

# Willa Cather

## NEWSLETTER & REVIEW

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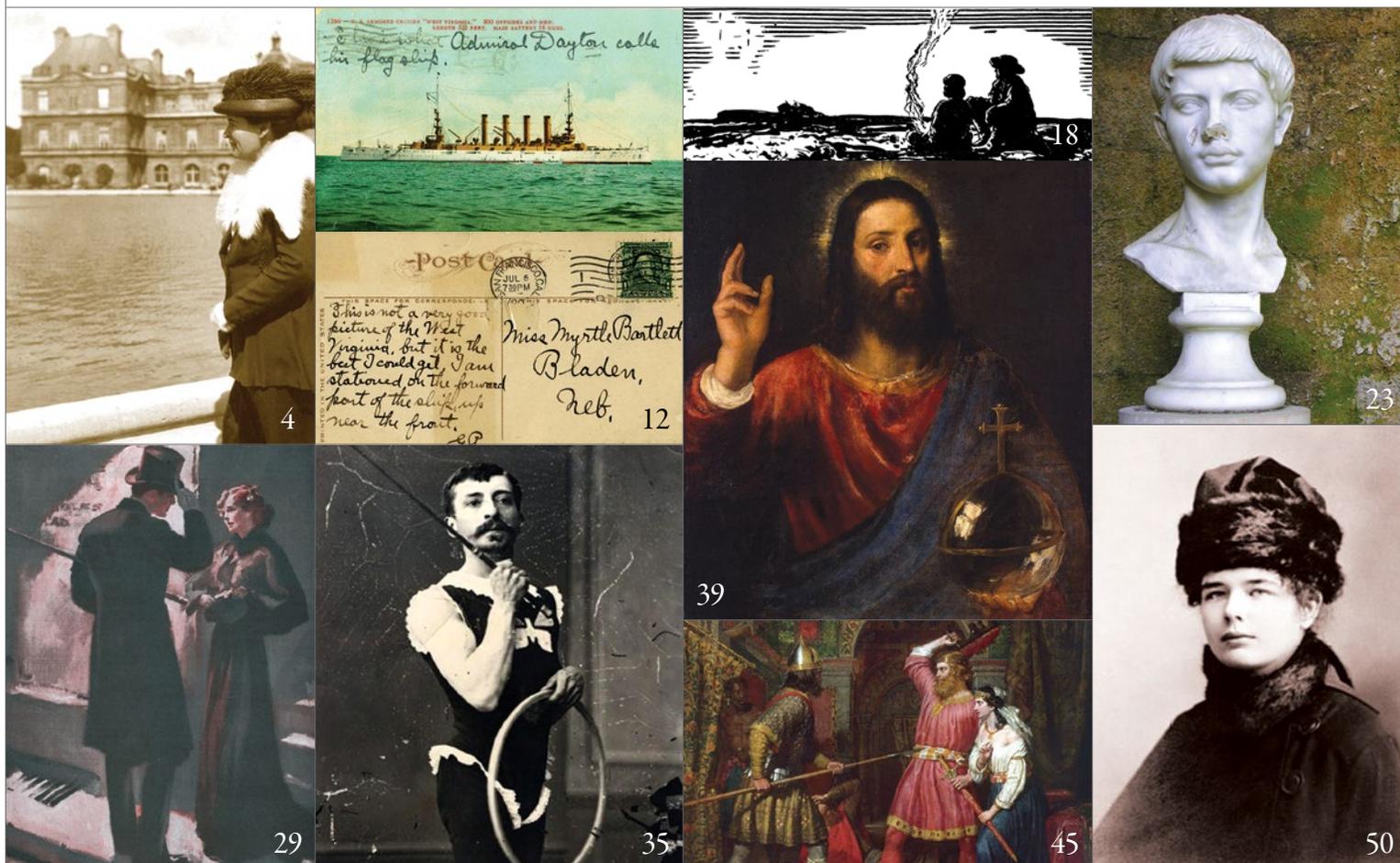


Cather and Europe

# Willa Cather NEWSLETTER & REVIEW



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On the cover: The Panthéon, Eugène Atget, 1924, from The J. Paul Getty Museum.



## Letter from the Executive Director Ashley Olson

Warm greetings to each of our friends and supporters as the year draws to a close and 2016 begins. I'm confident you'll find satisfaction in this issue's insightful scholarship that developed out of our three-day scholarly symposium held in Rome in June 2014.

As I embarked on my own first European voyage—regretfully by air and not on one of the grand ocean liners that Cather took on her European travels—I could not help but think about the similar thrill she surely felt to experience new cultures and cities for the first time. In a 1908 letter to her brother, Roscoe (which you'll see referenced more than once in this issue), she remarked, "I got my guide book for Rome the other day. Seems queer to be really on the way to Rome; for of course Rome has always existed for one, it was a central fact in one's life in Red Cloud and was always the Capital of one's imagination. Rome, London, and Paris were serious matters when I went to the South ward school—

they were the three principal cities in Nebraska, so to speak." After painstaking research and study (through the archives of our imaginations), we have located a rare, priceless map showing these "principal cities of Nebraska." We have reproduced it on our back cover of this issue, and we will have no comment regarding questions of its authenticity.

But to return now to "serious matters." To the Willa Cather Foundation's leadership and Board of Governors, that means doing all we can to spur new scholarship and to drive interest in Cather's life and work. As we prepare to close the book on our 60th anniversary year, we owe sincere thanks to the scholars who continue their research endeavors; the educators who find value in introducing their students to Cather's work; the visitors who make pilgrimages to Red Cloud; and the members and donors who enable us to sustain our programs while preserving the historic community of reader's imaginations.

Since our founding in 1955, a rising tide has ensured Cather's legacy as one of our greatest American novelists, and our task is to celebrate that achievement. Thank you for being part of this historic journey. And next year, bring a friend aboard.



## Letter from the President Thomas Reese Gallagher

A confession: we were a number of weeks into 2015 before it occurred to us to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Cather Foundation's 1955 founding. Maybe that was due to modesty, or a certain ambivalence about things like sixtieth birthdays (ahem). Mainly, I think, it was because our everyday responsibilities and programs and projects demanded virtually all of the attention of our small, dedicated, and chronically overworked staff and team of volunteers.

But thanks to them we've had a great year, marked by our biggest and most successful Spring Conference ever and a great surge in momentum in our plans to build the National Willa Cather Center. When we did take the time to indulge in a long look back over our sixty-year history, it seemed that 2015 was a year that might do our founders proud.

These were people whose dedication and labor and perseverance and generosity formed the strong foundation that still supports us today. We owe them a good deal, so let's say their names and honor their memory: Mildred Bennett, Carrie Miner Sherwood, Jennie Miner Reiher, Harry and Helen Obitz, Frank O'Rourke, Josephine Frisbie and L. V. Jacks.

The highlights of our first sixty years include the acquisition and preservation of numerous historic properties and objects

associated with Cather's life and work; the development of strong institutional alliances, such as with the Nebraska State Historical Society and the University of Nebraska Cather Project, which have helped assure our viability; thousands of visitors, including many who come again and again, and such distinguished guests as John G. Neihardt, Eudora Welty, Maya Angelou, David McCullough, Julie Harris and Eva Marie Saint; the awarding of student scholarships totaling more than \$150,000; sixty Spring Conferences and fourteen International Cather Seminars; the restoration of the Red Cloud Opera House; the establishment of an operating endowment and strong financial management; and, among many other accomplishments, the publication of this journal since 1957.

It's a record we're proud of and hope to continue. Sure, we've had the occasional misstep (do you still have your Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial ashtray?), but we do our best.

I started writing this letter in New York City, my home, with the usual distractions and noises of the city interfering with my progress (as they do). I am completing it in Nebraska, where I was born and raised, and where I spend more and more of my time. The noises and distractions interfering with my progress now are courtesy of the construction crews hard at work creating the National Willa Cather Center from the shell of the historic Moon Block building in Red Cloud.

Sometime during 2016, our new facility will open, providing new archival resources and a grand new setting for the ambitious plans we're cooking up for the coming years.



# Cather in Europe, Europe and Cather: The 2014 Symposium in Rome, Italy

Andrew Jewell and Mark J. Madigan

In Rome, to walk across the street sometimes requires a leap of faith. Cars and motorcycles stream by, and at many places there are no lights or crosswalks. So, to get across, those on foot wait for a small group to gather at the curb and then, unceremoniously, step into the stream. The vehicles all stop, without impatience or surprise, and give the walkers the right of way. It doesn't seem like it should work, but it does.

Planning for the 2014 Willa Cather Symposium in Rome required a similar leap of faith. We knew it could be done, but it seemed daunting. Could we find the right place? Could we find the resources? Would anybody come? Initial doubts were many and for a while as we began they flowed into one another. Thankfully, a small group of colleagues had gathered to worry and discuss: John Murphy, Robert Thacker, Cristina Giorcelli, the two of us, and the staff of the Willa Cather Foundation, most especially its Executive Director, Ashley Olson. Many others offered encouragement and support along the way. All together we stepped off the curb and made it across, and far more than successfully.

Our primary goal was to hold a symposium that explored Cather's relationship to Europe and European culture. We wanted to better understand the importance of various European influences on Cather's life and imaginative work, as well as Cather's impact on European audiences. Cather traveled to Europe several times in her life, and twice visited Italy. She also pointed to European culture as centrally important to her life from an early age, noting in a letter to her brother Roscoe in March 1908 shortly before leaving on her first trip to Italy that it "seems queer to be really on the way to Rome; for of course Rome has always existed for one, it was a central fact in one's life in Red Cloud and was always the Capital of one's imagination. Rome, London, and Paris were serious matters when I went to the South ward school—they were the three principal cities in Nebraska, so to speak." So she thought and believed.

The symposium, held from June 12–14, 2014, at the Centro Studi Americani, featured more than thirty presentations from scholars exploring these themes. This special issue of the *Newsletter & Review* features a selection of the papers that considered the European influences on Cather and her work. Another special issue, currently in the planning stage, will feature essays exploring Cather in translation in specific languages and the publication and reception of her work in those countries. It will be based on papers presented at the Rome Symposium and augmented by other submissions as well.

Another goal of our symposium was to support and promote scholarly and popular interest in Cather beyond the borders of North America. While we were successful in that regard, there remains much important work to be done. We are still learning about Cather's influence on various European readers—her work has been translated into most of the major European languages—but it appears that in many areas her work is not as well known as that of other American writers. Some European scholars of American literature have discovered Cather and published criticism about her work, and in the last decade translations of her novels have been published in Bulgarian, Dutch, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish (as well as Japanese, Korean, Kyrgyz, and Thai). That is, Cather's work is known abroad, but it should be better known. Working with our international colleagues in Rome was among the most rewarding and enjoyable endeavors of our careers, and we hope "Cather in Europe, Europe and Cather" will inspire future international conferences and further efforts to expand Cather's international readership.

In addition to the wonderful presentations at the symposium, those in attendance greatly enjoyed the elegant space of the Centro Studi Americani. Located in a former palace constructed in the seventeenth century, its rooms feature frescoes by some of the leading Tuscan and Flemish artists of the period. Our presence in this wonderful environment was made possible by a generous gift from the estate of Harriet Shadegg, given by Harriet's family members John and Sally Murphy. We both thank the Murphy family very much for this kindness; the symposium was made affordable and enjoyable for those who came in large part because of this gift.

We would be remiss not to mention that while none of us has ever been poorly fed at a Cather event, we cannot recall being better fed than in Rome. Our prodigious and delectable catered lunches and symposium dinner earned superlatives from all assembled. Camaraderie is greatly enhanced when one can enjoy a beautiful Italian lunch and a little light wine between sessions. These meals and the fellowship they inspired were an appropriate homage to Willa Cather, a woman who valued good cuisine and the rewarding conversation that flows with it. For our meals and local arrangements, including securing the elegant meeting rooms at the Centro Studi Americani, we are indebted to our codirector Cristina Giorcelli. We are grateful to Evelyn Funda for hosting a convivial happy hour gathering as well. *Grazie mille!*



When Willa Cather made her first trip to Europe two years into the twentieth century, she was twenty-eight years old and had yet to publish a book. Making her seventh and final journey across the Atlantic thirty-three years later, she was an acclaimed writer with a burgeoning international readership. As living proof of how widely Cather's reputation has flourished, more than forty scholars from Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Taiwan, and the United States assembled to discuss her personal, intellectual, and creative engagement with Europe for three memorable days. As the work in this issue of the *Newsletter & Review* makes clear, the event was a successful one, providing many insights into Cather's relationship to Europe. We are glad that we, with our colleagues, took the leap of faith and organized the event. The quality of the scholarship and the enthusiasm of those in attendance encourage us, and the Cather Foundation, to remember that Cather's remarkable artistry belongs to, and is appreciated by, a very big world.

## Contributors to this Issue

**Nalini Bhushan**, professor of philosophy at Smith College, has written on aesthetics and on the philosophy of language, of mind, and of science. Her more recent projects explore the intellectual dimensions of the Indian Renaissance (1857–1947); *Minds Without Fear*, her coauthored book on that period, will be published by Oxford in 2016. While she has presented papers at several Willa Cather conferences, this is her first publication on Cather's fiction.

**Stéphanie Durran**s is professor of American literature at the University of Bordeaux Montaigne and a former Fulbright scholar. She is the author of *The Influence of French Culture on Willa Cather: Intertextual References and Resonances* (2007) and has recently edited *Thy Truth Then Be Thy Dowry: Questions of Inheritance in American Women's Literature* (2014). She has published widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century women writers and is on the advisory board of the Society for the Study of American Women Writers.

**Cristina Giorcelli** is professor emerita of American literature at the University of Rome Three. Her fields of research are mid- and late-nineteenth-century fiction and Modernist poetry and fiction. She is cofounder and codirector of the quarterly journal *Letterature d'America*. She edits a series of volumes on clothing and identity (*Abito e Identità*) and the University of Minnesota Press has published four volumes as *Habits of Being*, coedited with Paula Rabinowitz. She was president of the Italian Association of American Studies (1989–1992) and vice-president of the European Association for American Studies (1994–2002).

**Richard C. Harris** is the John J. McMullen Professor of Humanities at Webb Institute on Long Island. He has published numerous articles on Cather and is particularly interested in the ways in which she used various literary, artistic, and musical sources in the creation of her fiction. He was the volume editor for the Scholarly Edition of *One of Ours* (2006).

**Andrew Jewell**, director of the *Willa Cather Archive* (cather.unl.edu) and coeditor of the forthcoming *Complete Letters of Willa Cather*, is a professor in the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries. He is the coeditor, with Janis Stout, of *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*. He joined the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Foundation in 2008.

**Mark J. Madigan** is a professor of English at Nazareth College in Rochester, New York. He is the historical editor of *Youth and the Bright Medusa* in the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition and editor of three volumes by Dorothy Canfield Fisher. He was a Fulbright Scholar in Ljubljana, Slovenia, and a Fulbright Specialist in Zadar, Croatia.

**Richard H. Millington**, the Helen and Laura Shedd Professor of English at Smith College, is the author of essays on Cather's modernism and of *Practicing Romance: Narrative Form and Cultural Engagement in Hawthorne's Fiction*; he is also the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Nathaniel Hawthorne* and the Norton Critical Edition of Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*.

**John J. Murphy**, professor of English emeritus, Brigham Young University, is a member of the Willa Cather Foundation Board of Governors and author of numerous major essays on Cather and of *My Antonia: The Road Home*; he edited the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and Penguin's *My Antonia*, and coedited the scholarly edition of *Shadows on the Rock* and also two volumes of *Cather Studies* (8 and 11). He directed the first International Cather seminar in 1981 and more recently has codirected the seminars in France and Arizona, and the 2014 Rome symposium, which he helped sponsor.

**Julie Olin-Ammentorp** is a professor of English at Le Moyne College and a member of the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Foundation. She has published extensively on the works of Cather and Edith Wharton, including essays in *Cather Studies 8: Willa Cather: A Writer's Worlds* and *Cather Studies 9: Willa Cather and Modern Cultures*. Her current project is *Edith Wharton and Willa Cather: Intersections*, a comparative study of the two authors. Like Cather, she has been lucky enough to visit Paris on several occasions.

**Françoise Palleau-Papin** is professor of American literature at Paris-13 University-Sorbonne Paris Cité. After a PhD on Willa Cather, she has authored a critical monograph on David Markson (2009), edited a critical volume on William T. Vollmann (2011), and coauthored *An Introduction to Anglophone Theatre* (2015).

**Diane Prenatt** is professor of English at Marian University, where she teaches American and European literature and contributes a literature course to the Catholic Studies program. She has published essays in *Cather Studies* and is working on a biography of Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant. Her most recent publication, in *Studies in the Humanities*, is an essay on Sergeant's World War I memoir, *Shadow-Shapes* (1920).

**Peter M. Sullivan** is professor emeritus at Indiana University of Pennsylvania where he taught German language and literature. He has presented at conferences on Willa Cather and published essays on the German influence on her fiction in *Cather Studies*, the *Nassau Review*, and *Western Pennsylvania Magazine*.



# Willa Cather's "Individual Map" of Paris

Julie Olin-Ammentorp | Le Moyne College

In a letter to her brother Roscoe in 1908, Willa Cather wrote that "Rome, London, and Paris were serious matters when I went to the South ward school—they were the three principal cities in Nebraska, so to speak" (*Selected Letters* 105). Twenty-seven years later, in her novel *Lucy Gayheart*, she articulated the concept of the "very individual map," explaining that Lucy had her own mental map of Chicago, in which the "city of feeling rose out of the city of fact like a definite composition" (26–27). Born in Virginia, raised there and in Nebraska, immigrant to Pittsburgh and New York City, and traveler across North America and to Europe, Cather was someone to whom place mattered intensely; it is correspondingly important in her works. Long before she ever set foot in Paris, she had a definite, if romanticized, idea of what the city was like; during each of her trips there, in 1902, 1920, 1923, 1930, and 1935, she developed an increasingly detailed and personal knowledge of the city. Like Lucy Gayheart in Chicago, Cather gradually created her own individual map of Paris; so too her characters who encounter Paris have their personal maps of this principal Nebraskan city. For Cather and her characters, the Paris "of feeling [rises] out of the city of fact like a definite composition."

Cather was one of a long and continuing string of Americans to visit, fall in love with, and write about Paris. Americans from Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson to Henry James, Edith Wharton, Ernest Hemingway, James Baldwin, and a bevy of current writers have not only spent considerable time in the city but have written about it evocatively. During the period in which Cather visited Paris, the city played a crucial role in the development of literary modernism; it was home to a range of vitally influential writers and publishers, many of whom were women, as documented by Shari Benstock's *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900–1940*. Cather stayed in hotels tantalizingly close to the homes of many of them, including Gertrude Stein, the modernist stylist and art collector, and Sylvia Beach, the founder of the famous Shakespeare and Company bookstore and first publisher of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It would have been a pleasant stroll from Cather's hotel on the Quai Voltaire, where she stayed in 1920 and 1923 (map #1), to Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas's residence on the rue du Fleurus (map #2), and a very short walk to the rue de l'Odeon location of Beach's bookstore (map #3) where, in the 1920s, Ernest Hemingway was dropping in

to borrow books. In her visits to the city, however, Cather apparently met none of these writers, nor does she seem to have been interested in meeting them. Her individual Paris was hers indeed.



Pierre-Auguste Renoir: *The Ball at the Moulin de la Galette*, 1876; *Musée d'Orsay*.

Cather's use of Paris in her writings reflects a change from a very romanticized view of the city to a deeper, more personal knowledge of it. Written before she had ever set foot in Paris, her 1899 poem "Then Back to Ancient France Again," with its references to "Spurred chevaliers" who "still quaff their wine" and to "gallants gay, with powdered hair" leading women "in the stately dance" (42), reflects the Paris she had read about in Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*. Her next two poems about the city, both included in her 1903 volume *April Twilights*, exhibit a somewhat more accurate view of the city, although both lack the stamp of her own distinctive consciousness. The first, "The Mills of Montmartre," is about the change this district underwent in the late nineteenth century, as it was transformed from a hill in the countryside covered with working mills into a suburban pleasure ground (map #4). Cather's view of Montmartre has none of the light and charm of Renoir's famous 1876 painting "The Ball at the Moulin de la Galette" (see illustration); instead is it a moralistic little piece, suggesting that the young women who were once hearty, healthy "lasses" now "trip . . . From idle door to door"; "The nights are terrible with mirth, / The days ashamed for song," she writes (66–67).

# NOUVEAU PLAN DE PARIS MONUMENTAL.



**MAP KEY:**

1. Hotel du Quai Voltaire, 19 Quai Voltaire
2. Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, 27 rue de Fleurus
3. Sylvia Beach's Shakespeare and Company bookstore, 12 rue de l'Odéon
4. Montmartre
5. Arc de Triomphe
6. Avenue des Champs-Élysées
7. Hôtel des Invalides; Dôme Church; Napoleon's Tomb
8. Cimetière de Montmartre
9. Cimetière du Père-Lachaise
10. Seminary for Foreign Missions, rue du Bac
11. Luxembourg Gardens
12. Pantheon
13. University of the Sorbonne
14. Latin Quarter
15. rue de Vaugirard
16. Corner of rue Soufflot and rue St. Jacques
17. Luxembourg Gardens—location of Cather photo
18. Luxembourg Gardens—Delacroix monument
19. Cathedral of Notre Dame
20. Musée Carnavalet
21. Sibut pension, 11 Place Cluzy, now Place Paul Painlevé (where Cather stayed in 1902)
22. Hotel Pont-Royal, 7 rue Montalembert (where Cather stayed in 1935)



The second poem about Paris included in *April Twilights*, entitled simply “Paris,” exhibits a loftier view of the city:

Behind the arch of glory sets the day;  
The river lies in curves of silver light,  
The Fields Elysian glitter in a spray  
Of golden dust; the gilded dome is bright,  
The towers of Notre Dame cut clean and grey  
The evening sky . . . (108)

Exhibiting neither the romanticism of “Then Back To Ancient France Again” nor the moralistic response to Montmartre, “Paris” uses positive terms to describe the city. The opening lines of the poem, quoted above, mention many of the city’s famous landmarks: the Arc de Triomphe (“the arch of glory”; map #5), the Seine, the avenue of the Champs-Élysées (map #6), “the gilded dome” of the Church of the Invalides (map #7), and so on; the later part of the poem personifies Paris as “an empress . . . / Heavy with jewels” and “arrayed . . . star by star with pride and power” (108). Both in its summary of the city and in its figuring of the city as a royal personage, the poem is surprisingly conventional; there is very little that is characteristic of Cather in these poems. Cather included neither “The Mills of Montmartre” nor “Paris” in the 1923 and 1933 editions of *April Twilights and Other Poems* (Thacker 225–28), perhaps indicating that she knew they were not her best work.

