, the Miner home, the Divide, and the town. The Wheeler farm, however, is merely mentioned, and it is disappointing not to have a photograph of the George Cather house (the Wheeler place in *One of Ours*) or an acknowledgement of its splendid renovation by Sayra Wagner, George Cather's granddaughter. In "Cather's Deep 'Foundation Work': Reconstructing 'Behind the Singer Tower'" (*Studies in*

Short Fiction 26:81-86), Joan Wylie Hall suggests that the seldom-discussed story be read not as typical muckraking fiction but as an artistic adaptation of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, which, Wylie claims, is Cather's "deep foundation." Wylie finds many definite parallels in the two works, and her comments need to be expanded into an article. Virgil Albertini's "Willa Cather and Baseball: Some Personal and Literary Connections" (*Platte Valley Review* 17:16-24) tries to build the case that Cather relied on her early background in Red Cloud, where baseball was part of her formative years, including the sport in *O Pioneers!* and *Lucy Gayheart*. Albertini's discussion relies rather heavily on supposition.

Two high-quality studies of *The Professor's House* were published in 1990; the first contributes an interesting angle on the novel and the second links the novel with Hemingway. Fritz Oehlschlaeger seeks to build upon and extend previous critical analyses of Professor Godfrey St. Peter's despair in "*Indisponibilité* and the Anxiety of Authorship in *The Professor's House*" (*American Literature* 62: 74-86). While drawing upon feminist work, Oehlschlaeger argues convincingly that the professor's split condition near the end comes from his seeing his life as an object; Godfrey suffers *indisponibilité* (unavailability), and, as a result, experiences a split between his mind and body and the disruption of his sense of the past, present, and future. Oehlschlaeger's conclusion is not startling: Augusta is the one who saves the Professor and helps him to his renewed availability.

In "*The Professor's House*: Cather, Hemingway, and the Chastening of American Prose Style" (*Western American Literature* 24:295-311), Glen A. Love claims Cather has been unjustly overlooked in the development

of American literary prose style. He feels her essays "On the Art of Writing" and "The Novel Demeuble" reveal modernistic directions in the novel, and her central theories of style anticipate Hemingway's theory of omission by three years. Cather's theory, Love effectively shows, predicted and defined "the formal directions of Hemingway at the beginning of his career." Love skillfully uses *The Professor's House* as a stylistic representation of the omitting process and shows how the length of the novel's three sections indicates the process. Here, says Love, there is a stylistic "unfurnishing" that carries out the theory of omission articulated in Cather's critical essays on style. Finally Love theorizes that Hemingway almost certainly would have read Cather's "unfurnished" novels such as *My Ántonia*, *A Lost Lady*, and *The Professor's House*, along with her critical omission essays, and he wonders whether Hemingway's public rejection of *One of Ours* contributed to Cather's neglect as a major participant in the movement toward simplifying American literary prose. A corresponding note to Love's essay on style is Mark J. Madigan's "Willa Cather's Commentary on Three Novels by Dorothy Canfield Fisher" (*American Notes and Queries* 3:13-15). Madigan paraphrases from and discusses four Cather letters to Dorothy Canfield Fisher emphasizing her theory of omission and uncluttered prose style. Cather's comments on Fisher's *Rough Hewn*, *The Deepening Stream*, and *Seasoned Timber* are interesting and read like her own critical theories of writing.

Marilyn Arnold's "Willa Cather's Artistic 'Radicalism'" (*CEA Critic* 51:2-10) takes issue with those who think of Cather in the traditional mold, and Arnold perceives Cather's work to be modernist. In this important essay, Arnold argues that Cather

experimented with form and her novels all differed from each other because she "regarded true art as that which finds its own form and which is different, therefore, from every other piece of art." Arnold diligently surveys several of Cather's lectures and interviews to show Cather as "an energetic and fearless spokesperson for artistic freedom." Cather obviously followed the artistic freedom she verbally defended and, to be sure, never wrote by formula. For that reason, Arnold emphasizes, her writings "will always be new."