Although Cather’s early poetry about Paris reveals little individual sense of the city, her prose writing, in both letters and her travel accounts for the *Nebraska State Journal*, suggests a traveler and writer who was beginning to identify what most interested her there. One indication of this is her choice of subjects. In a variant on “the thing not named,” Cather often focused her writing about specific places on what we might call “the thing rarely depicted,” frequently avoiding the well-known or popular “sights” of a place in favor of places less obvious. This pattern is clear in her 1902 travel accounts. E. K. Brown noted that as soon as Cather arrived in Rouen, her “report was sharply personal” in its focus on Flaubert (102); this was even more the case in Paris. Her sole article about the city was entitled “Two Cemeteries in Paris.” Although her account begins with the well-known artistic district of Montmartre and a brief description of the Basilica of Sacre Coeur, these passages are merely introductory to “one of the two great burial grounds of Paris” (*Willa Cather in Europe* 107), the Cemetery of Montmartre (map #8)—surely an unconventional choice of focus for the young travel writer (and quite possibly a disappointment to her readers back in Nebraska, who might have been hoping to hear about Notre

Dame, Napoleon’s Tomb, or other better-known sites). Cather follows her description of the literary graves in the Montmartre Cemetery with one of her trips to the Père Lachaise Cemetery (map #9), then as now a tourist attraction, but rarely the main reason people go to Paris.

In choosing these cemeteries as the main focus of her writing, Cather was beginning to delineate her individual map of Paris. It is a writer’s map of Paris, and it is this particular writer’s map. As George Kates points out in *Willa Cather in Europe*, her commentary on Paris suggests what will become one of her great themes: mortality (102). But it also focuses on immortality: Cather’s Paris is one in which the great writers are dead and buried, yet live on as inspirations. She concludes her description of Père Lachaise by invoking Balzac: “It was Balzac himself who used to wander in the Père-Lachaise in the days of his hard apprenticeship, reading the names on the tombs of the great. ‘Single names,’ he wrote his sister, ‘Racine, Molière, etc.; names that make one dream.’ Surely none among all the names there calls up visions more vast” (113–114). For the young writer, whose first novel was still a decade in the future, wandering in the footsteps of the young Balzac encouraged her to dream big dreams—dreams which may have seemed, back in Pittsburgh or Nebraska, little more than chimeras. As she would write to the editor Ferris Greenslet during her 1920 trip to Paris, “I wish you were here. I could tell you a great many things that would sound absurd on either Bank or Park streets!” (*Selected Letters* 293).

Cather’s first trip to France was a momentous occasion in the twenty-eight-year old writer’s life, the point at which she began exploring the cultures of the Old World. In turn, she was shaped by them. In many ways Cather’s first experience of Paris was what might be seen as standard tourist fare: she explored the city’s parks and museums, purchased “foolish underclothing” and ate delicious food “unto discomfort” (*Selected Letters* 65). Yet both her public writing about the trip for the *Nebraska State Journal* and her private comments in letters delineate the beginnings of a deeper response to Paris. While Cather was writing about food and undergarments to her mother, she was sharing more abstract thoughts with her father, referring to the city as “the most beautiful that men have ever had the genius to create. I find new pleasure and wonder in it every day” (*Selected Letters* 65). In a statement that suggests her very high standards and her proneness to disappointment, she singled out Napoleon’s tomb (map #7) as “the only thing I have ever found in the world which did not at all disappoint” (66). And she had begun to pay attention to daily life around her, seeing a new way of doing things, one devoted both to



careful work and to the enjoyment of life: “The people here are the most industrious, neat and painstaking people I have ever seen, and yet they take life comfortably” (66).

Cather was beginning to see the big picture of French life and culture, beginning to understand something Americans have always found appealing, if initially surprising, in Paris:



Eugène Atget: The Panthéon, 1924; The J. Paul Getty Museum.

that “pleasures of the flesh and instruction of the spirit” can go hand in hand (Gopnik xvi). The Protestant and Puritanical outlooks that dominated the American view of life (and which dominate “The Mills of Montmartre”) were left behind, and a new perspective was possible: “What a wonderful place! the American thinks, almost against his better Puritan judgment” (Gopnik xix). As Edith Wharton, another admirer of France, observed, “It was the Puritan races . . . who decided that ‘Art’ . . . was something apart from life” and “dangerous to it” (39); in Paris, “art” meant not only the paintings and sculptures in the Louvre and handsome urban architecture, but also the daily things. The seemingly superficial aspects of the city Cather wrote about to her mother were not so different from the more important aspects she praised to her father, but rather the result of the same cultural impulse: in Paris, Cather discovered, beauty could be a part of everyday life. She would acquaint herself further with French culture as she explored other regions of France during her 1902 trip and subsequent trips, developing a deep admiration of French culture that would shape works like *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*. As the historian David McCullough has written, “Not all pioneers went west” (15).

Although Cather never wrote a work set entirely or even primarily in Paris, the city haunted her literary imagination, weaving itself in and out of her work. Paris is an important reference point in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*: Fathers Latour and Vaillant are prepared for their missions in the New World at the Seminary for Foreign Missions on the rue du Bac (map #10); Father Latour recalls purchasing there the cloth for a cloak, “the twin of Father Vaillant’s” (222), which warms him for many years. Latour’s last thought is of “standing in a tip-tilted green field among his native mountains,” waiting “for the diligence [coach] for Paris” (315). Paris appears only as an idea in *One of Ours*; for Claude Wheeler as for Cather, it is one of the “principal cities in Nebraska.” Early in World War I, when Paris is threatened by a German invasion, Claude and his mother read about the city in an encyclopedia, focusing their attention on its defenses (227–229). Later, the soldiers in Claude’s company think of Paris, though they never get there. When they imagine it, they do so in very American terms, imagining it as possessing “incalculable immensity, bewildering vastness . . . the only attributes they had been taught to admire” (449). Given these terms, they imagine that in Paris “[t]he Seine . . . must be very much wider” and “spanned by many bridges. . . . There would be spires and golden domes past counting, all the buildings higher than anything in Chicago, and brilliant—dazzlingly brilliant, nothing grey and shabby about it like this old Rouen” (449). How disappointed they might have been by Paris, and perhaps particularly Paris as it appears in *The Professor’s House*, where grey is a dominant color.

By the time Cather completed *The Professor’s House*, she had visited Paris three times, spending considerable amounts of time there on each visit. During the 1920 visit, for instance, she spent “six or seven weeks” in the city, as Edith Lewis recounts, before visiting the World War I battlefields and the grave of her cousin G. P. Cather north of Paris, and returning there afterwards. Although this was the trip during which she was gathering material for the French chapters of *One of Ours* and during which, in Lewis’s words, Cather “wanted to live in the Middle Ages” (119), she appears also to have been absorbing impressions she would use in *The Professor’s House*. Cather and Lewis spent time in the Luxembourg Gardens (map #11), which are quite close to the Panthéon (map #12) and the square in front of it. Both are near the Sorbonne and the Latin Quarter (map #13, 14)—places which would resonate for the scholarly professor. Yet in an implementation of “the thing less obvious,” the Sorbonne makes no direct appearance in this academic novel, nor does the Panthéon, where so many brilliant French thinkers are entombed.



Instead the novel conveys a sense of Professor St. Peter's individual map of Paris. During the period when he had been living in the town of Versailles and tutoring the Thierault boys, he takes an early train into Paris, breakfasts on the rue de Vaugirard (map #15), and goes for a walk. The portrait of the city which follows is not one that is likely to appear in any guidebook: it's November, it's rainy, and shops aren't even open yet. But it is personal to St. Peter, and Cather renders it beautifully:

The sky was of such an intense silvery grey that all the grey stone buildings along the Rue St. Jacques and the Rue Soufflot came out in that silver shine stronger than in sunlight. The shop windows were shut; on the bleak ascent to the Pantheon there was not a spot of colour, nothing but wet, shiny, quick-silvery grey, accented by black crevices, and weather-worn bosses white as wood-ash. (101)

Cather tells us it is “bleak”; the dominant color is grey—one of the things the soldiers in *One of Ours* dislike about Rouen. But in her word-painting, the grey becomes a beautiful “shiny, quick-silvery” color, the palette of many classic black-and-white photographs of Paris, including a view of the Pantheon by Eugène Atget, taken from an intersection very close to the one Cather mentions (see photograph on page 7). St. Peter's individual map of Paris is evocative, but also very precise: the text pinpoints a particular corner between the Luxembourg Gardens and the Pantheon (map #16). Into this beautiful monochromatic palette Cather then adds color: “All at once, from somewhere behind the Pantheon itself, a man and woman, pushing a hand-cart, came into the empty street. The cart was full of pink dahlias” (101). Although the couple are “a weary, anxious-looking pair,” their “flowers, which were done up in large bouquets with fresh green chestnut-leaves” (102) are beautiful. St. Peter buys a bunch, struck by the beauty of brilliant pink-and-green bunches of flowers in their silvery setting, as well as the courage of the young couple, traveling with a baby to Paris in the early morning hours to make a few francs. Poor as he is himself, St. Peter willingly pays two-and-a-half francs for the flowers, even though he hardly knows what to do with

the one bouquet he has purchased. (He attempts to give it to a passing schoolgirl, but is prevented by a disapproving nun who accompanies the group of girls.)

Paris appears only occasionally in *The Professor's House*; this is the scene which Cather develops in greatest detail. It demonstrates her subtle treatment of places: in creating St.

Peter's recollections of Paris, Cather does not choose the obvious tourist sites or depict what we might call obvious weather, but instead renders a beautiful, unexpected, and individual moment in the life of this particular character. This happy, silver-grey morning in St. Peter's life recalls a passage from Cather's description of the small town of Le Lavandou in her 1902 travelogue: “there is always one place remembered above the rest because the external or internal conditions were such that they most nearly produced happiness” (*Willa Cather in Europe* 157). Or, as Tom Outland says on the Blue Mesa, “Happiness is something you can't explain” (252).

In some ways it is also difficult to explain why the dahlia scene in *The Professor's House* matters, or its effect in the novel as a whole: it seems isolated, simply a beautiful moment St. Peter remembers

vividly years later. Yet the moment's profound visual beauty “freezes a moment in time,” to borrow a phrase from *The Song of the Lark*. This painterly moment is distinctive, far from the cliché view of Paris, and accurate as well as beautiful: the critic Michel Gervaud remarks that Cather's description “capture[s] the atmosphere of Paris in late fall, the quality of the Ile-de-France light which brings out the brightness of the pink dahlias” (76). The scene also resonates with emotional and moral beauty. One of the most troubling undercurrents in *The Professor's House* has to do with money—not with poverty, but with affluence. The fortune which Louie Marsellus has made by turning Tom Outland's scientific formula into a marketable commodity provides some happiness to the St. Peter family—especially to Mrs. St. Peter, Rosamond, and Louie himself. Yet it has also caused profound strife: between Rosamond and her



*A postcard from Cather to her nephew Charles Cather, showing a flower seller at the Church of the Madeleine in Paris. Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries.*

sister Kathleen, and between the Marselluses and Professor Crane's family, among others. And of course the source of the rift between Tom and his friend Roddy Blake was Roddy's sale of the artifacts he and Tom had excavated from the Blue Mesa.

In contrast, the dahlia scene quietly demonstrates the unimportance of money, or at least of affluence. The young Godfrey St. Peter, poor as he is, has had enough money for his train ticket to and from Paris, for a "magnificent breakfast" (101), and to purchase what we might call gratuitous, splendidly useless beauty; he returns to Versailles "with nothing but his return ticket in his pocket" (103). In some ways this small, beautiful scene serves as a meditation on the relation, or perhaps the lack of relation, between wealth on one hand, and happiness and beauty on the other. In an earlier passage in the novel, readers are told that by "doing without many so-called necessities [St. Peter] had managed to have his luxuries" (27), and this scene is a persuasive demonstration of that. St. Peter tells Lillian that "If with that cheque [from the Oxford prize] I could have bought back the fun I had writing my history, you'd never have got your house. But one couldn't get that for twenty thousand dollars. The great pleasures don't come so cheap" (34). "The great pleasures," the pink dahlias surely among them, have little to do with anything as common or "cheap" as currency.

In a later scene, another part of St. Peter's individual map of Paris comes into focus: the Luxembourg Gardens. It was here that Cather

was photographed in her fur stole in 1920 (see adjacent photograph; map #17); those photos were taken in the most recognizable part of the Gardens, with the pool and the Luxembourg Palace behind (just a short distance from the scene at the corner of rue Sufflot and rue St. Jacques). This is one of the most recognizable areas of the Gardens; the pool and the palace appear in various guidebooks and photographs,



*At the Luxembourg Gardens, 1920. Southwick Collection, Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.*



*John Singer Sargent: In the Luxembourg Gardens, 1879; Philadelphia Museum of Art. In a second version of this painting, Luxembourg Gardens at Twilight, Sargent included the dome of the Panthéon in its appropriate spot in the middle distance. A print of that painting was placed in the copy of Alexander's Bridge that Cather inscribed to Isabelle McClung.*

and as the setting of John Singer Sargent's "In the Luxembourg Gardens" (see illustration above). There are other well-known views of the Gardens, including the long allée of pollarded trees, the Medici Fountain, and other locations. Cather chooses none of these more obvious parts of the Gardens for Professor St. Peter to ponder. Instead, she has him think of the monument to Eugene Delacroix (1798–1863; see photographs on page 10), an important French Romantic painter, the creator of the iconic "Liberty Leading the People" and many other canvases. Although the monument is located near the Luxembourg Museum and close to the often-photographed palace and pool (map #18), it is easy to overlook. Yet it is one of the sights St. Peter would have wanted to show Tom had he ever been able to visit the city with him, as the two of them had planned:

He had wanted . . . to go with him some autumn morning to the Luxembourg Gardens, when the yellow horse-chestnuts were bright and bitter after rain; to stand with him before the monument to Delacroix and watch the sun gleam on the bronze figures—Time, bearing away the youth who was struggling to snatch his palm—or was it to lay a palm? Not that it mattered. It might have mattered to Tom, had not chance, in one great catastrophe, swept away all youth and all palms, and almost Time itself. (260–61)

Cather's use of the monument has at least two fundamental interpretations. In one, Time is lifting "Fame," a female figure in the sculpture, to lay the palm of artistic achievement for Delacroix, while Apollo applauds ("Maquette"). In the other,

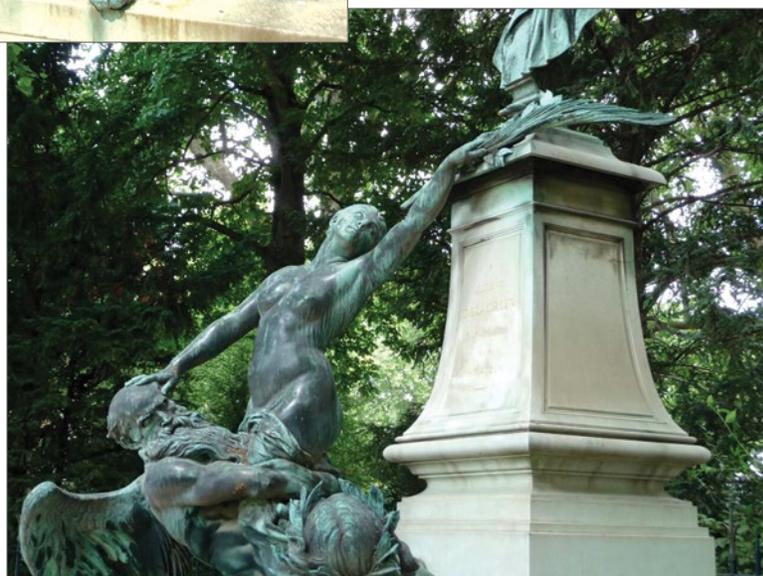


there is a struggle: Apollo, champion of art, in the lower right, applauds, while Time—who is also, of course, Death—strains to prevent the palm from being awarded, an allegory conveying the idea that the desire to achieve the glory of fame is always a race against time and death. Cather’s description of the monument accords with the second, agonistic reading: the female figure is turned into a male “youth” attempting either to “award” or to “snatch” a palm before it is too late. St. Peter’s reflection on the sculpture, particularly as he thinks of it relative to Tom’s fate, ends on a grim note of failure, with Death sweeping away both Tom’s “youth” and his chance at the palm of glory—something he is awarded only posthumously. By the time Tom has received that glory—that is, by the time he is elevated to the status of “the inventor of the Outland engine” (42)—he is, as Scott McGregor says, reduced to “a glittering idea” (110).

Near the end of the novel, the Professor wonders if he will ever return to Paris, and imagines “driv[ing] up in front of Notre Dame . . . and see[ing] it standing there like the Rock of Ages, with the frail generations breaking about its base” (270; map #19). St. Peter imagines the great cathedral through his own lens: his view of Notre Dame is shaped both by his ocean voyages (the image suggests waves breaking against a cliff) and by his unresolved grief over the death of Tom Outland, one of those “frail” human beings broken in the Great War. The sentences immediately following this passage suggest St. Peter’s underlying thoughts of Tom: St. Peter recollects that “He hadn’t seen it [Notre Dame] since the war” and then reflects that “if he went anywhere next summer . . . it would be down into Outland’s country, to watch the sunrise break on the sculptured peaks” (270). “The war” recalls Outland’s death in France; “Outland’s country” recalls his life in the Southwest. St. Peter has declined a trip to Paris because, although he loves the city, he feels that it is “too beautiful, and too full of memories” (162)—including, paradoxically,

the memory of the trip there that he never got to take with Tom. “The thing not named,” St. Peter’s profound grief over Tom’s death, hovers over his perception of the great cathedral. Cather’s pairing of Notre Dame and the Southwest in St. Peter, moreover, documents her own unusual range of geographic familiarity, and her ability to pair seemingly disparate locations in a single image.

St. Peter’s Paris is in some ways a sad place, but it is also a beautiful place; the Paris of Euclide Auclair in *Shadows on the Rock* differs significantly. Places exist in time as well as in space, and Auclair’s Paris—the Paris of Louis XIV, the Sun King—is not only smaller but less benevolent than the city St. Peter (and Cather) experienced. Cather researched Paris in the seventeenth century carefully. Not only did she consult historical texts; she also, during her 1930 trip to France, “followed the trail of Count Frontenac” in Paris, visited sites she would describe in the novel, and studied the city’s history at the Musée Carnavalet (Lewis 158; map #20). Auclair’s Paris is initially a quiet one; as a little boy he believed he lived



*Aimé-Jules Dalou’s Monument to Delacroix, 1890; Luxembourg Gardens. Top photo by Philippe/Creative Commons. Bottom photo (detail) by Warren Olin-Ammentorp.*

in a place where nothing ever changed (24). Yet it is not always a benevolent place. Although Cécile's mother tells her that she must carry on the French heritage in the New World because the French are "the most civilized people in Europe" (32), Cécile's father tells stories that suggest the opposite. Under the reign of Louis XIV, "he had seen taxes grow more and more ruinous, poverty and hunger always increasing. People died of starvation in the streets of Paris, in his own parish of Saint-Paul, where there was so much wealth" (40). Worst of all is the unjust death of an old man, Bichet, who is hanged because he takes two brass kettles from an abandoned house (107–08). "Your grandmother never got over it," Auclair tells Cécile; "She said she had no wish to live longer in a world where such cruelties could happen" (110). Although Auclair plans for many years to return to Paris, he never does; at the novel's end he is reconciled to Quebec, a kinder world than the one he left.

Paris of the 1930s, with its increased motor traffic and congestion, was less appealing to Cather than the city she had earlier visited; during her 1930 visit she wrote that "Paris is almost as noisy and crowded as New York. It has changed woefully in seven years" (*Selected Letters* 430). Yet she continued to enjoy many aspects of the city, including its connections to French literature, among them Victor Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris*. During the 1930 trip, she wrote to her twin nieces, Margaret and Elizabeth, that she had "climbed up to the tower of Notre Dame again and spent the morning among my old friends, the gargoyles" (431). Her affection for the gargoyles is also reflected in a postcard of them which she sent; anticipating Disney's 1996 animated adaptation of *The Hunchback* by several decades, she remarked, "I am sure all the figures were Quasimodo's playfellows, and that he had special friends among them" (429). On another postcard of the cathedral, she wrote, "I have often walked about the high parapet from which Quasimodo threw the priest" (419). Her matter-of-fact statement suggests that the novel was just as real an event to her as the fall of the Bastille, which she also mentions to her nieces (431). Cather's individual map of Paris was personal, cultural, and literary—and central to her imagination throughout her life.



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# Willa Cather and the Art of “Recoverable Contexts”: Source Materials for *One of Ours*

Richard C. Harris | Webb Institute

“Guess how I made the bull’s head? One day, in a pile of objects all jumbled together, I found an old bicycle seat right next to a rusty set of handlebars. In a flash, they joined together in my head. The idea of the bull’s head came to me before I had a chance to think. All I did was to weld them together . . . [but] if you were to see the bull’s head and not the bicycle seat and handlebars that form it, the sculpture would lose some of its impact.”

—Pablo Picasso 1943

Cather biographer James Woodress remarked over two decades ago that Willa Cather was perhaps the best educated novelist of her generation.<sup>1</sup> The transcript for classes she took while a student at the University of Nebraska in the 1890s indicates an impressively well-rounded liberal education, especially strong in history, literature, and languages. (Math evidently was not a strength: she earned, or was given, a grade designated “Passed” in an introductory math course in the spring semester of her senior year.) Certainly, Cather’s reviews and other articles written for the *Nebraska State Journal* in the mid-1890s and later in the decade for publications in Pittsburgh reveal a young woman who was astonishingly well read and well informed in the artistic fields of literature, drama, painting, and music. Her work at *McClure’s Magazine* from 1906 to 1912 expanded her knowledge of these areas, and her correspondence throughout her life makes it clear that her passionate pursuit of knowledge never waned.

The breadth and depth of her knowledge was, of course, fundamental to the fiction she wrote. Her works are filled with allusions and references to the arts: literature of “the great tradition” from the Bible and the ancient Greeks to nineteenth-century giants such as Tolstoy, Turgenev, Flaubert, Dickens, George Eliot, Thackeray; the music of Wagner, Schubert, Beethoven, and other major composers; and painting, from Renaissance Tuscan artists



Pablo Picasso: Bull's Head, 1942; Musée Picasso.  
© Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS),  
New York. Photo: Béatrice Hatala, © RMN-Grand Palais/  
Art Resource, NY.

to nineteenth-century masters, such as Millet and Puvis de Chavannes. Cather had available to her an enviable body of knowledge upon which she could draw when creating her narratives, and she suggested, referred to, or “appropriated” these and countless other sources throughout her works.<sup>2</sup>

A lesser known work of significance to Cather was J. W. N. Sullivan’s *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*, published by Alfred A. Knopf, Cather’s own publisher, in 1927. In an undated letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher probably written around 1930 (held in the Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont), Cather enthusiastically praised Sullivan’s study of Beethoven and urged Fisher, if she hadn’t read it, “For goodness sakes, do!” Cather told

Fisher it was the best book she had ever read about the process of artistic creativity. One passage in particular on the artistic, creative process must especially have struck her:

Numberless experiences extending over several years are gradually coordinated in the unconscious mind of the artist, and the total synthetic whole finds expression, it may be, on some particular occasion. Even with poetry, which often professes to have its origin in some particular occasion, the poem is never the effect of the particular occasion acting on some kind of *tabula rasa*. The experience of the particular occasion finds its place within the context, although the impact of the experience may have been necessary to bring this context to the surface. A genius may be defined as [one] who is exceptionally rich in recoverable contexts. (85)

One familiar with Cather’s comments about the way in which a number of her works initially sprang to life in her imagination might note the similar way in which this process worked for her. *A Lost Lady* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* provide two especially striking examples. In 1945 Cather told her friend Irene

Miner Weisz that immediately after reading an obituary piece on the death of Lyra Garber, the charming Red Cloud resident whom Cather had known when she was a young girl, she had retired to a place by herself and emerged an hour or so later, with the whole novel in her head (*Selected Letters* 643). It was a story, she also indicated, that had “teased” her for twenty years. It had taken shape in a kind of catalytic reaction as her memories of this woman, as well as connections, both literary and musical—among them the Bible, Shakespeare, Turgenev, and Schubert—came together.

Similarly, several years later having found the prototypes for the two main characters for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and having decided to write of the lives of her two religious figures “in a crude frontier society,” Cather read extensively about the history and geography of the American Southwest, the missionary experience there, and the fundamental aspects of Catholicism (Murphy 342). (See Lewis 139 and Cather’s letter to the editor of *The Commonweal*, *Willa Cather on Writing* 3–13.) But, again, the initial idea for her novel was developed, was given a sort of musical texture, as Cather drew upon her remarkable store of “recoverable contexts.” As John Murphy points out in the Historical Essay to the Scholarly Edition of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, works that Cather had read previously—John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, the Bible, the Iliad, and works by Dante, Virgil, and Ovid—“most significantly contributed to the Archbishop’s allusive language” (339).



Cather’s extensive use of “recoverable contexts” in her writing raises some interesting questions about the role of source material and influences in her fiction. Harold Bloom devotes considerable intellect to what he calls “the anxiety of influence” in his 1967 study by that name. (A revised edition was issued in 1973.) His focus there is on the ways in which the works of previous writers (his focus is on poets) may negatively affect, in some cases stifle, the individual creativity of those poets who succeed them. Cather clearly suffered no such anxiety. As noted in the brief discussion above, for her “influences”—that is, material drawn from the literary, musical, and artistic works of those who had gone before her, were not only a positive but also an essential element in the creation of her mature fiction. For her the creative process was not stifled by but rather was enriched by the associations and connections that she could draw upon, from what her early mentor Henry James (in typical Jamesean fashion) termed a “deep well of unconscious cerebration” (Preface to *The American* 23).

In placing Cather’s use of “recoverable contexts” in a broader imaginative or artistic context, we would better turn from Bloom to John Livingston Lowes’s great study of Coleridge’s “The Rime of

the Ancient Mariner” and “Kubla Khan,” *The Road to Xanadu*. In his 1985 foreword to the Princeton University Press edition of the work, Thomas McFarland declares, “No other work of American scholarship has ever quite had the impact of *The Road to Xanadu*. When it appeared in 1927, the intellectual public was dazzled” (ix). Two comments from critical reviews will suffice to illustrate the point. One reviewer called Lowes’s work, “as thorough a piece of productive scholarship as has been done in America,” and added that Germany, “where research into matters scholarly was invented, has little to show to surpass Professor Lowes’s book in mastery of every possible detail.” The reviewer for the *New York Herald* declared it “a masterpiece of what the French call *le critique de g n se*—that is, of that class of criticism which deals with the sources of a work of literature” (both quoted in McFarland [ix]).

The subtitle of Lowes’s book is “A Study in the Ways of the Imagination.” In his preface to *The Road to Xanadu*, he notes that he wants to be “quite clear” about his intention: “This is not a study of Coleridge’s theory of the imagination. It is an attempt to get at the workings of the faculty itself” (xxii). Some pages later he describes in great detail how this creative process works:

The “deep well of unconscious cerebration” underlies your consciousness and mine, but in the case of genius its waters are possessed of a peculiar potency. Images and impressions converge and blend even in the sleepy drench of our forgetful pools. But the inscrutable energy of genius which we call creative owes its secret virtue at least in part to the enhanced and almost incredible facility with which in the wonder-working depths of the unconscious the fragments which sink incessantly below the surface fuse and assimilate and coalesce. . . . it is again conscious energy, now of another and loftier type, which later drags the deeps for their submerged treasure, and molds the bewildering chaos into unity. But interposed between consciousness and consciousness is the well. (55–56)

In her comments on how Cather’s creative mind worked, Edith Lewis describes a very similar process:

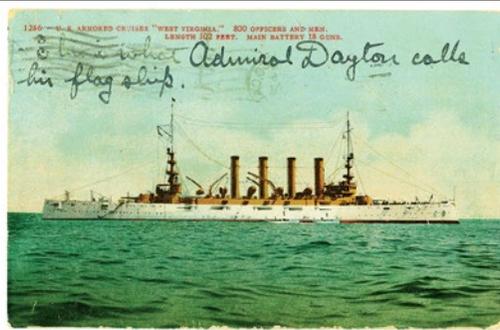
Although she did not plan the actual content of a novel beforehand, I believe one could say that she lived a great deal with her idea. . . . During the time she was not writing, or engaged with something else, I think she was very much preoccupied with the past out of which her story sprang; not actively trying to construct anything, but surrendering herself to memories, impressions, experiences, that lay submerged in her consciousness; letting them come to the surface, and relate themselves to the theme of her narrative.” (127)



Having noted the way in which Cather's creative imagination often worked, let us look at *One of Ours*, a work in which the contextual material Cather drew upon was particularly rich and varied. *One of Ours*, set in large part during World War I, will doubtless be among the works reexamined in the next several years as historians and literary critics once again debate the validity or "authenticity" of her depiction of the war experience of her central character, Claude Wheeler. The focus here, however, is not so much on what Cather says about war and that war in particular in *One of Ours*, but rather on how she created the novel she did. This paper, then, concerns itself with the creative process involved in the writing of *One of Ours*, the way in which Cather drew upon what she knew about life in Nebraska, molded that material, informed herself about the war, drew upon a store of both "high brow" art and popular culture and used this contextual material in creating her novel, i.e., the focus here, to use Lowe's phrase, is on "the workings of the [creative] faculty itself."

The idea for the novel began with the death of her cousin G. P. Cather at Cantigny on May 28, 1918; a member of the American Expeditionary Force, he was killed in action in the first major engagement of American soldiers in the war. In many ways it is rather curious that G. P.'s life and death should have fascinated Willa Cather to the point that it did. Unlike Willa Cather, who had escaped the cornfields of Nebraska (see Cather to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Selected Letters* 150) and had become a very successful and celebrated writer in New York, G. P. Cather had remained in Nebraska and had been, quite frankly, a "loser": until the time he joined the US Army in 1916, almost everything he did had turned out poorly, in most cases because of his own incompetence, irresponsibility, or carelessness.

The bumbling way in which he had mismanaged his life to that point must have disturbed Cather, but at the same time she obviously felt a certain sense of compassion for this young man who so desperately desired to do something "splendid" and whose life, in fact, had been transformed by his military experience. She noted that she felt a great sense of pride when she learned of his having earned a commendation for valor several weeks before his death. Returning to Nebraska several months after G. P.'s death, Cather visited his mother, her beloved "Aunt Franc," and read G. P.'s letters home, written in the fall of 1917 and the spring of 1918.



Before his service in the American Expeditionary Force, G. P. Cather served briefly in the U. S. Navy. While stationed on the U.S.S. West Virginia in 1908, he sent this post card to Myrtle Bartlett, whom he would marry in 1910. From the archive of the Willa Cather Foundation.

Whatever readers of *One of Ours* may think about her treatment of the fictional Claude Wheeler's feelings about his war experience, Cather's depiction of those feelings is valid. They are drawn directly from G. P.'s letters; in some cases, in fact, she comes very close to quoting directly from them.

On the basis of her conversations with G. P., her knowledge of at least some of the "disappointments" (his term) he had suffered, and her reading of his letters home, Cather felt haunted by, compelled, driven, to write the story of "a red-headed prairie boy" "butting his way through the world," searching desperately for "something splendid" that would give his life some kind of authenticity (Mahoney 39).

As many reviewers noted at the time of the publication of *One of Ours*, in

Book I through Book III of the novel, those sections set in the Midwest, Cather was on home ground. The writing clearly reflects her intimate knowledge of the area and the people she describes, and at the same time reflects her concern with American values during this period. This material is developed in conjunction with the Wheeler family's discovery of what is happening in Europe as the war begins. Claude, for example, goes out to buy the latest edition of the newspaper, so his family can have the most current report on the war; in another instance, he grabs a volume of the encyclopedia to read about the defenses around Paris. Cather here quotes verbatim from the article on Paris that appears in the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (227–228). In addition, in these early sections of the novel, Cather's text shows evidence of her borrowing material or ideas from several contemporary writers, most obviously from Vachel Lindsay's 1919 poem "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan," from which she took the epigraph for the novel and the title for Book V, and also Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, which Elizabeth Sergeant notes she and Cather had discussed shortly after its publication in 1911 (72–73), as well as Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, which was also published in 1919. Her description of "an unprecedented power of destruction [that] had broken loose in the world" (225–226) strongly echoes Yeats's line, "And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, / Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?" from his poem "The Second Coming," which first appeared in 1920.

The contextual material in this section also includes the popular culture of the period: specific references to automobiles,

movies, music, fashions, college football, health and health food fads, China and the China missions, the temperance and women's rights movements. In addition, Cather refers to contemporary newspaper and magazine articles, incorporating, for example, information on the life, trial, and execution of Joan of Arc published in connection with her widely reported 1920 canonization; comments about ex-President Theodore Roosevelt, who died in 1919; and details from Ida Tarbell's "muckraking" articles for *McClure's Magazine*.

With Book IV, however, Cather was on tenuous ground. Having moved Claude to Hoboken, New Jersey, his point of departure for Europe, she now had to get him to France. With no previously known material to draw upon, she simply borrowed what she needed from two contemporary sources. The first-person account of Doctor Frederick Sweeney, discovered when Cather saw the physician in New Hampshire and learned that he had kept a diary recounting his voyage on a troopship to France in 1918, proved quite valuable. Cather evidently pestered the doctor until he finally agreed to let her read it. His surprise and apparent displeasure at her having used material from it without his permission, was answered by Cather's declaring, "But I had Claude in Hoboken and had to get him to France!" (Bean 45). Joseph Husband's *A Year in the Navy*, published by Houghton Mifflin in 1920, a copy of which Cather requested and received from her editor Ferris Greenslet, also proved very useful. Cather, in fact, clearly lifted a number of passages from Husband's book and after a bit of polishing up, simply inserted them in her novel.<sup>3</sup>

The greatest creative challenge Cather faced in writing *One of Ours*, however, was Book V. She had spent six weeks in France in 1902. In 1920, after a year and a half working on the book, Cather felt she had to return to France in order to again experience French culture firsthand, to see what the battlefields "in the devastated parts of France" looked like (Lewis 120–21), and to find her cousin's grave. When she returned to New York, she talked with dozens of veterans about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. She wanted to immerse herself in the subject of the war. Elizabeth Sergeant recounts a May 1919 meeting for tea with Cather in Central Park: "... she was greatly involved in her soldier book, so greatly that one cup of tea had scarce been drunk before her questions started. She 'wanted to know,' with that eye-in-every-pore quality that took possession of her, when she was bent on her own ends" (155).

Cather clearly read many of the books that were published during and immediately after the end of the war, almost certainly among them Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu (Under Fire)*, which by 1918 was recognized as the greatest French novel on the war, as well as Dorothy Canfield Fisher's *Home Fires in France* (1918) and *The Day of Glory* (1919) (Stout 50). She also read a number of memoirs and accounts of the war that became available during

and immediately after the war, no doubt among them Theodore Roosevelt, Jr.'s *Average Americans*; Roosevelt was G. P. Cather's commanding officer, and his book includes a photograph of G. P. and other officers who served under his command, as well as a comment on G. P.

And Cather drew heavily upon the newspaper accounts she had read about the events in Europe. In letters to Dorothy Canfield Fisher in early 1922, Cather acknowledged reservations about the "misfortune" of having to use this material to develop her story, but she added that Claude's story was "so mixed up with journalism and public events," "external events," that she had little choice but to do so (*Selected Letters* 311–14). Nevertheless, in writing of the role of the war in the lives of various characters in the novel, Cather's remarkable memory was certainly invaluable. Major events such as the initial German march through Belgium, the sinking of the *Lusitania*, the execution of Edith Cavell, and war news concerning action on the Western Front at places such as Verdun, Ypres, Passchendaele, and Belleau Wood became essential to her narrative. Other newspaper articles also provided material: stories about air combat contributed to Cather's development of the character Victor Morse and the curious incident involving a woman pilot shot down over the battlefield. In Chapter VIII of Book V of the novel, soldiers engage in small talk about various subjects: one soldier's mail from home includes a clipping about the "discovery" of the site of the original Garden of Eden; another soldier mentions that before the war he was working on a dam in Spain that would become "the largest dam in the world," and in the course of excavation had come across the ruins of one of Julius Caesar's camps. All these incidents are based on actual newspaper accounts that Cather had read during, or in some cases in the years before the war, and certainly well before she began work on her novel in the late fall of 1918.

Most importantly, however, Cather had available her impressive knowledge of the great tradition of Western, that is, European and American, literature. References to these works are handled with an ease that illustrates how comfortable Cather was with her knowledge of them. In *One of Ours* there are almost twenty references to biblical stories and passages, as well as several references to classical myth. The following list of authors directly referred to or alluded to in *One of Ours* demonstrates the impressive wealth of knowledge she had to draw upon: Bourget, Bulwer-Lytton, Bunyan, Byron, Cervantes, Chekhov, Defoe, Dickens, Dryden, Gibbon, Heine, Homer, Horace, Longfellow, Michelet, Milton, Plato, Seeger, Shakespeare, Shelley, Stevenson, Tennyson, and Voltaire.

We can add to that list of literary works mention of Franz Schubert's lieder, Felix Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words*, Camille Saint-Saëns's Violin Concerto No. 3, Jules Massenet's *Méditation* from *Thaïs* and a suggestion of Richard Wagner's



*Parsifal*. And lest we forget the painters, references to Flemish and Tuscan art. One of the most striking points about this vast array of materials is the *broad range* of “recoverable contexts” from which Cather borrowed: A novel that subtly suggests that its main character is reminiscent of Wagner’s *Parsifal* (see Cather to Orrick Johns, *Selected Letters* 328) also compares that character to Collodi’s *Pinocchio* (*One of Ours* 147).

Let us conclude, then, by comparing comments made by young Willa Cather, the journalist, with those of the older Cather, the mature and very accomplished writer of fiction. In the Spring 2014 issue of the *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review*, Marvin Friedman notes that in an 1895 article Cather declared that there was something “especially wonderful” about a new work of art, “an absolutely new creation, a new work that did not exist yesterday, *that has been called up out of nothingness* [italics mine] and that henceforth will be a part of the art of the world” (*The World and the Parish* 179). Decades later the more mature and experienced Cather certainly did not see her fiction as having been “called up out of nothingness,” or as J. W. N. Sullivan said, created on a *tabula rasa*.

“Your memories are like the colors in paints,” she told Flora Merrill in 1925, “but you must arrange them” (*Willa Cather in Person* 77). Cather told Irene Miner Weisz in early 1945 that she knew some of her readers

sit around and do fine detective work on ‘where she got this, and where she got that.’ I could tell you in confidence, Irene, that so often I do not remember at all where I ‘got’ them. After *Ántonia* was published, Father pointed out to me half a dozen incidents—things I had seen or done with him (the two crazy Russians, etc.), and I honestly believed that I had invented them. They simply came into my mind, the way things do come when one is interested. When one is writing hard, one drives toward the main episodes and the detail takes care of itself. Unless the detail is spontaneous, unsought for by the writer, he isn’t much of a writer—has mistaken his job. (*Selected Letters* 642–43)

And in an April 29, 1945, letter to Carrie Miner Sherwood, Cather declared, “I do not so much invent as I remember and re-arrange” (647).

Finally, let us return to Lowes. In the concluding chapter to *The Road to Xanadu*, he asserts that “the imagination never operates in a vacuum. Its stuff is always fact of some order, somehow experienced; its product is that fact transmuted” (390). He continues, “Where, indeed, at any given instant, *are* all the countless facts we know, and all the million scenes we have experienced? Whatever that shadowy limbo may be, these were. The Well is only a convenient symbol for a mystery. And

there they had lain . . . to all intents and purposes in utter non-existence—asleep, some for weeks, some for months, and some for a period of years. Then, all at once, they awoke. . . . A definite impetus struck had down into the Well and set the sleeping images in motion. And then they emerged, they were linked in new and sometimes astonishing combinations” (393).

Cather’s correspondence in the period around the publication of *One of Ours* indicates that she was well aware of the artistic danger of relying too much on facts, i.e., using a journalistic process and incorporating “external events” as she had done in parts of Book V of her novel. She repeated this notion in her 1922 essay “The Novel Demeuble”: “If the novel is a form of imaginative art, it cannot be at the same time a vivid and brilliant form of journalism. Out of the teeming, gleaming stream of the present it must select the eternal material of art” (40). Claude Wheeler’s story, she had hoped, would rise above the “external events” surrounding her main character’s rather quixotic quest to make something splendid of his life.

*One of Ours*, though certainly not Cather’s best work, is, nonetheless, one of the more remarkable of her works in terms of the wide range of contextual material that went into its making. In his essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” published three years before the appearance of *One of Ours*, T. S. Eliot defines “tradition” in terms of the possibility of a positive relationship that can exist between the works of previous writers and those of the present. Unlike Bloom, who explores the anxiety new writers may experience when confronting the works of their predecessors, especially as those works may inhibit or compromise the newer writer’s work, Eliot sees “tradition” not as a deterrent or detriment to novelty but rather as an integral part of a creative process that synthesizes old and new. In his description of how the creative mind often works, he cautions those who would dismiss an artist’s using previously available material in his own work: “the most individual parts of his work,” he asserts, “may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously. And I do not mean in the impressionable period of adolescence, but the period of full maturity” (4). Later in the century Claude Levi-Strauss would speak of *bricolage*, simply speaking, “tinkering,” the creative process by which an artist might use available material in the process of creating something new, as Picasso in a sense did in creating his iconic bull’s head. In *One of Ours* Cather used a wide variety of sources drawn from a deep well of both conscious and subconscious material, as well as a sophisticated bit of “tinkering” with contemporary culture and events. Despite its flaws, the novel provides a fascinating insight into what Bernice Slotte long ago referred to as Cather’s “fierce intelligence and comprehensive knowledge” (9) and represents one of the most interesting examples of her creative mind at work.



## NOTES

1. Concluding comments at the 5th International Willa Cather Seminar. Hastings, Nebraska, 1993.

2. Cather had not only read works in this “great tradition”; she knew many of these works remarkably well. For example, she certainly read Thackeray’s *Henry Esmond*, which she referred to as “her old friend,” numerous times throughout her life. In a 1922 letter, she told H. L. Mencken that she had discovered Tolstoy’s four shorter novels when she was fourteen and that “for about three years I read them all the time, backward and forward” (*Selected Letters* 309). She informed her brother Roscoe in the fall of 1941 that she had six copies of Shakespeare’s sonnets, that she had memorized most of them years before, and that she always carried a copy with her, so she could look up a line if she forgot it (*Selected Letters* 607). In addition, she read Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* eight times during one of her early winters in Nebraska (Lewis 14); she read Flaubert’s *Salammbô* thirteen times (letter to Alfred A. Knopf, March 14, 1945); and Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* about twenty times by the mid-1930s (Woodress 51).

3. See my article on this subject, “Getting Claude ‘Over There’: Sources for Book Four of *One of Ours*.”

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# Becoming Cosmopolitan: The European Encounter with the New World in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

Nalini Bhushan | Smith College

The ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes (404–323 BCE) proposed a radical possibility for human contemplation—that of the *kosmopolitês*—an individual who would conceivably have no particular affiliation to the habits, customs, laws or ways of thinking and feeling of his own province, city or polis. Instead—and this was the revolutionary, perhaps impossible, thought—the individual’s only allegiance would be to the unspecified, undelineated, abstract cosmos. This is arguably the earliest predecessor of the more modern notion of the global citizen.

In our own time, the notion of the cosmopolitan person (or global citizen) is less radical: a “cultured” person, usually a traveler, and one who chooses to travel to other countries and encounter cultures other than one’s own. In this view, cosmopolitans would not

her own. Is a measure of parochialism inevitable in our encounter with the other, or is a genuine cosmopolitanism—namely, one that does not favor one’s own culture—possible? This is another way of asking whether Diogenes’s ancient radical idea can be realized.

I am interested here in the possibility of the conversion of “missionary” to “cosmopolitan or global citizen” in this more radical sense, i.e., to one who belongs, not to a particular religion or country, but, and in some deeper sense, to the entire world. In her novel set in the American Southwest, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather explores the complexity of cross-cultural encounter through the social interactions, intense personal and moral doubts, and emerging aesthetic pleasures of her main protagonist, priest and well-traveled missionary Father Latour. In furthering this exploration, I examine the uneasy relation between imperialism and cosmopolitanism (Nussbaum 1997), between missionary zeal and cosmopolitan receptiveness, and between the so-called “old” and “new” worlds of Latour’s Europe and the North America of the peoples he is sent to serve (see also Stout and Goodman).