Cather scholarship certainly gains from the seven articles in the *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter Special Literary Issue* (Fall 1989). This volume, edited by Ronald W. Butler, is a tribute to the work of Mildred R. Bennett, the pioneer of Willa Cather studies, in celebration of her eightieth birthday (September 8, 1989). The essays here consider Edith Lewis, *One of Ours*, *Shadows on the Rock* in relation to another 1931 novel, and *A Lost Lady*.

Lewis seems to have been as undesirable as some of Cather's own villains, and Patricia L. Yongue begins the assault in the lead article with "Edith Lewis Living" (12-15). Yongue refers to Lewis's final act in her relationship with Cather — her burial at the foot of Cather's grave — as probably "the consummation of a series of such acts which belie conflicting motives." Yongue concludes that Lewis governed and controlled Cather after her death. David Harrell's "Tall Tales of the Southwest" (15-19) extends the Lewis discussions with an account of Lewis and Cather's 1915 trip to Mesa Verde and Taos. Harrell clearly shows that Lewis misrepresented both places in *Willa Cather Living*, making them seem far more primitive than they really were and generally altering the facts of the trip. He has no answers for Lewis's distortion and exag-

gerations, although he does suggest a plausible reason that Lewis "portrays the places they visit as remote, primitive, and largely unknown, as if waiting for aesthetic discovery." When Mildred Bennett talked, people listened; when she wrote, they absorbed, and her discussion "At the Feet of Willa Cather: A Personal Account of Edith Lewis as Protector" (19-22) presents Lewis as spending her life in helping and sustaining Cather, and thus submerging her own talents to help promote Cather's work. She shows, too, that her help and support were not always healthy. Bennett is quite convincing when she relates her own troubles with Lewis while researching and writing *The World of Willa Cather*. As Bennett demonstrates, Lewis certainly complicated matters for Cather biographers. For Bennett, Lewis's grave is a lasting symbol of how Lewis in life subserviently placed herself at Cather's feet and "gloried in her position" there. (Marilyn Arnold's perceptive "Foreword" to the new addition of Lewis's *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Memoir* [Athens: Ohio UP, 1989] should be mentioned here for offering additional insight on the Lewis and Cather relationship.)

Michel Gervaud in Cather's "One of Ours: A French Perspective" (22-26) calls Cather an "inveterate Francophile." Cather cherished the literature, art, land, and people of France, and in *One of Ours* she communicated this passion to Claude Wheeler. Cather, according to Gervaud, never acknowledged any of France's weaknesses and always had a "warm loving vision of France" — whether it was right or wrong. John J. Murphy does not disappoint with his discussion of Cather's other French novel in "Coming of Age and Domesticating Space in the Wilderness: Roberts's *The Great Meadow* and Cather's *Shadows on the Rock*" (26-31). After first

declaring *The Great Meadow* and Roberts's *The Time of Man* as "truly great American Novels," he argues that *The Time of Man* is superior in many ways to *My Ántonia*. Considering all the work Murphy has done on *My Ántonia*, who is going to argue with him? Murphy carefully shows how the heroines, Cécile Auclair in *Shadows* and Diony Hall Jarvis in *Meadow*, make the two novels comparable. Both heroines are "products of artists with serious civilizing purposes," and "both novelists are aware that civilization begins in the kitchen with the domestic arts." His comparison of the familiar Cather work with the relatively unfamiliar one by Roberts is convincing. (The only other item on *Shadows on the Rock* this past year, Mark J. Madigan's "An Autobiographical Scene in *Shadows on the Rock*" [*American Notes and Queries* 1:103-104], needs mentioning here. Madigan discusses his discovery of an overlooked autobiographical reference in the sledding scene with Jacques and Cécile. He cites Cather's June 1931 letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher as establishing Jacques as the fictional counterpart of her nephew Charles. Madigan points out that Cather's description of the sledding scene was obviously drawn from her late-afternoon sleigh rides with her five-year-old nephew during the winter of 1927 in *Red Cloud*.)