I will argue that Cather shows us that the missionary may be productively viewed as an “accidental” cosmopolitan or citizen of the world. For while “parochial” (or even “imperial”) may be a more fitting description of the missionary as he *begins* his travels overseas, on the reasonable ground that the missionary’s primary interest is a narrow anti-cosmopolitan one, namely, that of saving individual souls by conversion to his own religion of choice, the resulting experience of one who *remains* a missionary overseas can be transformative in unintended ways. I call this transformation “becoming cosmopolitan.” I am particularly interested in the role of otherness, the aesthetics of otherness, in this case—of other spaces and places, of other senses of time and of intimacy—in effecting this transition in sensibility. At the same time, I am interested in Cather’s sense of the limitations, of the boundaries, of the cosmopolitan sensibilities of the two priests—Latour and Vaillant—in her novel.

## Encountering Otherness: The Missionary in the New World

While the indigenous parish priest inhabits local places and encounters members of his parish in a familiar setting, the missionary priest is a traveler who expects to work in an unfamiliar setting, encountering unfamiliar places, climates, and peoples. The



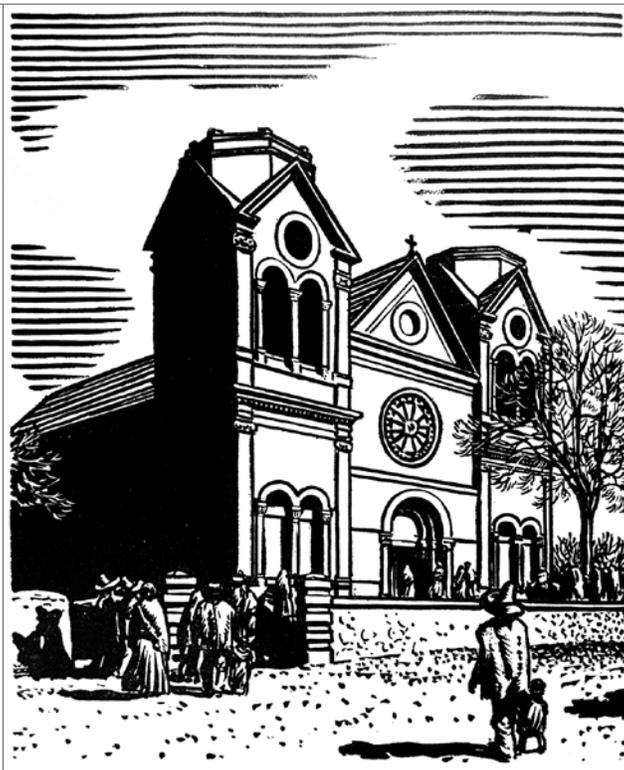
The illustrations in this essay are by Harold von Schmidt, originally created for a special 1929 edition of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

be required (and would perhaps even be unable) to shed their more familiar allegiances in favor of the unfamiliar; rather, they would be “open” to incorporating new experiences, ways of seeing and aesthetic sensibilities into their more familiar framework, and, *perhaps* to having that framework be transformed by those experiences (see Appiah and Rorty for differing opinions on this less radical version).

In practice, the human history of cultural encounter has revealed just how difficult it is to be genuinely open to new, unfamiliar cultures. Nietzsche’s wonderfully phrased insight in the late nineteenth century was that “we cannot look around our own corner” (*The Gay Science*, section 374; 336). That would account in part for what we now recognize as the uneasy relation between cosmopolitanism and a form of imperialism or at minimum a parochialism: the would-be cosmopolitan cannot help both appreciating and judging a vastly different culture by the standards of her own culture, often resulting in a sense of the superiority of

two priests in the novel—Latour and Vaillant—are Frenchmen working in America, travelers to the New World with a complex missionary role. Father Latour, our main protagonist, by his own telling looks and acts like an American businessman by day, “All day I am an American in speech and thought—yes, in heart, too” (*Archbishop* 37), but is liberated to feel and dress like a French priest by night. For a time their mission is narrow, to carry out specified church duties necessary to save Christian souls, through baptisms, confirmations, and marriage rites. Father Latour soon recognizes that in the New World he is at the same time assisting in the nation-building task of helping the local Mexicans and Indians become “good Americans” (37). In cultivating good Christians, he is simultaneously cultivating good American citizens. At the outset, both of Latour’s goals may be justifiably viewed as imperialist: to reform wayward Mexicans and convert heathens to his own (superior) religion and to transform unreliable citizenry into citizens in his own (Caucasian) image.

Even at this juncture, however, we see a subtlety in his state of mind. Father Latour recognizes that his success in this complicated endeavor, curiously enough, depends in part on his not being American himself. As a Frenchman (*and* not part of a military establishment), Father Latour is an outsider trusted by the Mexicans and Native Americans. Outsider-ship is a quality they—the Frenchman and the Mexicans and Native Americans—have in common. In addition, the ideological distance that is built into his outsider status as a non-American is reduced by his practical ability to speak Spanish. Fluency across languages gives one a passport to cross otherwise impassable borders (in Dutta and Robinson,<sup>1</sup> an entry point into otherwise incommunicable forms of life; see also Wittgenstein). This is a position shared by both Fathers Latour and Vaillant and that gives them a privileged status as speakers in and on behalf of the community they happen to serve (Alcoff).



But Father Latour is different from Father Vaillant in at least two crucial respects that are relevant to the possibility of becoming cosmopolitan. First, he is receptive to beauty wherever it exists. He has, that is, a perceptive and imaginative eye, the hallmark of the cultured person. Second, despite the practical daily duties of the missionary, he lives a deeply intellectual life; the combination of the two—the imaginative and the intellectual—gifts him, upon occasion, with a third eye, what I venture to call the eye of the seer, who takes the perspective of the cosmos. We glimpse this difference in sensibility between the two priests early in the novel, in the

section entitled “The Bell and the Miracle.” When informed by Latour that the silver in the bell is indebted to Moorish design, Father Vaillant responds: “What are you doing, Jean? Trying to make my bell out an infidel?” And, when informed further about the history of the early bells and that the Angelus was “really an adaptation of a Moslem custom” (47–48), Vaillant concludes his assessment that Latour has sullied the purity of the bell by this hybrid history. But Latour comes to the opposite conclusion, finding in this blended cultural and religious history of the bell something inspirational.

In the novel Cather shows us that the encounter with otherness transforms both missionaries at the end of their respective lives, but in quite different ways. For in virtue of the differences that exist between the two men in aesthetic sensibility, character, skill, and capacity, Bishop Vaillant dies a great missionary priest, while Archbishop Latour dies a great cosmopolite, or citizen of the cosmos. In other words, Latour has the ingredients of sensibility and character that evoke from him that “openness” to the cosmos that approaches the radical idea of *kosmopolitēs* proposed by Diogenes.

### The Education of Father Latour: A Missionary’s Existential Journey From Otherness to Openness

Book Three of Cather’s novel traces the contours of the interaction between Father Latour and Jacinto, his Indian guide from the Pecos pueblo, on their journey to visit Indian missions in the west. It documents a progression in understanding by Father Latour of the nature, character and ability of the pueblo Indian mind (in contrast with that of the nomadic Indian like





the Navajo). Over time, Father Latour's naïve preconceptions and other manifestations of ignorance about Jacinto are erased, or at least muted, as a result of the interaction of the two.

At the outset it is clear that Father Latour has little in common with Jacinto. The reader is aware of the Father's paternalist, or imperialist, preconceptions: that Jacinto is illiterate, without opinions about much beyond his skill at being a guide, which he performs superbly. Those misconceptions are slowly corrected, opinions become more nuanced, beliefs changed. When Latour comments on an Indian name being "pretty," for instance, Jacinto rejoins, "Oh, Indians have nice names too!" (95), which suggests that Jacinto is, in fact, capable of a measure of feistiness, and of agency even, hitherto unknown to the Bishop. There is also a shift in his assessment of Jacinto's level of literacy: "Jacinto usually dropped the article in speaking Spanish, just as he did in speaking English, though the Bishop had noticed that when he did give a noun its article, he used the right one. The customary omission, therefore, seemed to be a matter of taste, not ignorance. In the Indian conception of language, such attachments were superfluous and unpleasing, perhaps" (96).

In these ways, an earlier assumption of a more hierarchical view of civilizations has given way to a more equalized sense of, and indeed respect for, difference: "The Bishop seldom questioned Jacinto about his thoughts or beliefs. He didn't think it was polite, and he believed it to be useless. There was no way in which he could transfer his own memories of European civilization into the Indian mind, and he was quite willing to believe that behind Jacinto there was a long tradition, a story of experience, which no language could translate to him" (97). This is a key passage for my argument here. At this point, Latour neither attempts to read into Indian culture that of his own, nor does he denigrate it for its difference. This is evidence of that quality of "openness" to the other that is a mark of being cosmopolitan.

By the end of Latour's time together with Jacinto, there is a further attitudinal shift toward this different culture. When the trader Zeb Orchard expresses the familiar hierarchical view of cultural difference—that the "things they value most are worth nothing to us. They've got their own superstitions, and their minds will go round and round in the same old ruts till

Judgment Day" (143)—Latour responds that respect and honor of custom and traditions is an attitude that he himself shares as well with the Indians.

This attitude of valuing what is deeper than what is reflected on the surface demonstrates Father Latour's grasp of a universal value underlying what may be great differences in cultural custom. At this stage in the novel, Father Latour not only has a fine appreciation of and respect for aesthetic and cultural *differences* (the swaddling of infants, the fire and snake stories that might explain the dwindling numbers of surviving Indian babies); he also sees the *commonalities*. Significantly, the commonalities he sees prevent him from concluding merely what the religious imperialist would: that these fundamentally "other" people have souls that need saving. Rather, his attitude is that of the moral cosmopolitan—with the conviction that those who seem fundamentally "other" are human with shared attitudes and values under quite different skin, culture and history.

### Becoming a Story: Citizens of the Land

One attribute that distinguishes the individuals Father Latour finds most attractive in the New World and that link them together in his mind despite their differences—the Anglo Kit Carson, and the Hispanic Don Manuel Chavez, for instance—is that these are self-made men, but by no ordinary process. They each have had encounters with radically different others, effectively forcing them out of the stasis of routine grounded in habit, custom, and the familiar, and consequently out of a more typical trajectory of human development. As a result, Father Latour reflects, "each of these men not only had a story, but seemed to have become his story" (192). One could at this juncture have focused on a quite different and problematic aspect of such a self-made man as Carson: specifically, on the tyranny of rugged individualism that asserts itself to the exclusion of social injustice. But my aim in this essay is to reconstruct Cather's account of Carson's (and Chavez's) emotive and perceptive capacity, not to judge the morality of their actions. In this connection, Latour observes: "Those anxious, far-seeing blue eyes of Carson's, to whom could they belong but to a scout and trailbreaker?" (192).

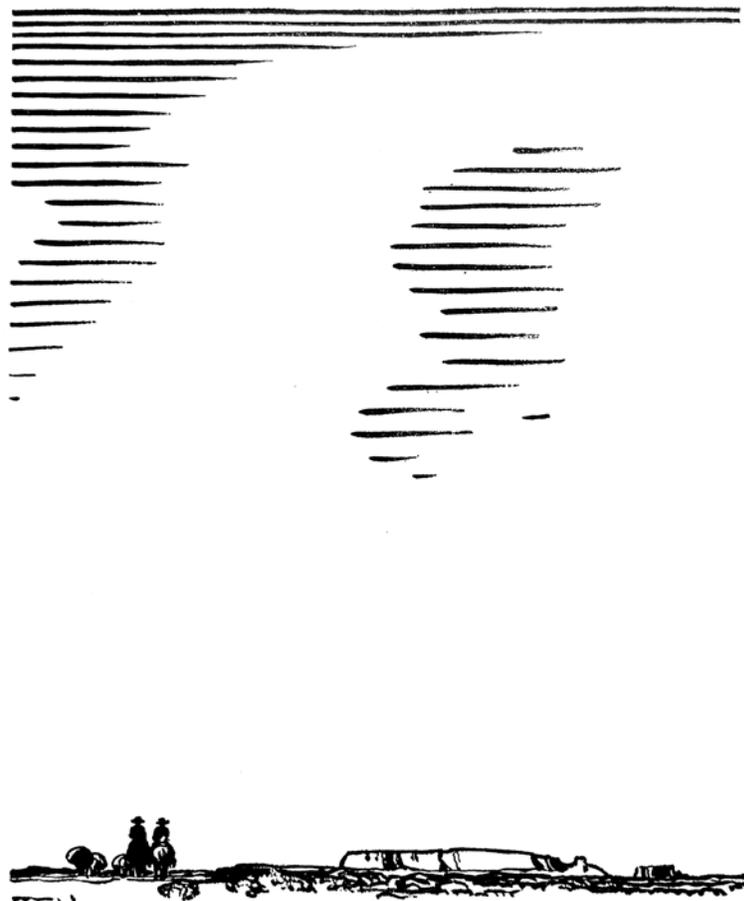
What is the difference between a person having a story and becoming a story? One might read into Father Latour's reflection the following distinction between traveler-types. On the one hand, we imagine the traveler with whom we are most familiar, who travels to distant lands but retains her own familiar affiliations even as she consciously consumes and subsequently narrates the stories she has encountered along the way in her interactions with others—this is a traveler who *has* a story. On the other hand, we might imagine another type of traveler; the traveler who, for a



number of contingencies not under her control, is forced out of her comfort zone for a sustained period of time and into a strange and unfamiliar world that she has to make her own in order to survive. For a certain kind of individual, this could have a transformative consequence, resulting in a visceral ability to feel at ease in vastly different places and spaces and with vastly different peoples. While it is an acquired skill, its acquisition takes place below the threshold of consciousness. These are trailbreakers who in effect have an unusually intimate relation to their story—they have *become* their story. In *becoming* a story, a self remains rooted to the earth that has occasioned the story, but the roots of this self are no longer singular or provincial, thus affording the self a liberation from the constraint of a particular custom, habit or language, a freedom to be at ease in many different contexts. Carson can move with ease between the Mexicans, Indians, Americans, and the French. So can Chavez. In sharp contrast, in Cather's telling, the typical traveler may travel to many lands and do business with Others, but lack this aspect of a cosmopolitan sensibility, namely, a first-person understanding of and ease with, and a sense of belonging, with unfamiliar others.

I propose that Father Vaillant, too, belongs to this special breed of individual. He has the quality that Latour finds attractive in Carson and Chavez. Joseph Vaillant has of course willed the vocation that has thrust him into the life he now leads. Still, one could argue that he too becomes his story. About his years among the flock in Albuquerque, he exclaims, “down there it is work for the heart, for a particular sympathy, and none of our new priests understand those poor natures as I do. I have almost become Mexican! I have learned to like *chili colorado* and mutton fat. Their foolish ways no longer offend me, and their very faults are dear to me. I am *their* man!” (217). When he is given a new task to go to Denver, despite the fact that “[o]f all the countries he knew, the desert and its yellow people were the dearest to him,” the immersion in his chosen vocation enables him to take on this new assignment to an unfamiliar place and peoples, as “it was the discipline of his life to break ties; to say farewell and move on into the unknown” (260), and very soon he is “wholly absorbed in his preparation for saving souls in the gold camps—blind to everything else” (265). The method of and capacity for willed immersion—in his chosen vocation and, importantly, in local customs and habits—is Father Vaillant's unique skill. It is intentional and self-conscious, driven by the goal that never eludes him: that of being a good missionary.

This missionary, the boyhood friend of Father Latour, who dies apparently happily in Denver, becomes his story, the story of a great missionary in the New World, a world that he inhabits with ease and to which he belongs. He nevertheless remains a missionary at heart, and this prevents him from the possibility of that radical openness to which Diogenes refers.



### Father Latour: Becoming a Citizen of the Sky

I began this essay with Diogenes the Cynic who famously announced in a fit of rebellion that he was a citizen, not of Athens, or of anyplace else, but only of the cosmos. In what I hope is a creative juxtaposition, in Cather's short story “Old Mrs. Harris” there is a striking expression of this version of being cosmopolitan, as expressed in the description of the Mr. Rosen's sensibility in contrast to that of his wife: “All countries were beautiful to Mr. Rosen. He carried a country of his own in his mind, and was able to unfold it like a tent in any wilderness” (*Obscure Destinies* 102).

In the last third of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Father Latour experiences an epiphany when he journeys across New Mexico back to Santa Fe, this time in the company of Eusabio, his nomadic Navajo friend. Latour discovers that the world in which he actually dwells is not, after all, the particular place to which a person typically owes allegiance, whether it be a particular village, city or nation. Rather, the world in which he actually now dwells is “the sky, the sky!”, signifying a place and a space “full of motion and change” (245). Perhaps this is Father Latour's version of Mr. Rosen's “country of his own” that he can from now on “unfold . . . like a tent in any wilderness.” This is a transformation and a sense of belonging that Father Latour could have had only on that piece of the earth he now inhabits—not amidst the landscape of his beloved home in France but here in the American Southwest.



This aspect of the transformation in his sensibility is distinctively an aesthetic one. As an individual inclined to don an aesthetic perspective from the very beginning (see Murphy), and with a penchant for distancing himself from the particular, Father Latour returns quite deliberately to die in Santa Fe in Book Nine: “He did not know just when [the air] had become so necessary to him, but he had come back to die in exile for the sake of it” (288).

But this is not the only respect in which Archbishop Latour becomes a citizen of the cosmos. There is a moral dimension as well. At the end of Book Eight, Latour says to Father Vaillant: “You are a better man than I. You have been a great harvester of souls, without pride and without shame” (275). I would like to propose that Latour had discerned in Vaillant a central aspect of his greatness: he was a great Christian missionary. In saying so, Latour recognized a contrast with himself. I detect this key contrast in the words that he utters to his young protégé Bernard: “My son, I have lived to see two great wrongs righted; I have seen the end of black slavery, and I have seen the Navajos restored to their own country” (306). Neither of these two issues—one having to do with social justice, the other with equality—are particularly religious, or Christian; they are, however, deeply moral. In the end, we see that the saving of souls in the Christian sense is not what ultimately matters to Latour. The sentiment is also cosmopolitan to its core: his view about the two great wrongs springs not from narrow parochial loyalty but from something larger.

Father Latour began his life’s journey as a man of great character, discipline, intelligence and an instinctive regard for beauty; if he had stayed in France he would no doubt have died a great parish priest with all of his original attributes in evidence. But something radical happened in his travels to and from the New World; his natural attributes, combined with firsthand encounters with the unfamiliar in all of its diversity—peoples, places, spaces, topographies, histories, mythologies and adversities—transformed him into not simply a great missionary, but, in a complex, imperfect, and yet significant way, into a citizen of the cosmos.

In this novel Cather brings together two of the places most important to her—Europe and the American Southwest—but in an intriguing reversal of her own biography. For while Cather herself went to Europe as an acolyte, with a fresh untutored gaze and returned to the “new” world a cosmopolitan, I argue that Cather’s missionary hero, her Archbishop, originally from the “old” world of Europe, becomes cosmopolitan in the deepest sense only in Cather’s “new” world. In the end, for Cather, the cross-cultural encounter in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* becomes the key site of meaning, the space within which one figures out the true nature of belonging, of one’s place in the

world and one’s relationship to all those “others” with whom one shares that world.

#### NOTE

1. “Languages are jealous sovereigns, and passports are rarely allowed for travellers to cross their strictly guarded borders.” Rabindranath Tagore, as quoted in Krishna Dutta and Andrew Robinson.

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# Latin Perspectives and Special Friendships in the *Aeneid* and *The Professor's House*

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Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925) is rich in intertextual references and allusions, which tempt us to discover this puzzling novel's hidden, overarching meaning. Many of these references are to European medieval and modern artists and artworks: from Italian and French operas (Cimarosa's *Il matrimonio segreto* and Thomas's *Mignon*) to Brahms's *Requiem*, Dutch painters (Van Dyck), French embroideries (the Bayeux ones), Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, French and English-language novelists (Anatole France, Paul Bourget, Daniel Defoe, Jonathan Swift). Intertextual references to classical authors are also present: from Euripides and his *Medea* to Caesar, Lucretius, and Virgil. I will concentrate on these Latin writers, especially Virgil, and suggest their importance in this novel.

## Latin Perspectives

Cather started learning Latin at the age of nine, probably with her grandmothers, and, later, with a private tutor. She took two years of Latin at the University of Nebraska and evidently liked it so much that she would read Virgil with her brother Roscoe during summers home from college. As has often been noted, Cather saw in the classical world the values that the contemporary way of life and industrialization were destroying: loyalty, endurance, courage, integrity. The three Latin authors she mentions in *The Professor's House* share the epic form: that is, the victory, after many struggles and high personal and social costs, of their protagonists and of humanity itself when it follows the noble paths in life. Thus, all three writers' works are characterized by a sense of existence dependent on unremitting and inevitable contrasts and battles.

Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE) is famous as a writer for his commentaries on the wars he conducted: the Gallic War and the Civil War. Both wars were successful, even if challenging for him and his armies. Caesar's language is plain and rudimentary,

like much of Cather's text, which also depicts struggle. He is mentioned twice in the first book of the novel (111 and 186). More relevant, however, is Caesar's almost exact contemporary Lucretius (96–55 BCE), the author of the epic-philosophical poem *On the Nature of Things*, which presents the Epicurean theory relative to nature and the role of man in an atomistic and materialistic universe not guided by divine intervention but only by chance. This poem, treating of physics, psychology, and ethics, is linguistically very difficult, clearly contrasting with Caesar's simplicity. It emphasizes personal responsibility and incites human beings to acknowledge that they are victims of passions that they cannot understand. Lucretius's conclusion is that since everything, except the atom, is transitory, one should enjoy the beauty and pleasures the world has to offer. Quite surprisingly, Godfrey St. Peter and Tom Outland read it, when—during the summer the Professor's wife, Lillian, and their two daughters, Rosamond and Kathleen, spend in Colorado—they dine together at Godfrey's on "rainy or chilly" nights" (174).<sup>1</sup> And since Tom tells his story



This marble head of Julius Caesar, discovered on the Italian island of Pantelleria, dates to the first century CE. Photo by Eutbman/Creative Commons.

during one of these "rainy nights," we realize that their reading and his telling are associated. The choice of Lucretius after a meal of *saignant* roast lamb rubbed with garlic, steaming asparagus, and a bottle of sparkling Asti, is somewhat ludicrous because his knotty vocabulary and complex syntax would prove very heavy reading! Yet, as Tom is a physicist and the men's friendship is passionate and hard to fathom even by them, making Lillian "fiercely jealous" (50), references to Lucretius's philosophy are quite appropriate.

While Lucretius is mentioned only once at the end of Book I (173), Book III begins with a Lucretian consideration: "All the most important things in his life, St. Peter sometimes reflected, had been determined by chance," and immediately afterwards he admits that his encounter with Tom Outland "had been a stroke



of chance he couldn't possibly have imagined" (257). Also, at the beginning of the novel, the Professor is said to be "terribly selfish about personal pleasures, fought for them. If a thing gave him delight, he got it" (27), and at the novel's end he realizes "He had never learned to live without delight" (282). Thus we can see how *On the Nature of Things* deeply permeates *The Professor's House*, chance and delight being two staples of Epicureanism.

Undoubtedly, more pregnant than either of these writers is the presence in the novel of Virgil (70–19 BCE), who in his youth was profoundly influenced by Lucretius. Much has been written on Virgil's impact on *My Ántonia* (1918), which begins with an epigraph from the *Georgics*, and, according to Mary R. Ryder, is informed by the "epic tone" and "epic adventure" (112) of the *Aeneid*. If Paul A. Olson calls *My Ántonia* "an epic displaced" (284) since it proposes the triumph of maternal and creative forces rather than those of war, Erik Thurin argues that a sound interpretation of the novel requires "a correct reading of the many allusions to Virgil" (204). The *Aeneid* is not only an allusive presence in *The Professor's House* (it is mentioned by title three times—111, 250, 252), but it structures the novel, which, incidentally, like the *Aeneid*, is subdivided into books (three in Cather's novel, twelve in Virgil's poems). Commissioned by Caesar Augustus in order to celebrate his family as descendant from Aeneas, the *Aeneid* presents the heroic deeds of its eponymous hero to establish Trojan culture in Italy after fleeing his pillaged city. Not without many difficulties and setbacks, he succeeds at the end in importing traditional values into the new country. Incidentally, in *The Professor's House* there is a reference to Virgil's patron in the name of the family's sewing woman, Augusta (the title meaning "venerable" and "protected by the gods"). Augusta is a very devout Catholic and at the end of the novel her many sound qualities—among them, loyalty and integrity (281)—make her symbolic of the legion of people whose companionship and assistance the Professor requires during what remains of his life.

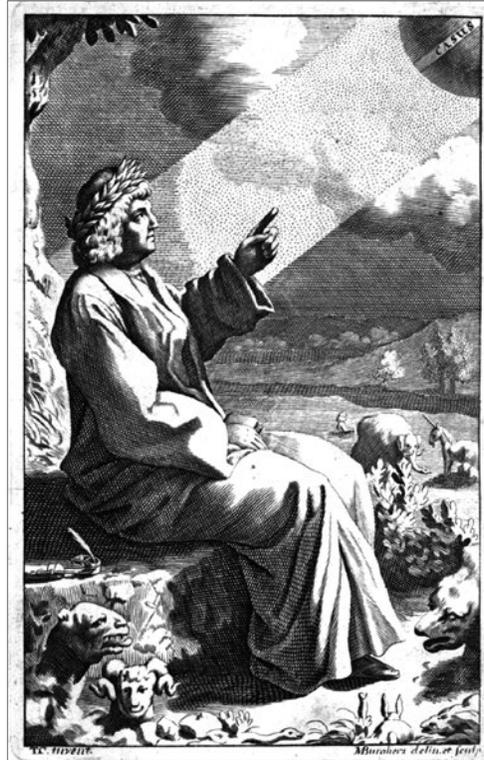
*The Professor's House* presents the struggles of its protagonist against both his domestic and his social environment. Professor St. Peter is so troubled by his family (especially, his wife and older daughter) that he is overwhelmed by what he once regarded as "the engaging drama of domestic life" (26). As envy and ruthlessness

deteriorate the relationship between his daughters and they become a source of bitter concern for their father, he begins to sympathize with Euripides, who, having "observed women so closely all his life," "went and lived in a cave" (154). Likewise, the Professor chooses to live in a dismal studio, seen by him as a "shadowy crypt" (110) in the abandoned family house. As a teacher of history at the university in Hamilton, St. Peter feels ill at ease in an academic system he sees as plagued by nepotism, commercialism, consumerism, and political manipulations. Whereas his relationship with his colleague in

history, Professor Langtry, is tinged with hostility due to feuds and politics, his sympathetic alliance with his physicist colleague, Dr. Crane, has been damaged by his daughter Rosamond's greed. Even the Professor's published research in eight volumes—to which he has dedicated his life—hints at this widespread pugnacious atmosphere as a grandiose epic dealing with conquering and exploiting: *Spanish Adventurers in North America*. Like his first namesake, Napoleon, the Professor, after many battles, will die in exile, at least estranged from his world. Finally, and perhaps most saliently, he is plagued by an interior existential crisis related to the (presumed) demise of the novel's co-protagonist, Tom Outland.

Tom too, had led an embattled life. After an adolescence and youth as an orphan, he fought unsuccessfully against American bureaucracy, ignorance, greed, and hypocrisy. Having made a notable

scientific discovery, he then enlisted in the Foreign Legion to fight in the Great War, leaving others to reap the rewards of his invention. Before entering the university, Tom suffered the loss of his bosom-friend, Rodney Blake—a loss for which he was sure he would one day be made accountable. After an argument based on a misunderstanding over Anasazi artifacts—a misunderstanding Tom had caused by his silence—Rodney left him in the middle of the night and Tom, although prompted, failed to reach out to detain him. Tom admits his guilt: "I went to sleep that night hoping I would never waken" (247). It is reported that he later lost his life in the war. Hardship thus characterizes both the works of the three Roman writers as well as the lives of Cather's two protagonists. But there is so much more than these coincidences relative to Virgil as to leave no doubt that references to the *Aeneid* are the most poignant in the novel. It is as if Cather wished, on the



Lucretius. From the frontispiece to T. Lucretius Carus, *Of the Nature of Things*, 1682, by Thomas Creech. Drawn and engraved by Michael Burghers.

one hand, to prove how immortal some themes in the Latin poet's most celebrated work are and, on the other, to place herself in the wake of such a memorable tradition.

Virgil and the *Aeneid* are rendered more meaningful in *The Professor's House* through reference to a protagonist in *Le Mannequin d'osier*<sup>2</sup> (1897), a novel by Anatole France, evoked by the Professor (20) and by his son-in-law, Louie Marsellus (156). For our purposes, this intertextual reference is meaningful because the protagonist of *Le Mannequin d'osier*, Lucien Bergeret, is also an academic: he teaches Latin at the University of Paris. Specifically, he does research on the metrics of the *Aeneid*, particularly on Book VII, that deals with the encounter of Aeneas with Pallas—a momentous event, as we shall see.<sup>3</sup> To underline the significance of the Latin poet for him, Professor Bergeret is also said to be preparing a book on *Virgilius nauticus* (*Marine Virgil*). Thus, in *The Professor's House*, Virgil and the *Aeneid* are present both directly and obliquely, as a sort of echo, as a *mise-en-abyme*. In a note in the Scholarly Edition of Cather's novel, James Woodress and Kari A. Ronning suggest that Tom's description of the city on the Blue Mesa is similar to that of the village in which Aeneas finds himself in Book VI, when he goes to Tartarus (380). At the end of Book II in *The Professor's House* Tom declares: "When I look into the *Aeneid* now, I can always see two pictures: the one on the page and another behind that: blue and purple rocks and yellow-green piñons with flat tops, little clustered houses clinging together for protection, a rude tower rising in the midst, rising strong, with calmness and courage . . ." (252). Following Woodress and Ronning's hint, John J. Murphy rightly claims in a recent essay that Virgil's and Cather's protagonists share analogous feelings of guilt (293–95).

## Special Friendships

What may have made the *Aeneid* so special for Cather is the importance the poem assigns to friendship, the *only* strong affection that permeates it, besides the genealogical one binding Aeneas to Anchises on one side, and to Ascanius (Iulus)<sup>4</sup> on the other. There is, of course, the interlude of Book IV where, after Aeneas arrives in Carthage, its queen, Dido, falls in love with him. Aeneas seems to respond to her love, but soon afterward, reminded by Mercury of his social and historical responsibility and mission, he stealthily leaves with his fleet and people for Italy, and Dido, in despair, commits suicide. Thus, in a poem of struggles against both atmospheric elements and foreign enemies, this singular episode of heterosexual love is soon quenched.<sup>5</sup> Thereafter, the one non-genealogical affection left is that of all male friendship.

Among a host of male friendships, two stand out: the one between Aeneas and Pallas (in Books VIII, X, and XII) and the

one between Nisus and Euryalus (in Book IX). In *The Professor's House* there are two such strong, special friendships: the one between Professor St. Peter and Tom Outland and the one between Tom and Rodney Blake. One may go as far as to affirm that Cather's novel is structured around these two friendships. When not directly described, they are either hinted at or recalled and, thus, always present. Whereas in Virgil, each set of friendships is a discreet and different one, in Cather's novel the two friendships are interconnected through Tom, as he is a partner in both. Not by chance, then, from a narratological perspective, Tom's "Book" is the hinge between the first and the third in the novel.

That the Professor's friendship with Tom is a special one is shown by the circumstances in which it occurs. As St. Peter confesses, his encounter with Tom happened when "husbands [like himself] had ceased to be lovers" (158)<sup>6</sup> and when he idealistically entertained a "dream of self-sacrificing friendship and disinterested love" (169). After admitting that the reason why he keeps teaching at the University is because "he loved youth—he was weak to it, it kindled him" (29), the Professor (in his early fifties) later acknowledges that "He had had two romances: one of the heart, which had filled his life for many years, and a second of the mind—of the imagination. . . . Outland . . . brought him a kind of second youth" (258). The Professor, therefore, indirectly avows that, after having been in love when he married and for several years afterwards, he met "a second infatuation" (50). Tom, who is in his early twenties and, in St. Peter's view, "fine-looking," has beautiful hands—like Lillian's—and a "manly, mature" voice, "full of slight, very moving modulations" (111, 119, 124), is homologous with both youth and romance.

After Tom's death, the Professor says to his materialistic daughter, Rosamond, that "my friendship with Outland is the one thing I will not have translated into the vulgar tongue" (63). In this statement, the use of the surname seems an exceedingly defensive denial, implying a distance that the rest of the narrative contradicts. In effect, after meeting Tom, the Professor is immediately interested in him, takes him to his study, and makes a companion of him. He becomes Tom's mentor and, as such, a sort of father, so much so that he tells his more sympathetic daughter, Kathleen, that for both daughters Tom had been "an older brother" (130). And, of course, had Tom married Rosamond, to whom he was engaged, he would have been the Professor's son-in-law. When St. Peter's wife, Lillian, responds jealously to her husband's relationship with Tom, and Tom, sensing this, visits their house less frequently, he and St. Peter "met in the alcove behind the Professor's lecture room at the university" (170). Under these circumstances, in its technical precision the term "alcove" assumes somewhat ambiguous connotations.



The special friendship connecting the Professor and Tom echoes one just as complex in the *Aeneid*. If Aeneas and Pallas have a sort of father/son tie, they share more surreptitiously a sort of lovers' bond. Aeneas acts as vicarious father to Pallas, who had been entrusted to him in Book VII by Pallas's elderly father, Evander, who tells Aeneas that "under you his master he shall be accustomed to endure warfare and the severe labour of Mars, to behold your deeds and to admire you from his first years" (238). Also Pallas, young and handsome, is the only *other* character besides Dido (when she was seated next to Aeneas at the banquet, at the end of Book I), who asks Aeneas to tell him his story (while voyaging on his left in Book X). By repeating Dido's request, Pallas replaces her approaching Aeneas both physically and psychologically. The similarity between Dido and Pallas is confirmed by the way Pallas, immediately after encountering and listening to Aeneas, "took him by the hand, and embracing his right hand clung to him" (224),<sup>7</sup> as if struck by a *coup de foudre* (the same was true of Dido after listening to Aeneas). And in Book X and XII, Aeneas—the *pius* hero, famous for his compassion—commits the only ferocious act in the whole epic due to despair over the killing of Pallas. When, in Book X, he hears of Pallas's death by Turnus's hand, he kills Magus, who had pleaded for mercy, and a priest of Phoebus and Diana, and, most tellingly, the young and generous Lausus, who had come to his wounded father's defense and whom, after killing him, Aeneas himself mourns in deep guilt since theirs had been an "unjust" duel (Aeneas being much stronger and more experienced than the young man). Finally, in Book XII, when Turnus, mortally wounded, begs Aeneas for mercy in the name of his own father, and Aeneas, remembering Anchises, is on the verge of sparing his life, he sees on Turnus's shoulder the precious belt from Pallas's corpse, and "inflamed with rage and dreadful in wrath" (384), he kills the Latin warrior.

Comparing the Professor and Tom to Aeneas and Pallas on the basis of age and status, Tom would stand for Pallas and, in fact like him, should die. Juxtaposed to the *Aeneid*, however, the protagonists' positions in Cather's novel shift. At their very first encounter, when St. Peter asks Tom to repeat by heart some of the Latin he claims he knows, Tom recites "Infandum, regina, iubes renovare dolorem" (112): the beginning of Book II of the *Aeneid* where Aeneas recounts the story of the fall of Troy. Dido is so moved by his words that "his countenance and his telling dwell fixed in her heart, nor does care allow peaceful rest to her limbs" (95). In the novel, on this occasion Tom would thus stand for Aeneas and the Professor for Dido.<sup>8</sup> As, in his declamation, Tom "steadily continued for fifty lines or more" (112),<sup>9</sup> St. Peter is so impressed that he takes him under his wing, to the point that

he "wouldn't hear of his going" away (115)—just as Dido did after Aeneas's telling. Finally, during this same first encounter, Tom presents Lillian and the two daughters with "princely gifts" (120), like those Aeneas gives Dido in Book I. To make the similarity between Dido and the Professor more meaningful, St. Peter contemplates suicide toward the end of the novel by neglecting his malfunctioning gas stove. However, it is Tom—whose surname, Outland, indicates that he is not of this land, not of this earth—as Aeneas (and not the Professor as Dido) who is said to die, thus switching the destinies of the *Aeneid*'s two protagonists. But, if St. Peter lives, it is only to prepare himself for death: in his dejection, he feels "outward bound" (281). It must also be emphasized that Tom is connected to Aeneas because of his feelings for the city on the mesa, which he tells St. Peter he regards as "a religious emotion,"<sup>10</sup> adding, "I had read of filial piety in the Latin poets" (250). The love bond between the Professor and Tom is, therefore, intertwined with filial piety, as in the case of Aeneas and Pallas.

The other special friendship in the *Aeneid* involves Nisus and Euryalus, two young men whose tie of love is so strong ("There was to them one love," says Virgil [253]) that they die together. Nisus is "swift with the dart and light arrows" (253) and Euryalus, the younger, is extraordinarily handsome: "there was not another of the Trojans . . . more beautiful . . . a boy marking his unshaved face with the first youthful bloom" (253). In the vain attempt to rescue Euryalus, ambushed by the Latins in a forest, Nisus, who had succeeded in escaping, goes back and dies with him. In Cather's novel, Rodney, a cowboy about ten years older than Tom and described by him as "the sort of fellow who can do anything for somebody else, and nothing for himself . . ." (183), takes care of Tom, cures him when he falls ill, makes sure he studies his Latin, and sells the Indian pottery to a German collector because he thinks that the money will enable Tom to attend college. As Tom admits, "He liked to be an older brother" (184). On the Blue Mesa, when the two friends are joined by an old Englishman who cooks, Tom asserts that "the three of us made a happy family" (196). As Tom avows, "He [Rodney] surely got to think a lot of me and I did of him" (184). Analogous to the bond between the Professor and Tom, Rodney—"noble, noble Roddy" as Kathleen defines him (122)—is to Tom both vicarious father/brother and loving friend. In a disconcerting, but pertinent observation, Tom declares, "Nature is full of such substitutions, but they always seem to me sad" (184).

If Professor St. Peter echoes Anatole France's Professor Bergeret, an echo, a *mise-en-abyme*, of the stronger-than-death tie binding Nisus to Euryalus is to be found in another French text, the medieval epic poem *Amis et Amiles*,<sup>11</sup> mentioned by Kathleen (129) when she sees on her father's couch the "purple blanket,



A portrait bust of Virgil, located at the burial vault in Naples said to be his tomb.  
Photo by A. Hunter Wright/Creative Commons.

faded in streaks of amethyst, with a pale yellow stripe at either end” that Rodney had given Tom and that was “like his [Tom’s] skin” (128).<sup>12</sup> Significantly—and, perhaps, more physically (erotically?) than in any other instance—this blanket now envelops St. Peter when he gets chilly in his studio at night. Whereas in the *Aeneid* the two friends die, in the French medieval epic they survive,<sup>13</sup> and in *The Professor’s House* both disappear: Rodney cannot be found anywhere in spite of many searches, and Tom is said to have died, Cather’s narrative beginning after his demise. (Let us not forget that the Foreign Legion in which Tom enlisted with the hope of finding Rodney [129] is a perfect institution to die away from the world, as one is protected by absolute anonymity). Like Rodney and Tom, Professor St. Peter too will, perhaps, soon disappear—as he foresees he will—but, metatextually, beyond the novel’s boundaries.

In conclusion, analogous to Virgil’s prudence in dealing with all-male friendships in the *Aeneid* (even if same-sex relationships were not a source of scandal in the Roman world and Virgil had been more explicit about them in Eclogue II), Cather presents male friendships in this novel as homosocial relations that give meaning to or, better, that structure the life of an individual (see

Cantarella, Dynes, and Donaldson). Virgil’s and Cather’s sets of friendships show the primacy of love—as unselfishness, as limitless generosity—over all (“*Omnia vincit amor*,” Virgil had sung in Eclogue X), as opposed to the heterosexual love turned sour that in the novel characterizes the relationship now existing between St. Peter and his wife. Furthermore, for Aeneas and Pallas as well as for the two sets of friendships in *The Professor’s House*, these homosocial relationships are *also* ingrained in a familial, if vicarious, tie: be it that of father or son or brother, thus suggesting the foundational importance of kinship, rooted either in blood or—when there are no blood sons or brothers as in these cases—in emotional consonance.

What I have just affirmed might seem contradicted by Tom’s behavior toward Roddy the night of the latter’s departure. But here another element may have intervened. Cather never comments on—and, thus, seems to agree with—Tom’s accusation of Rodney as the one who considered the Indian pots personal and not national properties (even if, as Tom himself later concedes, “I had never told him just how I felt about those things” [238], and, consequently, Rodney had rightfully called Tom’s reproach “this Fourth of July talk” [244]). I think that Cather shared with Virgil the classical ideal of sacrifice for the greater good, of individual transcendence through personal abnegation. In the classical world “one can consider the web of immediate personal connections as less important than . . . the abstract universal cause of humanity” (Benjamin 78–79). As a novel written just after the Great War, selling Anasazi pots to a German for monetary gain would have seemed the ultimate effrontery.

Beyond the thematic hints that Cather may have drawn from the *Aeneid*, there may have been another more substantial reason for her choosing Virgil’s epic as a reference text. As a genre, the traditional epic form was based on a unique perspective, on the controlling, objective, superior, monistic vision afforded by the speaking voice, which was the unifying ideological pivot of the narrative and guaranteed a trans-individual truth, thus preventing the characters’ individual plights from fracturing the text with subjective views and the epic form from becoming a tragedy (see Conte). Compared to the traditional epic, the Virgilian epic is largely innovative because the speaking voice is more sympathetic (the narrator often intervenes in the narrative) and empathic regarding his characters’ doubts and complexities; for instance, if Aeneas submits to destiny, he does so with pain. Because for Virgil history is something entirely separate from myth, he presents the tensions derived from the contradictions that are present in history. In Cather’s 1925 novel, the presentation of the different points of view does not coalesce under a superior logic: all relationships—including friendships—waver, are broken into facets, are all plausible,



acceptable, and, finally, composite. This, as well as its complex network (game?) of allusions, establishes this text as modernist.

## NOTES

1. Another instance of Lucretian influence in the novel: The Professor “had let chance take its way, as it had done with him so often” (282).

2. Much has been written on this French novel that certainly inspired Cather in the creation of the two female “forms” (one, a headless and armless bust, and the other, a full-length figure without legs), prominently displayed in the Professor’s studio. To these forms—on which Augusta used to hang the unfinished dresses of his wife and two daughters when they were small—he is deeply attached. In Anatole France’s novel, when Professor Bergeret discovers that his wife betrays him with his best pupil, he throws out of the window the wicker dummy on which she models her dresses.

3. In this book also the magnificent shield, helmet, sword and spear commissioned by Venus to Vulcan for her son, Aeneas, are described.

4. Aeneas’s son is called both Ascanius (his original name) and Julius (the name he takes up in Latium).

5. The tie between Aeneas and his Latin spouse, Lavinia, is only hinted at as it regards the foreseen, but unsung future.

6. The Professor calls the two female “forms” “my ladies” and “my women” (22) and does not want to be separated from them.

7. In Chapter XIII, after his encounter with Dr. Crane, when the Professor makes the partially incongruous analogy between his world and a boat and stars (149), Cather may have had in mind this passage from the *Aeneid*, since Pallas, when he sails on Aeneas’s boat, besides pleading Aeneas to tell him his story, asks him to be instructed about the stars.

8. This scene may be seen as a kind of Elizabethan performance (Shakespearean works are mentioned twice in this novel), when, not allowed on the stage, women’s roles were played by young men.

9. That is, he reaches the point where Aeneas relates that the Greeks, pretending departure, leave a huge wooden horse in front of Troy’s walls.

10. Incidentally, the strong father/son tie (Aeneas/Ascanius/Julius) is so momentous because it signifies genealogy, the guarantee of a future for the blood line.

11. The names are of Latin origin: they come from Amicus and Amelius. The French epic tells of Amis, who is stricken with

leprosy because he committed perjury in order to save Amiles. A vision informed Amis that he could only be cured by bathing in the blood of Amiles’s children. When Amiles learns this, he promptly kills his children, who are, however, miraculously restored to life after Amis is cured.

12. Incidentally, these three colors are also chthonian ones, announcing death. See Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, trans. John Buchanan-Brown (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 20, 1137–1139, 792–795.

13. To make the connection of this novel with Virgil and medieval French literature subtler and more intricate, the Professor, talking to his wife (49), mentions Phyllis (the shepherdess in Virgil’s *Eclogues*) and Nicolette, the female protagonist of the French twelfth century genre-composite work *Aucassin et Nicolette*—another story of contrasted love.

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# An Elegy for the Reader: Europe and the Narrative of Self-formation in *Lucy Gayheart*

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## Where Is Cather's Europe?