Linda M. Lewis's "Cather's *A Lost Lady* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*: Re-envisioning Romanticism" (31-35) considers the similarities that exist between Marian Forrester and Emma Bovary. Her discussion is hardly groundbreaking, but Lewis effectively distinguishes Cather's heroine from Emma for not longing for escape into an unrealistic dream: "while dreaming is merely escapism in Flaubert, it is in Cather both pragmatic fiction and nostalgic longing." Ronald Butler's "Sexual

Imagery in Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*" (35-38) adds another to his competent studies of such imagery in Cather; here he contends that "strong sexuality" is one of the major elements in *A Lost Lady* and clearly shows how Cather uses sexual imagery "to define her characters and reveal the depths of their complex relationships." A final item on *A Lost Lady* is Richard C. Harris's comparative study "First Loves: Willa Cather's Niel Herbert and Ivan Turgenev's Vladimir Petrovich" (*Studies in American Fiction* 17:81-91). Harris demonstrates that many similarities in *A Lost Lady* and "First Love" and his well-argued assertion is that Turgenev's story "was almost certainly an influence upon Cather's own."

Although two books on *My Ántonia* were published during the year, only two journal articles appeared. In "Jim Burden and the Structure of *My Ántonia*" (*Western American Literature* 24:45-61), John L. Selzer considers *My Ántonia* as "a comic novel recording its title character's triumph and its narrator's tardy but resolute enlightenment." What it all means is that Jim, as an adult, is a reliable narrator who understands the mistakes he made as a youth. As a narrator, Jim is older and wiser, but as a character he is immature. Selzer takes issue with those critics who see the novel as either formless or episodic. He rightly sees the work as "tightly structured in a way that dramatizes the events of Ántonia's life and her final triumph, that critiques the errors in Jim's life, and that sanctions his final comprehension of those errors." Selzer ends his discussion by saying the novel "closes affirmatively comically." "The Silent Protagonist: The Unifying Presence of Landscape in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* by Shelley Saposnik-Noire (*Midwest Quarterly* 31:171-179) discusses a well-worked subject generally known in

Cather studies. Saposnik-Noire uses vivid landscape examples from the text and sees landscape in this novel as a unifying and silent physical presence with human vitality, and, like Twain's river, "almost a fictional character in itself."

A matter of influence is Mary R. Ryder's concern in "'All Wheat and No Chaff': Frank Norris's *Blix* and Willa Cather's Literary Vision" (*American Literary Realism* 22:17-30). It is no secret that Cather did not care for the naturalistic school of fiction, but she did like Norris's *McTeague*, and Ryder offers a fascinating view of Cather's attraction to another Norris novel, the lightly regarded *Blix*. She gives several reasons for this attraction, but the underlying one, Ryder feels, is that Cather found the modern western woman in *Blix*. Cather agreed about "what the woman of the new century should be," a combination of masculine strength and feminine spirituality. Ryder demonstrates that "The Treasure of Far Island" is an example of Norris's influence on Cather and that Margie Van Dyck is the literary descendant of *Blix*.

In "Willa Cather: The Daughter of Exile" (85-127), in *After the Fall: The Demeter-Persephone Myth in Wharton, Cather and Glasgow* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), Josephine Donovan attempts to apply feminist theory to Cather texts. Donovan's thesis is that Cather exhibits the struggle of the daughter to leave the maternal/lesbian world in order to participate in the patriarchal one of art and action. She applies her thesis to sixteen shorter works and to *A Lost Lady*, *O Pioneers!*, *Alexander's Bridge*, *My Ántonia*, *One of Ours*, *Song of the Lark*, *The Professor's House*, and *Lucy Gayheart*, saving us from yet another mother-daughter discussion by dismissing *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* because it "has been treated sufficiently elsewhere." Donovan contends

that reconciliation of "the two realms of feminine experience — that of the nineteenth-century mother with that of the twentieth-century new woman-daughter — is the central issue in Cather's fiction." Cather, says Donovan, dealt with but still had not resolved this issue in "The Best Years," her final story.