In early March of 1908 Willa Cather wrote her brother Roscoe a letter anticipating her first trip to Rome:

I got my guide book for Rome the other day. Seems queer to be really on the way to Rome; for of course Rome has always existed for one, it was a central fact in one's life in Red Cloud and was always the Capital of one's imagination. Rome, London, and Paris were serious matters when I went to the South ward school—they were the three principal cities in Nebraska, so to speak. (*Selected Letters* 105)

Cather's arresting phrasing—"Rome, London, and Paris . . . were the three principal cities in Nebraska"—points the way toward the answer I'll be proposing to the question raised in this essay's opening movement: "Where is Cather's Europe?" Compressed within the letter's striking sentences is a sense of place not geographical but cultural and imaginative: Rome, London, and Paris are not simply cities that one might visit; they, and the Europe they represent, exist in a place at once pedagogical (they were "serious matters when I went to the South ward school") and self-constituting (Rome is the "Capital of one's imagination," "a central fact in one's life"). This glimpse of the self-formative function of an imagined Europe is vividly captured and confirmed in a still-earlier letter—Cather is fifteen—notable for its intense ambition and bad spelling:

I see a goo[d] deal of [music teacher] Mrs. [Peorianna Bogardus] Sill for she is at least a imatation of the things I most lack. She is as self satisfied as ever and her narrations are pretty much the same as they were some four years ago when I met her first. I am, to say the least, familiar with them—say, some things look better at a distance, dont they?—A continental tour is a test of character, some men it makes some it mars. I am very egar to "press with my profane pedals the native soil of heroes and poets," but when I return I don't want my whole life to be "a European souvenir." (*Selected Letters* 9; bracketed letters and phrases supplied by the editors)

Cather's Europe, we begin to see, is a crucial stop on a recognizable itinerary of self-making. Though embraced with distinctive eagerness by the young Cather, the scenario sketched



The illustrations in this essay are by Pruett Carter, created for the original serialization of *Lucy Gayheart* in *Woman's Home Companion*, March–July, 1935.

out in these letters is a familiar one to students of nineteenth-century middle-class aspiration. A life's unfolding is imagined as the progressive acquisition of "depth," accompanied by an attendant investment in the practices and emotions felt to assist this acquisition, chief among them, reading, understood as an act of self-formation, with European travel (to the sites of that reading) construed as a kind of pilgrimage. This scenario is not simply an element in the biography of a singular young woman but an ideological trajectory, a foundational narrative that nineteenth-century American middle-class culture, hungry for elevation, proposed to its ambitious offspring. And that culture seems to have proposed this narrative of self-making with special force to young people like Willa Cather and, earlier in the century, to William Dean Howells, another





small-town Midwesterner impelled eastward by literary desire so intense that it made becoming a person of culture seem like the most alluring form of romance.<sup>1</sup>

If one corollary to the claim I am making here—that Europe’s fundamental location for Cather lies within the geography of American self-formation—is that its status is not simply personal but ideological, here is another, one still more crucial to the argument about the meaning of *Lucy Gayheart* I am about to unfold. One reaches this Europe not by boat but by book; the meaning of Europe for a young person situated as Cather was is not an effect of travel but an effect of reading. We get a confirmation of the formative power of reading’s Europe in Edith Lewis’s biography, with its tribute to the role played in Cather’s development by her teachers: Eva Case, the Goudys, the amazing store-clerk/classicist William Ducker, reading’s emissaries all in Cather’s Red Cloud world. Their tutelage instilled in her, as Lewis sees it, an enabling discontent: “What she was chiefly conscious of was a whole continent of ignorance surrounding her in every direction, like the flat land itself; separating her from everything she admired, everything she longed for and wanted to become” (Lewis 28). And we see this intense, self-forming drama of responsiveness—a drama that unfolds from the encounter with the books that speak Europe’s resonant name—in some striking scenes from the fiction as well: Jim Burden and Tom Outland enchambered with their Virgil; Vickie Templeton’s absorptive, self-creating sojourns in the Rosens’ library in “Old Mrs. Harris.” (These scenes, it seems to me, have a deeper, more revealing affinity to *Lucy Gayheart* than does *The Song of the Lark*, its ostensibly inevitable counterpart.) And, finally, we can find confirmation of the priority of textuality over geography when we turn to Cather’s first actual experience of European travel: I’m thinking here of the description of her visit to A. E. Housman’s Shropshire in a

letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher from the summer of 1902, in which Cather expresses her delight that the local landscape and its denizens conform *exactly* to the version she had encountered in the poems—“‘Is football playing/along the river shore?’ Well I guess yes” (*Selected Letters* 63). Like other American pilgrims to Europe, Cather is encountering—seeking to confirm would be a better phrase—a place already experienced on the wings of print, and her all-but-inconsolable disappointment when she meets the actual A. E. Housman derives from measuring him against his imagined, reading-derived predecessor. In Cather’s world, before there was Europe, there was reading, and Cather’s Europe, like the young self that longs to visit it, is made out of books.

### *Lucy Gayheart* and the Fate of Reading

But what does this claim, that the Europe of Cather’s life and fiction is preeminently an emanation of the book, have to do with *Lucy Gayheart*? Here, in brief, is my answer: *Lucy Gayheart*—in its characterizations, in its action, in its allusive texture, in its form—is a book made out of reading, and its central character exemplifies the transformation-eager receptiveness evoked in the young Cather of these letters and of Lewis’s portrait, and in the fictional characters I have mentioned. Though Clement Sebastian is American in origin, he is, as a singer in the classical tradition, one of Europe’s transformative emissaries; Lucy is an accompanist, much more a student than an artist, and her relation to Sebastian is, most deeply, construed as the relation between a loving reader and a text.<sup>2</sup> In this section of the essay, I make the case for this reading-focused interpretation of the novel.

For an ostensibly minor novel, *Lucy Gayheart* has provoked a distinguished set of interpretations within our critical tradition. Yet even many readings richly sympathetic to the book and its heroine tend to find their way, by one route or another, to a rhetoric of diminishment: “If only Lucy had found a way to become a real artist,” they often seem to say or sigh, “then we might have something.”<sup>3</sup> This view of the novel seems to me to be profoundly mistaken. For one thing, there is no evidence that Lucy has conceived, as she contemplates her return to Chicago, a desire to be anything other than the art-and-experience hungry accompanist she has been. The critics’ wish to make Lucy an artist or see her as an artist *manqué* has more to do with a perceptual habit—the all-but-automatic espousal of a hieratic view of the artist—than with the behavior of Cather’s text—though that hieratic view of the artist is certainly one that Cather frequently espoused. (This is really the only bad thing that I will have to say about her in this essay.) My own argument will cut against the grain of this critical habit of mind. Here is its fundamental claim: *Lucy Gayheart* is not a book about creativity; it is a book about responsiveness—about, this to say, the capacity of the kind of self-

transforming reading of art, or experience, evoked by the letters I have just discussed. Everything that matters in *Lucy Gayheart*—what’s beautiful, what’s beloved, what frightens, what torments, what’s evil, what’s good—unfolds along an axis of responsiveness, and is measured on that scale.

The novel’s commitment to narrative of responsiveness can best be demonstrated by tracking Lucy’s trajectory through the novel, in which her response to art and the emergence of love unfold as versions of each other. What follows is a sequence of passages, of key moments in that trajectory, which I will read in a reading-centered way. While the novel opens with a communally based narrative voice establishing how Lucy resonates in the town memory—with how she has been responded to—its action proper begins with Lucy taking things in. Here is Lucy, riding home from skating, witnessing the appearance of the evening’s first star:

Suddenly Lucy started and struggled under the tight blankets. In the darkening sky she had seen the first star come out; it brought her heart into her throat. The point of silver light spoke to her like a signal, released another kind of life and feeling which did not belong here. It overpowered her. With a mere thought she had reached that star and it had answered, recognition had flashed between. Something knew, then, in the unknowing waste: something had always known, forever! . . . The flash of understanding lasted but a moment. . . . It was too bright and too sharp. It hurt, and made one feel small and lost. (13–14)

There’s much to notice in this passage, but let me emphasize two things: the first is the way this time-honored encounter with beauty is recast as a drama of response; Cather gives us the passage not as a mere act of sensory reception but as an intense exchange. The starlight “speaks” to Lucy, and as it speaks, it “releases” within her a feeling that is hers but one she cannot yet recognize as her own. The second observation: this experience is dynamic, first exhilarating then destabilizing. The passage at once establishes Lucy as a figure of responsiveness and responsiveness as profoundly active. Seeing the star is transformative: it makes—and then, disturbingly, remakes—her anew.

We encounter a similar emphasis on responsiveness as a form of action in a later passage, which gives us an account of Lucy’s experience of hearing Sebastian sing for the first time (he performs a selection of Schubert *lieder*, followed by *When We Two Parted*, a setting of Byron’s poem):

She was struggling with something she had never felt before. A new conception of art? It came closer than that. A new kind of personality? But it was much more. It was a discovery about life, a revelation about love as a tragic

force, not a melting mood, of passion that drowns like black water. As she sat listening to this man the outside world seemed to her dark and terrifying, full of fears and dangers that had never come close to her until now. (33)

Her response continues to reverberate after she returns home, and in the days that follow, and I need to let you hear more of it:

Lucy had come home and up the stairs, into this room, tired and frightened, with a feeling that some protecting barrier was gone—a window had been broken that let in the cold and darkness of the night. Sitting here in her cloak shivering, she had whispered over and over the words of that last song. . . . It was as if that song were to have some effect upon her own life. She tried to forget it but it was unescapable. . . . For weeks afterwards it kept singing itself over in her brain. Her forebodings on that first night had not been mistaken; Sebastian had already destroyed a great deal for her. Some people’s lives are affected by what happens to their person or their property; but for others fate is what happens to their feelings and their thoughts—that and nothing more. (34–35)



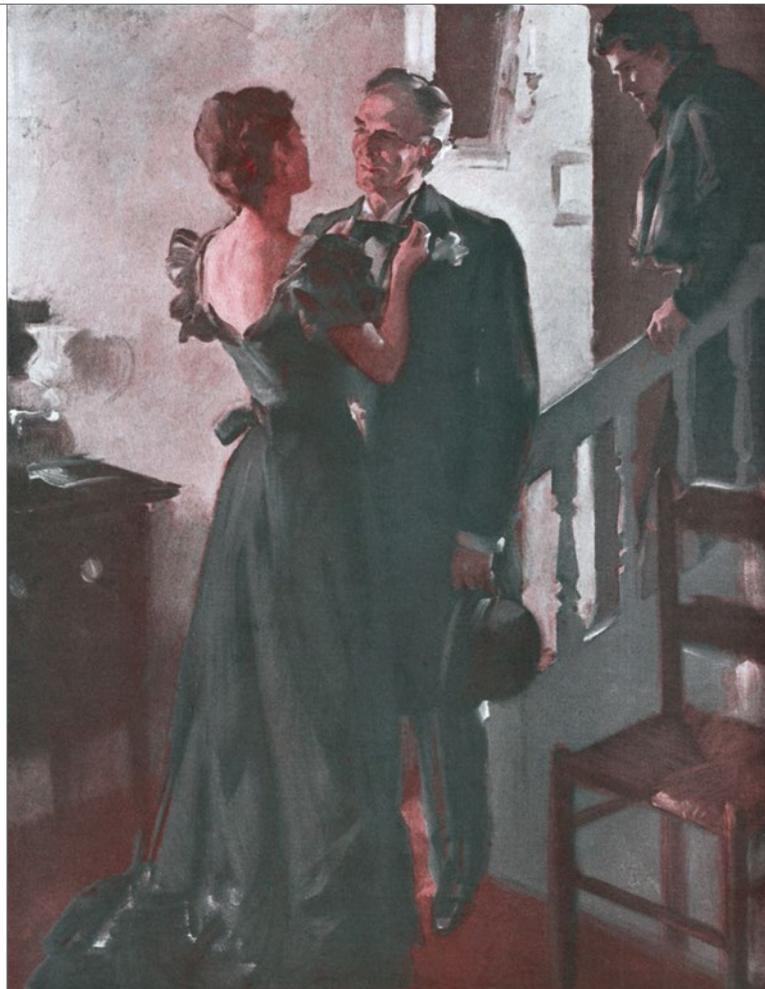
We witness in this passage, like its predecessor, what might be called the romantic elevation of reception. There is little disposition, in either passage, to distinguish between thrilling and terrifying responses: intensity is all. Note, too, this passage's evocation of the immediacy, the solitude of reading: Lucy's response intensifies upon her return to her apartment—"sitting *here* in her cloak, shivering" (my emphasis: consider that curious "here," which make Lucy's room simultaneously the location of our own reading)—and it reverberates as the days go by. Our attention has been shifted from the drama of Sebastian's performance to the drama of Lucy's response, and the effects of that response, as in her encounter with the star, are transformative, self-creating: "Sebastian had already destroyed a great deal for her." Here, too, there is a subtlety of phrasing worth remarking: "for her" seems quite clearly to mean "on her behalf"—not "at her expense"; her response to Sebastian's singing has been the making of her.

As it is with art, so it is with love, or with art and love combined, as they are in Lucy's relationship with Sebastian. Just as beauty and art are defined as occasions for responsiveness in the passages above, so erotic experience is imagined as an exchange of recognitions, of readings of the beloved one. Here is the moment when Sebastian first takes Lucy in his arms:

Lucy felt him take everything that was in her heart; there was nothing to hold back any more. His soft, deep breathing seemed to drink her up entirely, to take away all that was timid, uncertain, bewildered. Something beautiful and serene came from his heart into hers; wisdom and sadness. If he took her secret, he gave her his in return; that he had renounced life. Nobody would ever share his life again. But he had unclouded faith in the old and lovely dreams of man; that he would teach her and share with her. (93)

That's nice, but more interesting still, is the way this moment of mutual recognition is recast, a few pages later, in the solitary key of reading:

It was at night, when she was quiet and alone, that she got the greatest happiness out of each day—after it had passed! Why this was she never knew. In the darkness she went over every moment of the morning again. Nothing was lost, not a phrase of a song, not a look on his face or a motion of his hand. In these quiet hours she had time to reflect, and to realize that the few weeks since the 4th of January were longer than the twenty-one years that had gone before. . . . Since then she had changed so much in her thoughts, in her ways, even in her looks, that she might wonder she knew herself—except that the changes were all in the direction of becoming more



and more herself. She was no longer afraid to like or to dislike anything too much. It was as if she had found some authority for taking what was hers and rejecting what seemed unimportant. (99–100)

As Cather gives this scene to us, it is in the reading-like space of private reflection—in the replaying of the day, in "these quiet hours" in her room—that her relationship with Sebastian achieves its full power. And that power, we recognize, at once derives from her capacity for intense response—her readerliness—and emphatically emerges as a form of self-making: "the changes were all in the direction of becoming more and more herself."

My argument—that Lucy's trajectory within the novel unfolds along an axis of responsiveness, that the power of self-making that we witness as she moves is rendered as a growing capacity for reading's enlivening work—will now, I think be clear. Two closing, confirmatory notes: first, the passage I have just been discussing, as it continues, seems to provide an irresistible confirmation of this claim, for Cather explicitly marks this moment of self-affirming growth as a gain in Lucy's skill as a reader: "Until she had begun to play for Sebastian she had never known that words had any value aside from their direct meaning" (101). And second: the reawakening that comes, late in the book, to a Lucy benumbed by grief, when she hears the itinerant

soprano sing *The Bohemian Girl* is rendered—emphatically, unmistakably—not as a desire to become an artist but as a hunger for something to respond to:

She wanted flowers and music and enchantment and love,—all the things she had first known with Sebastian . . . Suddenly something flashed into her mind, so clear that it must have come from without, from the breathless quiet. What if—what if Life itself were the sweetheart? It was like a lover waiting for her in distant cities—across the sea; drawing her, enticing her, weaving a spell over her. . . . Oh, now she knew! She must have it, she couldn't run away from it. She must go back into the world and get all she could of everything that had made him what he was. . . . Let it come! Let it all come back to her again! Let it betray her and mock her and break her heart, she must have it! (195)



Having spent so much time listening for the resonances of reading in the language of Cather's portrayal of Lucy, I must move with untoward speed to support my claim that the conception of responsiveness that shapes this characterization governs, more broadly, the novel as a whole. If the good things of *Lucy Gayheart*—self-expansion, sympathy, wisdom, love—are measured on a scale of responsiveness, so are its darker experiences and emotions. What is it that is most to be feared in the novel? It is the loss of the capacity to respond: “That happiness she had so lately found, where was it? Everything threatened it, the way of the world was against it. It had escaped her. She had lost it as one can lose a ravishing melody. . . . And she couldn't breathe in this other kind of life. It stifled her, woke her in a frantic fear” (109). Accordingly, it is as the realized form of this fear—as a lost capacity to respond—that she feels her grief at Sebastian's death: “To have one's heart frozen and one's world destroyed in a moment—that was what it had meant” (164). What drives and torments Lucy after Sebastian's death? It is the burden of the lie she told to Harry about her relationship with Sebastian—and her hunger for his renewed responsiveness to her is above all a hunger to be seen fully, to be read correctly. What makes James Mockford the villain of the novel? It is precisely his capacity to make Lucy's feeling for Sebastian, her response to his art, her reader-like role as his accompanist and pupil feel empty, a mockery, “nothing but make-believe” (64). What, finally, constitutes cruelty in *Lucy Gayheart*? It's the willful betrayal of one's capacity to respond, as when Harry's vivid refusals to respond to her seem to lock Lucy into stasis and grief, and send her, enraged, to her final skate: “If he should put his hand on her, or look directly into her eyes and flash the old signal, she believed it would waken something and start the machinery going to carry her along” (185).

If the thwarting of responsiveness defines the way of cruelty and loss in the book, it is the retrospective achievement or recovery of that capacity that comes to define human value as the novel ends. We glimpse this late, retrospective version of responsiveness in the brief portrait of Mrs. Ramsay in Book II, which gives us Lucy's return to Haverford after Sebastian's death. The widow of one of the town's founders, a woman long active and executive, she has aged, her daughter thinks, beautifully and surprisingly: “she was more interested in other people, all people, now than she used to be” (152). Listening to her mother's expression of sympathy for Lucy, her daughter is “almost startled by something beautiful in her mother's voice. It was not the quick, passionate sympathy that used to be there for a sick child or a friend in trouble. No, it was less personal, more ethereal. More like the Divine compassion. And her mother used to be so stormy, *so* personal. If growing old did that to one's voice and one's understanding, one need not dread it so much, the daughter was thinking” (155). And we see it most fully in the novel's compressed, remarkable Book III, in which Harry Gordon remakes his life in the key of memory, along the axis of responsiveness: “For years he had tried never to think about Lucy at all. But for a long while now he had loved to remember her. . . . In spite of all the misery he had been through on her account, Lucy was the best thing he had to remember. When he looked back into the past, there was just one face, one figure, that was mysteriously lovely. All the other men and women he had known were more or less like himself” (233–234). Harry lives a quiet, even a readerly life—playing chess with Lucy's father, hiding out, alone with his memories, in his back office at the bank. Through memory he recovers—first in torment, then through acts of kindness and fidelity, the still-responsive self she had seen in him: “He was conceited and hard to teach, but she believed that he would go on learning about life” (199–200). We return, in this late phrasing, to the knot of emotions and ambitions with which we began—to the pedagogical love, the reader's love, glimpsed in those early letters.

### Who Dies in *Lucy Gayheart*?

Let me conclude by trying to bring the opening section of this paper—my evocation of Cather's book-made Europe and of the role it played in her ideologically resonant self-making—together with the interpretation of *Lucy Gayheart* I have been proposing. While Lucy herself never travels farther than Chicago, Cather renders Lucy's self-becoming as an awakening to the “Europe” evoked by her encounter with the cosmopolitan Sebastian, by her self-defining responses to and reading of the complex experiences sedimented in his art and his character. From this conjunction—between the reading-centered self-formation that Cather evokes in her letters and the reading-focused way she tells Lucy's story—the novel emerges, in affinity to its third book, as itself an act of retrospection



and remembering. *Lucy Gayheart* is an elegy for the reader in two senses. For Cather the writer, the book acknowledges and celebrates the readers, the Lucys, that have called into being her fiction through their enlivening responses to it.<sup>4</sup> For Cather the person, we might hear in the book her remembrance of, her farewell to, herself as a young reader, hungry for books, for Europe, for the romance of self-making her reading and learning would call forth within her. Why is there so much dying in *Lucy Gayheart*? Because reading—though it shows the way toward a kind of living, as Cather knew more fully and intensely than almost anyone—is also, as books end, as characters leave us, a kind of dying—for them and for us. Maybe this is one of the many things she learned from Sarah Orne Jewett, something we hear at the end of *The Country of the Pointed Firs*: “When I went in again the little house had suddenly grown lonely, and my room looked empty as it had the day I came. I and all my belongings had died out of it, and I knew now how it would seem when Mrs. Todd came back and found her lodger gone. So we die before our own eyes; so we see some chapters of our lives come to their natural end” (Jewett 139). It is, finally, this indispensable capacity to read, and to die, and to read and to die again that Cather asks us to witness, to mourn, and to celebrate in *Lucy Gayheart*.

#### NOTES

1. For a fuller account of this cultural history, see my “Where is Hawthorne’s Rome?”

2. Intriguingly, both of the young women commonly attested as prototypes for the character of Lucy seem to be emissaries—or perhaps exiles—from reading’s world of initiation and accomplishment. Sadie Becker, a young woman with a “rich contralto laugh,” identified by Cather as “the girl who used to skate in the old rink, dressed in a red jersey,” was an accomplished musician and accompanist who moved to Red Cloud from New York (*Selected Letters* 570, 678); Anna Gayhardt was “a dandy sort of a girl, handsome as a picture and finely educated, reads and speaks German like a top,” who finds herself teaching school in Blue Hill, Nebraska; after a late night of dancing, she and Willa—sharing quarters—“went to bed, and she was so glad to meet somebody from ‘civilization’ that we talked books and theatre until the daylight came through the shutters” (28).

3. For me, the most persuasive readings of the novel are those that see Cather as raising, via her representation of Lucy, expansive and central questions of human meaning making. I am thinking especially of essays or chapters by David Stouck, Blanche Gelfant, Richard Giannone, Elaine Apthorp, and David Porter. Even Cather’s most distinguished readers, in perceptive treatments of the novel, seem to me to fall into the this mode of diminishment, as when Joseph Urgo construes Lucy as uninteresting in herself,

but valuable as an illustration of the way a life’s meaning stays mobile after the body succumbs to the stasis of death (Urgo 117), or when Janis Stout sees her as admirable for taking, in her poignant life, a step toward becoming a real artist (Stout 264). No need, in my view, to mention the numerous flatly dismissive accounts of the novel and its title character.

4. My essay might be heard as an accompaniment, in another key, to Charles Johanningsmeier’s fascinating work on the selection of letters from ordinary readers that Cather kept and carried with her over the years.

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# Pierre Loti and Willa Cather's Journey Home: So Near, So Far

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*My letter to Willa Cather, care of the ether, the Great Beyond, considers the affinities between French writer Pierre Loti (1850–1923) and Willa Cather, who greatly admired his works.*

Dear Willa,

You had to leave Virginia and then Nebraska and gather a hoard of cultural spoils away from home to return to your first impressions, having kept the memory of the looped trajectory of your life and art. You had to travel far away before you could return home in writing from another vantage point. In this, you were much like Pierre Loti, who may have well been a role model for you. You knew he was a Frenchman who traveled the world over, who lived in Polynesian islands, in Japan and also in Turkey for months on end. Like you, he was unconventional, but well-established. He challenged the gender assumptions of his time. He was a man of complex masculinity. A colonialist of ambivalent colonialism, he took part in the colonial enterprise, but contributed to shift it from within, as his novel *Aziyadé*, set in Constantinople, changed the view Europeans had of the Ottomans. In their diary, the de Goncourt brothers, Edmond and Jules, write of him that he is “a wonderful scenery painter, an admirable visionary of nature” (“lundi 14 juin 1886” 1256). So were you. In *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) you knew how to depict a natural scene, to make it speak of its indifference to the feelings of a character walking through it, or of its allure, or of an older narrator's fear of her own nostalgia when writing about such glory. You had the young Nancy walk through the “Double S” (169) in that unforgettable page of such dangerous seduction, when the devilish rogues of slavery and sexual consummation lurk around the corner, ready to destroy the paradise of dogwoods in bloom to satisfy their passion. You knew the magic of suggestion through nature, and you made it all the more powerful because you saw it retrospectively, having left Virginia to consider it from afar and from the distance of time and maturity.

I'll try and imagine what you read in Loti's works, and this will reflect my choice, my mistakes or my discoveries, in the hope that it will bring pleasant memories of reading to you. My understanding is that, far from mimicry, you found a community of purpose with Pierre Loti. But first I need to remind you of a few biographical elements, which Loti, with his sense of publicity, tended to throw into people's faces when he most cultivated originality. So please bear with me, dear Willa, while I briefly concentrate in his works.

As a high-school teacher you assigned Loti's *Iceland Fisherman* (1886) to your class.<sup>1</sup> You admired his novel, and thought you should pass it on to your students, probably because the subject, the life of Breton fishermen, and Breton women surviving deprivation and loss, but also for the style in which Loti writes: a beautiful prose, elegiac and melancholy, but without flourish. Was there also something in his adventurous, peripatetic life that attracted and challenged you, Willa? At the very moment you assigned *Iceland Fisherman* you were already wondering if you had the courage to drop the steady, female-gendered job of teaching high-school for something more rewarding, and you did. First, you stopped teaching and took up magazine editing. Then you dropped that too, when you realized it was too time-consuming and drained your precious energy and sapped the concentration you needed to write. Did you also aspire to his fame? He was,



*Pierre Loti dressed as an acrobat, 1876.*

after all, elected a member of the French Academy in 1891, an honor incessantly coveted by Zola. Loti was poetic in a prosaic way; he wrote with a directness and simplicity you admired, and he also had the recognition you aspired to. That recognition did not daunt you in a gendered way, because he was not a masculine paragon of fame. In fact he looked cross-gendered. Thin and refined, he wore makeup, perfume, and jewelry, was elegant in a dandy-like way, both feminine and masculine. But despite his effeminate appearance he was married “right and left,” as the French saying goes.<sup>2</sup> He had a left-hand marriage, and fathered children into a ripe old age in both his legitimate and illegitimate



families, but managed to keep this a secret. You will remember, Willa, that in his works, Loti does not write about his family life but rather about the strength of friendship about love in impossible relationships due to cultural differences, or because of the vicissitudes of life. In *Iceland Fisherman*, the fisherman is married to the sea, dies in the sea's cold embrace and never returns to his wife in Brittany; in *Aziyadé* (1879), the adulterous friendship between a French diplomat and a Turkish married woman is doomed. Loti often describes homosocial friendships as stronger than conventional amorous ones, and he describes his men characters lovingly. Most importantly, he questions his certainties and considers his cultural habits with a great deal of distance, as if what was familiar was also strange to him.

Like Loti, you too came to write of “*l'exotisme du proche*,” the “exoticism of the familiar,” the phrase a French critic uses to describe Pierre Loti's regional French novels (Dupont 13). For example, in *Iceland Fisherman*, the hero Yann has an expensive gold watch that he brought back from a southern French city, and the narrator remarks that such an elaborate watch seems misplaced in the “primitive” surroundings of the stark fishing expeditions: “Yet this banality of civilized life stood out in the midst of the primitive men, surrounded as they were by the great silences of the sea.”<sup>3</sup> “The great silences of the sea” was Loti's resonating chamber to praise the sailors' glory, and while the watch singles out Yann from the crowd, his use of the word “primitive” carries the primary nobility of the common man in his essential work. You also decided to extol the glory and endurance of simple folks from your earliest stories on. In your story “A Wagner Matinée” (1904) the narrator looks at his aunt and experiences this “exoticism of the familiar” abruptly: “I saw my aunt's battered figure with that feeling of awe and respect with which we behold explorers who have left their ears and fingers north of Franz Joseph Land, or their health somewhere along the Upper Congo” (236). His aunt's endurance is displaced to the geographic extremes of the Arctic or the Equator. You also detected exoticism in the obscure destinies and talents for living of ordinary folks. Like Loti, you paid attention to physical details that become emblematic of hardship, resilience, generosity, of life-giving nurture. You had the same affectionate proximity and the right dose of estrangement to see things both from within and as if from the moon. Your exoticism does not turn the sitters into objects of fantasy but glorifies them for their own sake.

You achieved that goal only after a wrench, like that of Loti's heroine Gaud in *Iceland Fisherman*. In a passage which must have rung a bell because you had a similar experience when you were



*Louis Marie-Julien Viaud as a youth, before he became Pierre Loti.*

uprooted from Virginia to Nebraska, Loti describes Gaud's feeling of estrangement when she leaves Paris and arrives in Brittany, which she knew only as a child, and then only in summer. Gaud finds winter Brittany terribly “harsh.”<sup>4</sup> In a similar expression of estrangement, no matter how used to the sea Yann the sailor is, he still finds the Icelandic sea he fishes in impossible to comprehend, and is awed by what strikes him as “aspects of counter-life, of a world that has come to an end or has not yet been created.”<sup>5</sup> He finds the sun unrecognizable, as if going counter to creation, reverting to chaos: “it rather looked like some poor, dying yellow planet, which had stopped in indecision, in the midst of chaos.”<sup>6</sup> In their exile, in being uprooted,

Loti's characters are sensitive to a change in perspective. When the narrator of *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887) arrives in Japan, he observes that his usual understanding of space does not equip him for grasping the landscape he discovers; he needs another scale, and another world view, to understand Japan: “indeed, it seems that the absence of distance, of perspective, allows us to observe all the details of this minute, intimate, wet and muddy piece of Japan under our eyes.”<sup>7</sup> Jim Burden in *My Ántonia* has “the feeling that the world was left behind” (7) when he arrives in Nebraska, while Loti's Breton characters probe the limits of their understanding, in the uncomfortable experience of being uprooted.

The narrator of *Madame Chrysanthème* also conveys the new smells of the country he discovers, and finally realizes that his language and the categories contained in his language no longer apply to the reality he encounters: “To narrate those evenings faithfully, one would need a more precious language; one would need a graphic sign made precisely for it, that could be inserted amongst the words, to indicate laughter for the reader, possibly forced laughter, yet still fresh and gracious enough.”<sup>8</sup> Sensitive as he was to foreignness, Loti may have been the first to give you, Willa, the authority to borrow foreign words and import their reality into your use of English, because they transcribe their world more faithfully than culturally faulty translations. Loti complained that he has been criticized for using foreign words but justified himself because borrowed words are the only adequate ones: “Until now, I had always written ‘his guitar’ to avoid exotic terms, which I have been reproached for using too often. But neither the word *guitar* nor the word *mandolin* can do justice to that thin instrument with an elongated neck, whose high notes are more sentimental than the voice of grasshoppers; from now on, I shall write *shamisen*.”<sup>9</sup>

Although you mention Prosper Mérimée's use of Spanish words in *Carmen* as an example, you seem to write under Loti's

justification when you rebuff Marguerite Yourcenar for her reluctance to incorporate Spanish words in her translation of your *Death Comes for the Archbishop*:

Madame Yourcenar further told me that it would be impossible to use in her translation the local names of things—i.e., nouns such as burro, mesa, adobe (both a noun and adjective), casa, arroyo, hacienda, etc., etc. These words were, of course, originally Spanish, but they are now common words everywhere in the southwest. All the American farmers and railroad workmen use them without knowing that they are Spanish. There are simply no other names for these things. You cannot call an arroyo a ditch or a ravine. (Letter to Alfred A. Knopf, April 19, 1938, *Selected Letters* 547)

It is a famous rebuff, and I cannot help but enjoy the way you defend your position to a writer so well established in my country.<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, born sixteen years after you, engaged in a dialogue with a Japanese scholar about the limits of translation between such different traditions as Western and Eastern philosophies, concluding that “we reach those things with which we are originally familiar precisely if we do not shun passing through things strange to us”(33). You couldn’t have been aware of this dialogue, which took place long after your death, and you may prefer Kipling’s witty chiasmus in “The English Flag” anyway, which expresses a similar idea: “And what should they know of England who only England know?—” (42).

Like Loti’s, your simple country folks knew America well because they often knew it from other vantage points, or from the many different Old World customs they encountered within the same county in Nebraska. They too tested their limits and their certainties or insecurities, and for that they were heroes and heroines in their own glory, which had nothing to envy the heroic deeds of antiquity. Like Loti, you shaped your heroines in the classic tradition, recognizing in telling domestic details of hairdressing or attitude their heroic qualities. When Loti’s Gaud gets undressed in the seclusion of her bedroom, she takes off her corset, a troublesome Parisian fashion, and the narrator finds her waist more “perfect” when free, likening her to a “marble statue.”<sup>11</sup> In this instance, the narrator observes her like your Don Hedger does Eden Bower exercising naked in her room in “Coming, Aphrodite!” (1920). Gaud wears her hair braided and pulled up into rolls above her ears,<sup>12</sup> and Loti writes that “then, with her straight profile, she looked like a Roman virgin.”<sup>13</sup> In

*O Pioneers!* (1913), Alexandra is first noticed for her hair; she has “two thick braids, pinned about her head in the German way, with a fringe of reddish-yellow curls blowing out from under her cap,” and an observer’s exclamation of praise is met with disdain: “She stabbed him with a glance of Amazonian fierceness and drew in her lower lip—most unnecessary severity” (15). Gaud is similarly self-determined. Her marriage turns into widowhood immediately, as she is virtuously single like Alexandra, and she too becomes a creator giving shape to life, although not as a pioneer woman cultivating the land, but rather as a talented and much sought-after dressmaker in her village, much like Lena Lingard in *My Antonia*.

In *One of Ours* (1922), you describe, like Loti, a trajectory of estrangement within one’s own culture, of an uprooting and looping quest that leads the main character’s self-discovery after having experienced life in another land. Claude Wheeler finds himself in France, after his disastrous marriage to Enid Royce in Nebraska. He becomes a hero when he leads the charge in battle, much like Sylvestre in Loti’s *Iceland Fisherman*, who charges ahead and saves six other sailors during a fight in Hanoi. Sylvestre is first described as having found himself in his new environment, far from home: “The last few days, he had begun his transfiguration: his skin had tanned, his voice had changed, he now stood in his own element.”<sup>14</sup> He is wounded, mortally, during his heroic charge, a charge described as “the kind that gave common men the



Constantinople, 1904.

supreme courage, that made antique heroes of them.”<sup>15</sup> Did you model Claude’s final charge after Sylvestre’s to reveal the heroism of plain, unobtrusive men who have gone far overseas to test their mettle? Once dead, Claude Wheeler returns home in spirit for his mother and for Mahailey, who speaks for him when she calls his mother “Mudder” because for Mahailey, his spirit, like God, is always near, “directly overhead, not so very far above the kitchen stove” (606).

Because we critics gathered at this conference in Rome read you closely, for us too you are not so very far above the kitchen stove, or above our desk, or wherever we may be. We feel close to your works and find them inexhaustible, despite the passage of time and multiple readings. Often, we tend to see life through your lenses and read it through your beautiful wording of the world.

Please don’t be offended. Critics like to probe the secrets of creation, whether it stems from any influence or not, and we admire a beautiful turn of phrase when it just clicks with what it



says like magic. We find this as erotic as the intimacy of an alcove. And please don't blush, dear Willa, for all this praise. Please accept this personal letter of thanks for your gift to the world. Thanks to you, coming home with a memory of the looped journey makes sense, as your character Jim Burden recognizes in *My Antonia*: "I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is" (360).

Farewell, wherever you are, and look kindly on us.

Admiringly yours, from Rome,

Françoise

## NOTES

1. See Richard M. Berrong, "Willa Cather's Intertextualization of Pierre Loti's *Icelandic Fisherman* in *O Pioneers!*" *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review* 57.1 (Spring 2014): 8.

2. See Maupassant's tales.

3. "Cependant cette banalité de la vie civilisée détonnait beaucoup au milieu de ces hommes primitifs, avec ces grands silences de la mer qu'on devinait autour d'eux" (58). All translations from Loti into English are mine, to respect the current translation standards that previous English translations did not have.

4. "ce jour d'arrivée, elle avait été surprise d'une façon pénible par l'âpreté de cette Bretagne, revue en plein hiver" (77).

5. "aspects de non vie, de monde fini ou pas encore créé" (97).

6. "il semblait plutôt quelque pauvre planète jaune, mourante, qui se serait arrêtée là indéfiniment, au milieu d'un chaos" (102).

7. "vraiment il semble que cette absence de lointains, de perspectives, dispose mieux à remarquer tous les détails de ce très petit bout de Japon intime, boueux et mouillé, que nous avons sous les yeux" (ebook 14742/34719).

8. "Pour raconter fidèlement ces soirées-là, il faudrait un langage plus maniéré que le nôtre; il faudrait aussi un signe graphique inventé exprès, que l'on mettrait au hasard parmi les mots, et qui indiquerait au lecteur le moment de pousser un éclat de rire,—un peu forcé, mais cependant frais et gracieux (ebook 15233/34719).

9. "Jusqu'à présent, j'avais toujours écrit sa guitare pour éviter ces termes exotiques dont on m'a reproché l'abus. Mais ni le mot *guitare* ni le mot *mandoline* ne désignent bien cet instrument mince avec un si long manche, dont les notes hautes sont plus mièvres que la voix des sauterelles;—à partir de maintenant, j'écrirai *chamécén*" (ebook 16432/34719).

10. Yourcenar was the first woman to be elected a member of l'Académie française, as late as in 1980, when she was 77 years old. She liked your country so much she choose to live on Mount Desert Island, but had not been as adventurous as you and had not visited the Southwest when the two of you met. Both of you

must have had a whiff of the other's determination and talent, under the veneer of propriety and good manners.

11. "Alors sa taille, une fois libre, devint plus parfaite; n'étant plus comprimée, ni trop amincie par le bas, elle reprit ces lignes naturelles, qui étaient pleines et douces comme celles des statues en marbre; ses mouvements en changeaient les aspects, et chacune de ses poses était exquise à regarder" (93–94).

12. "nattes enroulées au-dessus de ses oreilles" "comme deux serpents très lourds"; "en couronne sur le haut de sa tête" (94).

13. "alors, avec son profil droit, elle ressemblait à une vierge romaine" (94).

14. "Déjà transfiguré depuis quelques jours, bronzé, la voix changée, il était là comme dans un élément à lui" (161).

15. "celle qui donne aux simples le courage suprême, celle qui faisait les héros antiques" (162).

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# “What Is There about Us Always”: The Archbishop and Willa Cather’s [Roman] Catholic Imagination

Diane Prenatt | Marian University

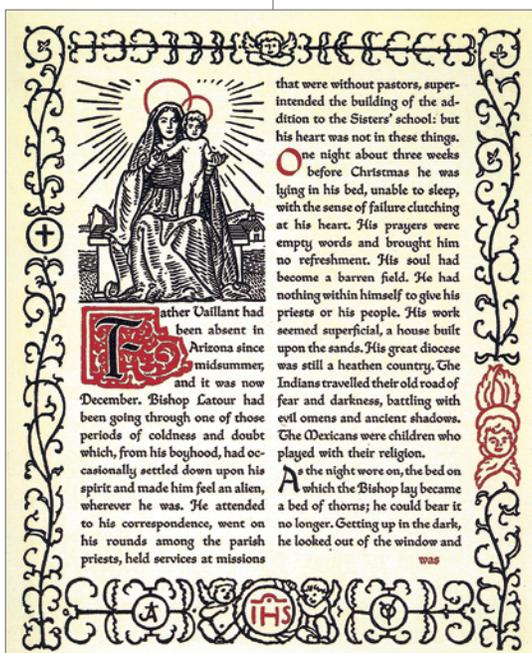
Like many longtime readers of Willa Cather, I often find myself responding to the assumptions of new readers to say that no, Cather was not a Catholic, but yes, it is certainly understandable to have thought she was. What makes it so understandable is the accuracy of Cather’s depiction of Catholic culture in *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), the brief but memorable scenes relating to Catholic practice and belief in *O Pioneers!* (1913), *My Ántonia* (1918), *One of Ours* (1922), and *The Professor’s House* (1925), and—most convincingly—the comprehending portrait of Archbishop Latour in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). We can readily understand Cather’s affinity with Catholicism when we reflect upon her deep affection for France, her preference for legend as a narrative mode, and her appreciation for the ritualistic nature of quotidian acts. She was a serious reader of Dante and may have extended her knowledge of Catholic theology through reading Aquinas.<sup>1</sup> Cather’s representation of Catholic belief, however, runs deeper than her observant depiction of the Catholic culture of immigrants and her familiarity with doctrine; it is intimately and meaningfully connected to the quality of her imagination, to her depiction of the constant interchange between the transcendent and the mundane that Catholic theology defines as “the sacramental world.”

To recognize that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* depicts a sacramental world, or that the novel is informed by a sacramental world view, is to say something more than the fact that it includes scenes in which the two priests, Jean Marie Latour and Joseph Vaillant, administer the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. To note those many scenes, however, is to realize how thoroughly Cather’s story inhabits a world in which theological doctrine is enacted physically. At Agua Secreta, where he found refuge after his prayer before the cruciform juniper, Latour “performed marriages and baptisms and heard confessions and

confirmed” (30–31); at Manuel Lujón’s place, Vaillant performs marriages and baptisms (59, 65); Latour expects to find a confirmation class at Padre Gallegos’s parish in Albuquerque (86); Vaillant administers the last rites to Father Lucero (179) and rides to the Hopi Indians, “marrying, baptizing, confessing as he went” (211); Archbishop Latour receives the Viaticum on his last day of life (314).

The belief that these sacraments, administered through ordinary substances like oil, salt, water, and bread, grant the recipient access to the grace of God reflects the belief that “matter matters,” as the contemporary Catholic theologian John E. Thiel puts it (46). The belief in sacramentality, Thiel explains, is a belief in “the capacity of created matter to mediate the grace and love, the providence and salvation of God” (47); the Christian faith distinctively claims that “salvation is mediated through the created order” or the physical world (46). Christians believe that God, in the person of Jesus Christ, redeems them “in and through created being, not in spite of it or as an escape from it” (46).<sup>2</sup> “Incarnational”

is often used interchangeably with “sacramental” to describe this belief, in which the incarnation of God in the human person of Jesus Christ is the fundamental manifestation of the sacrality of the created order. The contemporary Catholic theologian David Tracy points out that the doctrine of sacramentality, developed by Catholic theologians from Bonaventure to Teilhard de Chardin, means that “[t]he entire world, the ordinary in all its variety, is now theologically envisioned as sacrament” (413). The Catholic theologian William L. Portier draws upon Mircea Eliade’s notion of the sacred and the profane to explicate his own discussion of the sacramental world view. For Eliade, Portier states, “every aspect of the profane is a potential medium for the manifestation of the sacred. The capacity of the visible world to body forth the invisible . . . gives his approach a striking affinity with the incarnational/sacramental ethos of Roman Catholicism” (62).



A page from “December Night,” a scene from *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1933 (©1926, 1927, 1929 by Willa Cather).



The Catholic imaginative conflation of ordinary and sacramental is profoundly symbolic; theologically, it was formulated as the “doctrine of analogy” by Thomas Aquinas (Tracy 413). Portier categorically states, “The holy never appears ‘directly,’ but through a non-sacred or profane medium. . . . [T]he holy is *symbolically* mediated” (63; original emphasis). David Tracy theorizes a Catholic imagination that tends to be “analogical” as opposed to a Protestant imagination that tends to be “dialectical.” Andrew Greeley, the Jesuit sociologist and novelist, uses Tracy’s definitions to explain why American Catholics “imagine differently” from American Protestants—why, as he puts it, “Flannery O’Connor is not John Updike” (34). Greeley simplifies Tracy’s definitions somewhat to describe the Protestant dialectical imagination, which “assume[s] a God who is radically absent from the world. . . . The world and all its events, objects, and people tend to be radically different from God,” whom we must go somewhere else to find; and the Catholic analogical imagination, which “assume[s] a God who is present in the world, disclosing Himself in and through creation. The world and all its events, objects, and people tend to be somewhat like God” (45). Although Greeley is mostly interested in the way these imaginative differences affect Catholic and Protestant social codes and behaviors, he follows Tracy and Portier in attributing the analogical imagination to a belief in the sacramental or incarnational world.