David Daiches wrote *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* in 1951, but thirty-eight years elapsed before another British book-length evaluation of Cather appeared. Now there are three more: Susie Thomas's (1990), Jamie Ambrose's (1989) and Hermione Lee's (1989). Lee's *Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up* (London: Virago) is the one that is worth the long wait; it is an ambitious study that complements the O'Brien and Woodress biographies. What Lee describes is a Cather of split identities, sexual conflict, and stoic fatalism. To Lee, "readings which explicate Cather's fiction entirely as an encoding of covert, repressed lesbian sexuality seem . . . simplistic, even patronising." She lengthily explains that the male narrative voices of Cather are not her means of secretly expressing lesbian feelings. Lee's study encompasses literary tradition as well as gender issues and learnedly and stylishly argues that Cather belongs not only at the forefront of American literary history, but also deserves a high place in the canon of world literature.

In *Willa Cather* (New York: Barnes and Noble), Susie Thomas sees Cather's achievement as the result of her "ability to transcend the limitations of gender and nationality." She relates Cather's particular contributions to the American literary heritage and her "profound and enriching response to European literature, music, and painting." Thomas's chapters on *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *The Professor's House* are insightful and valuable. She worries about Cather being rele-

gated to the ranks of the local colorists and hopes that Cather will be recognized as a major writer of universal significance. "Cather's work will be read for as long as there are people to read at all," she concludes.

Jamie Ambrose's *Willa Cather: Writing at the Frontier* (Oxford: Berg) offers a rather bland and general review of Cather's life and work, and her interpretations are simple and predictable. She offers no documentation for any of her statements but obviously leans heavily on Edith Lewis's *Willa Cather Living* and Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant's *Willa Cather: A Memoir*. (Lewis is listed sixteen times in the index; Sergeant nineteen.) She also cites Woodress's *A Literary Life* as the most accurate and comprehensive, yet there are only six entries for him. The important works of critics like Rosowski, Arnold, Stouck, Murphy, and many others are ignored. Ambrose's study offers a readable style, but, as a general introduction to Cather's life and writing, it is very inferior to Philip Gerber's *Willa Cather*.

Two books on *My Ántonia* were published in 1989. The first is John J. Murphy's *My Ántonia: The Road Home* (Boston: Twayne) a well-named book with a beautiful jacket painting titled *A New Land* by Cather artist John Bergers. Murphy is the first to devote a book-length study to a single Cather novel. Hopefully, he will follow with eleven more, for he offers a valuable and close textual reading and carefully examines the influences on the author's art. His solid discussion includes themes, raw materials from which the novel was created, and how Cather's imagery is indebted to techniques of impressionist, luminous, and genre painting. He shows how the novel follows themes stressed in Virgil's *Georgics*, identifies and evaluates the darker undercurrents, and, in so doing, compellingly explains

that "apparent simplicity, actual complexity is perhaps Cather's most significant achievement in *My Ántonia*." Especially useful is the discussion of the historical context and the comprehensive survey of criticism. What is unfortunate is that Murphy's splendid study ends too soon.

Susan Rosowski's editing of *Approaches to Teaching Cather's My Ántonia* (New York: Modern Language Association), a collection of work by both established and newer critics, is impressive. Rosowski arranges the essays in four sections focusing on "Teaching the Life and Times," "Teaching the Literary and Philosophical Traditions," "Teaching Specific Courses," and, finally, "Teaching Specific Aspects." All of the contributors, like David Stouck, John J. Murphy, Loretta Wasserman, Robert Thacker, Blanche Gelfant, and Rosowski herself are experienced in teaching *My Ántonia*, and they generously share their approaches in courses that range from freshman composition to graduate study. Enhancing this collection is the introductory "Materials" section. Here Rosowski offers with comments a valuable compilation of suggestions by instructors and of works that would be helpful for teaching the novel. Both books on *My Ántonia* are excellent aids for both the student and the teacher.

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