Thus, in the Roman Catholic world of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the cruciform juniper tree, before which Latour prays when he is lost in the New Mexico desert, is both profane tree and holy crucifix. Latour—a man “who was sensitive to the shape of things” (17)—recognizes that “living vegetation could not present more faithfully the form of the Cross” (18), and so he performs his devotions no differently from the way he would at the foot of a crucifix in a French cathedral. In Portier’s terms, the holy symbol of Christian redemption appears through the profane medium of the tree. Latour is thereby granted providential grace—the intervening action of God in his life—leading him to Agua Secreta, where he finds himself resting in “comfort and safety, with love for his fellow creatures flowing like peace about his heart,” his feverish thirst quenched (30). Latour knows that this dramatic turn of events is what Joseph Vaillant would call a miracle and reflects that Vaillant likes his miracles “spectacular, not with Nature, but against it” (30); whereas it is Latour’s belief that miracles “rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always” (54). In Tracy’s and Greeley’s terms, Latour’s notion of the miraculous is an almost purely Catholic recognition of God disclosing himself through the created order,

while Vaillant’s, in contrast, tends toward the dialectical Protestant imagination: Vaillant’s encounter with God, as Latour describes it, is outside the created order. Latour characteristically conflates the transcendent and the mundane, the sacred and profane: “As he had a very special way of handling objects that were sacred, he extended that manner to things which he considered beautiful” (252). Cather thus attributes Latour’s highly developed aesthetic perception not only to his French cultural formation, but to his theological belief system. It has its source in his enacted belief in the sacramentality of the world without which those rituals he performs as a priest would be simply fetishistic and his personal aesthetic merely precious.



Nicolas Poussin: Sacrament of Ordination (Christ Presenting the Keys to St. Peter) (detail), 1636–1642; Kimbell Art Museum.

The belief in the sacramentality of the world is “consummately expressed” in the doctrine of the Incarnation (Thiel 46). As Thiel states, “If the doctrine of creation is the language of Christian sacramentality, then the doctrine of the Incarnation is its more explicit grammar” (47). In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather affirms the centrality of the Incarnation by locating two almost unutterably beautiful scenes with reference to Christmas, the point in the liturgical calendar that commemorates the Incarnation. The first of these is the description of Latour’s and Vaillant’s Christmas dinner in “The Bishop Chez Lui” and the second is Latour’s Advent encounter with Sada in “December Night.” In these two scenes, the most ordinary human needs—for food, clothing, and shelter—are satisfied by ordinary objects from the physical world (onions, chicken, potatoes; a cloak; the roofed space of a church) which are transformed sacramentally in the context of the Incarnation.

The Bishop’s Christmas dinner resonates with sacramental symbology. The meal is sacramentalized by the presence of

candles, including those in the silver candlesticks Latour received as an ordination gift, and the smell of piñon logs burning in the fireplace, which Latour compares to incense. The olive oil that dresses Father Vaillant's homely Christmas salad is the same oil traditionally used to anoint recipients of the Catholic sacraments. Father Vaillant's fretful chatter about his cooking is a mild reminder of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (the Eucharistic change of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ): the transformation of the humble foods native to the American Southwest into a French Christmas dinner has not been easy. In celebration of the day—in celebration of the Incarnation—the two priests converse in their native French, a rare indulgence that intensifies their own relational communion and reaffirms their identity and their commitment to their vocations. The meal and the conversation also place the two men in relationship with the communion of saints, the community of all believers living and dead, including Frenchmen who have participated in the thousand-year “constantly refined tradition” (41) of the soup that begins their meal. Thus, common materials of the created order—onions, dried plums, a “good enough” wine “with a slight taste of the cork” (42)—mediate the transmission of grace, the spiritual enrichment of the two priests. The salvific function of thoughtfully prepared food is a recurrent motif in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Later in the novel, Latour observes, “Time and again [he] had seen a good dinner, a bottle of claret, transformed into spiritual energy [in Father Vaillant] under his very eyes” (238). As the great feast is prepared at the Lujon place, Father Vaillant insists on roasting his *gigot* rare not only because he is a Frenchman (60), but because he wants the blood of the Lamb.

Bishop Latour's encounter with Sada likewise evokes the doctrine of the Incarnation. It takes place during Advent, the period of time that commemorates the anticipation of the birth of Christ. Inside the church—in the Lady Chapel, dedicated to the mother of the incarnate God—where Latour lights candles before the statue of the “Holy Mother” (224), Sada weeps “tears of ecstasy” at seeing “the holy things of the altar” (what the Catholic Church calls “sacramentals”) after being kept from church for nineteen years by her abusive employers (224). As Sada murmurs, “O Sacred Heart of Mary,” Latour feels “how that name was food and raiment, friend and mother to her.” (228). He understands what it means to Sada “to know that there was a kind Woman in Heaven, though there were such cruel ones on earth. . . . Only a Woman, divine, could know all that a woman can suffer” (228). The contemporary American Catholic writer Mary Gordon has observed, “It is one of the marvels of a Catholic education that the impulse of a few words can bring whole narratives to light with an immediacy and a clarity that are utterly absorbing” (288).

In this episode, Sada's Advent devotion to Mary, as Latour shares it, brings to light the narrative of the Incarnation that provides the basis for the imaginative experience of the sacramental world. For as Andrew Greeley explains,

. . . Mary is the “defining image” for the Sacramental Imagination, that image which most sharply distinguishes . . . the Catholic tradition from other Christian traditions. . . . Mary is essential to Catholicism, not perhaps on the level of doctrine but surely on the level of imagination, because she more than any other image blatantly confirms the sacramental instinct: the whole of creation and all its processes, especially its life-giving and life-nurturing processes, reveal the lurking and passionate love of God. (253)

“December Night” is only one of many references to Mary as the mother of God throughout *Death Comes for the Archbishop* that illuminate the incarnational narrative underlying Latour's sacramental world view. Both Latour and Vaillant are dedicated to Mary, their “Gracious Patroness” (211). Cather has given Latour the middle name of “Marie”—not unusual for French men (it was Voltaire's middle name, too)—but a purposeful choice, as the historic Bishop Jean Lamy's middle name was Baptiste. Father Vaillant, who wears a signet ring inscribed “*Auspice Maria*” (“under the protection of Mary”), cherishes the hope that one day he will lead a contemplative life of “devotion to the Holy Mother”; for the time being, he tells Latour, he will “serve Her in action” (43). It is to the “Holy Mother” Latour prays before the cruciform tree and he knows that Vaillant would believe it was she who “took the mare by the bridle” and delivered him to Agua Secreta (30), where he was met by Josepha's greeting, “*Ave María Purísima, Señor*” (24). Latour notices the *santos* in Benito's house, especially “the sorrowing mother,” so different from the plaster images of the Virgin he found in churches in Ohio (28). Relaxing before his Christmas dinner, Latour hums softly “*Ave Maris Stella*” (“Hail, Star of the Sea”), a vespers hymn to Mary (39); later in the novel, Father Vaillant invokes the compline hymn, “*Alma redemptoris mater*” (“Fair Mother of the Redeemer”; 211). Early in the novel, when the Bishop has just returned from Durango, he is awakened by the ringing of the Angelus, a Marian devotion (45). The story of Our Lady of Guadalupe is inset in the novel (49–52), told to Latour by an elderly priest who had finally made a pilgrimage to the shrine commemorating the appearance of Mary in the new world.

The Marian narrative underscores the sacramental quality of the garden scene several years after Latour and Vaillant's Christmas dinner. Bishop Latour is working in his garden as Father Vaillant lies on a cot nearby recuperating from malaria in “the month of





Dante Gabriel Rossetti: *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin, 1848–1849*; Tate Britain. Rossetti's model for the Virgin Mary in this, his first completed oil painting, was his sister, the poet Christina Rossetti.

Mary and the month of May” (208). As “the grass under foot had a reflection of blue sky in it” (209), so the earthly garden illustrates a heavenly analog: it is both a practical orchard and kitchen-garden, the fruits of which supplement the “starchy diet” of Latour’s Mexican parishioners (278), and, in its beauty and variety, a metaphor for the Biblical Eden. Latour likes to remind his students of “that passage from . . . Pascal: that Man was lost and saved in a garden” (279), a reference to the doctrine of the *felix culpa* (“fortunate fall”), the belief that Adam and Eve’s fall from innocence occasioned the happy event of the incarnation of Jesus Christ and his redemption of human beings. The garden is thus emblematic of the incarnate world. As the iconographic *hortus conclusus* (“enclosed garden”), it is also a symbol of Mary inviolate. “All the most important events in [Vaillant’s] own history had occurred in the blessed month when this sinful and sullied world puts on white as if to commemorate the Annunciation” (213), Cather writes. The Catholic Church commemorates the Annunciation not in May, however, but on March 25—nine months before the Incarnation. This isn’t a mistake Latour would have made; the Incarnation seems to have been on Cather’s mind.

Cather historicizes the significance of Mary in the Catholic tradition by invoking the courtly love tradition that is the legacy of the interchange between Catholics and Muslims during the Crusades. In this tradition, Mary is the divine analogy for the unattainable earthly woman whose favor the chivalric lover seeks. Latour recognizes the origins of the Angelus in the Crusades (48). He is described as “a man of gentle birth. . . . He had a kind of courtesy” (18). Lujon calls Vaillant a “*caballero*” (“cavalier” or “knight”; 63), identifying him with the chivalric tradition. Latour displays courtliness toward Doña Isabella, kissing her hand (202). In these scenes, Latour and his Vaillant perform as Frenchmen, but their behavior, as Cather depicts it, is inseparable from their religious faith.<sup>3</sup>

Cather’s representation of the sacramental world, of the analogical imagination, extends beyond the facility with metaphor that we expect from good literature. Her frequent choice to feature Catholic characters and culture draws attention to her own imaginative and perceptual processes. There are many unanswered questions about Cather’s spirituality, but she does seem to have longed for a world, which she thought once existed historically, that accommodates transcendence and sacrality. Her longing is related to her rejection of the kind of data-driven realist literature she decries in “The Novel *Démeublé*.” When we talk today about the materialism Cather disdained, we seem to be talking about consumerism or even simply bad taste. But materialism, understood philosophically, is a system in which the spiritual, the ephemeral do not exist. The innovation of the positivist sciences was to correct an unquestioning, faith-dependent world view. There is no space in literary realism as formulated by Zola for “the emotional penumbra” of things (“The Novel *Démeublé*” 48). In contrast to Emile Zola, who wrote a novel debunking Mary’s apparition at Lourdes, who would say with the realist painter Gustave Courbet, “Show me an angel and I’ll paint you an angel,” Cather paints worlds that presume the existence of the miraculous and numinous, in which transcendence is not another place but is a quality apparent to “perceptions . . . made finer.”

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Latour’s perceptions of his world are conflated with the narrator’s own. Often, Cather does not trouble to create any distance between Latour, as the center of consciousness, and her narrator—as in the description of the landscape between Laguna and Ácoma, which looks “as if, with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being brought together . . .” (100). It is easy to assume that Cather’s imagination shared the analogical quality of Latour’s, whether or not she shared his doctrinal beliefs. Her depiction of the Catholic sacramental or incarnational worldview corresponds to

representations of embodiment that recur throughout her fiction. Cather often locates a transcendent consciousness in the human body, as she does, for example in *The Song of the Lark*, when Thea begins to understand the Indian women potters by imagining herself in their physical space, walking as they must have, babies on their backs. Thea's epiphanic understanding that art contains "life itself" occurs when she baptizes herself with water in Panther Canyon (273). In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Magdalena's "very body has changed" (220) once she has been redeemed from her degraded life with Buck Scales. Furthermore, throughout her fiction, Cather's typical symbol-making endows elements of the created order with a transcendence, a sacrality, that corresponds to the Catholic doctrine of sacramentality. In *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), for example, the ordinary articles of housekeeping—brooms and brushes and copper pots—become almost sacramentalized in their creative function of making "life itself" (227). Throughout *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Latour displays an authentically Catholic imagination precisely because he perceives an interchange, an analogy rather than a binary difference, between the sacred and the profane: he accepts the suffering of agonizing thirst by comparing it to the Passion of Christ (19); he celebrates the Edenic origins of the garden (279); he compares being led out of the sand-hills of the desert to the flight into Egypt (30); he compares the vast incompleteness of the mesa to the Biblical act of Creation (100); the rock of Ácoma reminds him of the apostle Peter (103).



As someone who teaches American Catholic literature, I've begun to attend to a conversation that is developing about its disappearance. In December 2012, Paul Elie, the author of a well-received critical study of American Catholic writers (*The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*, 2003), published an essay on the front page of the *New York Times Book Review*, entitled "Has Fiction Lost Its Faith?" in which he asserts that "Christian belief figures into literary fiction in our place and time . . . as something between a dead language and a hangover" (1). Despite the fact that the personal experience of religion figures in the fiction of Louise Erdrich, Alice McDermott, William Kennedy, Don DeLillo, Jeffrey Eugenides, and others, Elie points out, contemporary fiction generally demonstrates a "refusal to grant belief any explanatory power," an inability to "dramatize belief the way it feels in your experience, at once a fact on the ground and a sponsor of the uncanny, an account of our predicament that still and all has the old power to persuade" (15). In a related essay in *First Things* (an interreligious journal aligned with neoconservative Roman Catholicism), Dana Gioia "encourages Catholic writers to

renovate and reoccupy their own tradition" (33). Gioia states that "although Roman Catholicism constitutes the largest religious and cultural group in the United States, Catholicism currently enjoys almost no positive presence in [American literature]" (33); this, he contends, "marks a major historical change" from the mid-twentieth century, when American Catholic writers were widely reviewed, when their presence was enlarged by the British Catholic revival and a dynamic community of European Catholic writers like François Mauriac and Georges Bernanos (35–36). Catholic writers are no longer a coherent community, Gioia laments; they are no longer willing to identify themselves as Catholic (37). They practice their faith privately and do not engage it in their writing.

I understand Elie and Gioia's consternation at finding no reflection of their own experience in the literary canon. But I wonder whether they might be missing something.<sup>4</sup> In a 2002 essay in *Commonweal*, explaining his own decision to identify as a Catholic novelist, Peter Quinn discerns four elements present in any genuinely Catholic work of fiction: "the communion of saints; sin, suffering, and redemption . . . grace; and *the Incarnation*" (18; my emphasis). Yet despite Elie's insistence that contemporary fiction dramatize matters of belief, despite Gioia's urgent call to Catholic community and identity, neither one identifies



Titian: Christ Blessing, c. 1570; the State Hermitage Museum.



the sacramental or incarnational worldview—or the analogical imagination—as a marker of Catholic fiction. Gioia mourns the contemporary Church’s neglect of “its glorious physicality, its ability to convey its truths as incarnate” (40), but he attributes it to a decline in Catholic visual art and music, and does not seek the same quality in literature. To notice the representation of the incarnate world in Catholic fiction, however, is to enlarge our understanding of what “Catholic literature” means. Gioia himself reminds us of Flannery O’Connor’s pronouncement: “The Catholic novelist doesn’t have to be a saint; he doesn’t even have to be a Catholic; he does, unfortunately, have to be a novelist” (42). All of Quinn’s markers of Catholic fiction are present in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, but it is the pervasive representation of sacramentality, of the analogical imagination, that invites us to include Cather in the eclipsed tradition Elie and Gioia lament. We might question whether that tradition is eclipsed after all, for surely Cather is not alone in writing toward a transcendent and sacred world in which, “our perceptions being made finer . . . our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always.”

#### NOTES

1. For an analysis of the influence of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* on Cather’s “spiritual quest novels,” including *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, see John J. Murphy’s “Cather’s New World Divine Comedy: The Dante Connection” in *Cather Studies 1* (1990) 21–35.

2. Although Thiel ecumenically uses the word “Christian” in defining Roman Catholic belief, not all Christian denominations share the Catholic definition of “sacrament.” Most Protestant denominations recognize only two sacraments, baptism and communion; some, like the Quakers, recognize none. There is also considerable difference among Christian theologies regarding the efficacy of the sacraments, including the Catholic belief (originating with Augustine) that sacraments confer grace, and various Protestant views that sacraments affirm a state of grace that has already been attained by the recipient.

3. Cather’s depiction of French and Bohemian Catholic culture in *O Pioneers!* (1913) indicates her early interest in the connection between the chivalric tradition and Marian devotion. The young farm boys on horseback, who ride out to meet the bishop come to administer confirmation at Sainte-Agnès, “longed for a Jerusalem to deliver” (226), and they remind the bishop that “the Church still has her cavalry” (227). Emil Bergson, who had dressed as a *caballero* for the church fair, resolves to act on his

love for Marie Shabata when he is transported by Raoul Marcel’s performance of Gounod’s “*Ave Maria*” during the confirmation Mass (228–29). Even Amédée Chevalier’s surname is a reminder of the chivalric tradition.

4. One thing both men are missing is any acknowledgement of the contemporary American novelist, memoirist, and essayist Mary Gordon, who figures prominently in Catholic literary and political discourse. (See, for example, her August 2014 contribution to *Harper’s*, “Francis and the Nuns: Is the New Vatican All Talk?” as well as novels like *Pearl* (2006), a treatment of hunger striking in Ireland informed by the beliefs of Simone Weil.) Elie and Gioia’s omissions of any reference to her are incomprehensible.

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# Fair Rosamond and Fierce Rosamund: European Models for the Older Daughter in *The Professor's House*

Peter M. Sullivan

Critical approaches to Willa Cather's 1925 novel *The Professor's House* have focused on the notion that this work more than others illustrates Cather's modernist views, expressing her disillusionment with the consumer culture and the loss of noble values that defined America's past. Her much-cited comment that for her the world had broken in two expressed a pessimism and sense of loss that would endure for years. Yet, Cather was experiencing literary and commercial successes; prior to the appearance of *The Professor's House* she had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her war novel *One of Ours*, and had also published the well-received novel *A Lost Lady*, both providing income that allowed a comfortable lifestyle. Cather, as scholars have noted, was not averse to luxury, and participated in the consumer culture.

Among the approaches to reading *The Professor's House*, ecological interpretations, such as that of Kelsey Squire, have focused on the aesthetic appreciation of and attachment to place, which can be diminished, by conspicuous consumption and cosmopolitanism. Further addressing the consumer culture, Richard Harris discusses parallels between early novels of Chicagooan Henry Blake Fuller and *The Professor's House*, finding that Cather likely drew on Fuller for themes and characters that illustrate the impact of conspicuous consumption on family values. As David Harrell theorizes, a focus on Cather's attraction to the Southwest, the cliff dwellings at Mesa Verde, and Cather's travels in Arizona and New Mexico is central to "Tom Outland's Story," the key to the novel. James Woodress, in his Historical Essay in the Scholarly Edition of the novel, agrees, and discusses its many different sources (Harrell 6; *The Professor's House* 297–316). But remarks made by Cather herself to close friends offer another, fascinating perspective. Writing to Irene Miner Weisz on February 17, 1925, Cather expresses her pleasure that Irene had read the manuscript and "got at once the really fierce feeling that lies behind the rather dry and impersonal manner of the telling" (*Selected Letters* 366). And in a letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher later that year Cather sounds a cautionary note, referring to the novel as "a nasty, grim little tale . . ." (*Selected Letters* 375). With these remarks she hints at the bitter feelings underlying relationships in the family of protagonist Godfrey St. Peter, a professor at a small Midwestern college.



Edward Burne-Jones: Fair Rosamund and Queen Eleanor, 1861; Yale Center for British Art.

Although the Professor, whose multivolume work *Spanish Adventurers in North America* established his scholarly reputation, shows an abiding affection for his daughters, tensions persist. The younger Kathleen, married to newspaper man Scott McGregor, leads a modest existence, while older daughter Rosamond and husband Louie Marsellus, made wealthy by the commercial exploitation of a patent inherited by Rosamond, are furnishing a new mansion and can afford a limousine. The Professor is repelled by his older daughter's insensitivity and her blatant acquisitiveness, which also remain a source of friction between the sisters. In discussing the novel Woodress does not offer prototypes for Rosamond or Kathleen, though Harris suggests a possible model for Rosamond in a Fuller novel.



As Cather's descriptions of the Professor's older daughter and her name suggest, a further search for models clearly lead to the European tradition.

In the small town of Hamilton where the family resides, there has long been consensus about the striking beauty of the Professor's older daughter, suggesting a legendary beauty of the same name, Rosamund de Clifford. Known as "Fair Rosamond" or "Rose of the World," derived from Latin "*rosa mundi*," this English noblewoman became the mistress of King Henry II, the spouse of Eleanor of Aquitaine. (While most scholarly sources spell her name "Rosamund," this historical person has become "Rosamond" in legend—that is, the spelling Cather uses—so that is how I will refer to her here.) Legends emphasize a jealous rivalry between Rosamond and the older queen, one indicating that Rosamond was poisoned by Eleanor, although few of the stories can be substantiated. Rosamond, it is said, remained at the king's estate at Woodstock, which the king had surrounded by a garden that was actually a labyrinth. (Built, it was said, to keep Eleanor's spies from discovering the liaison, but equally effective in physically containing the beautiful paramour.) When

Rosamond died she was buried at Godstow Nunnery, where her tomb in front of the high altar became a popular shrine; on a visit to the church, however, Bishop Hugh of Lincoln ordered that because of Rosamond's sinful example her remains be removed to the cemetery ("Rosamond," *New Britannica* 10, 179; Abbott; Matthews). Since the late Middle Ages the story of "Fair Rosamond" has received literary treatment in prose and poetry, including a well-known drama by Algernon Charles Swinburne (1837–1909), a favorite author of Cather's.

Swinburne's drama, *Rosamond*, appeared in 1860 and reveals his early attraction to medieval romance and courtly love themes. Though the play has been dismissed by critics as "a mere Pre-Raphaelite exercise," it is inspired by Swinburne's passion for the traditions of troubadour poetry (Harrison 37). In Swinburne's play, Rosamond, mistress of Henry II, espouses a religion of love, conceiving herself as a beautiful woman like the famous ones of antiquity who inspired potentially destructive passions. Though Rosamond is enchanted with her own beauty,

she is insecure in her relationship with the king. Surrounded by rose blossoms in the maze at Woodstock, she sits alone, sensitive to the world's gossip. Recalling the king's adulation, though, she considers herself and that of the world about her in terms of beauty, the ultimate value Swinburne associates with love (40). According to Swinburne's aestheticism, it is beauty that can assure love and salvation.

Several of "Fair Rosamond's" qualities are reminiscent of the Professor's older daughter, Rosamond Marsellus. She too is particularly aware of her beauty, and is reminded of it by an admiring husband, giving her a high level of self-esteem. And just as the king's paramour is held at the lodge at Woodstock, the older daughter will be kept at the couple's new mansion, behind "wrought-iron door fittings" (40), hinges and latches that her husband Louie has ordered installed everywhere, rather than the more popular "Colonial glass knobs" (40). Rosamond, metaphorically, will become a trophy of the extravagant Louie, whose name echoes the French monarchs of the *Ancien Régime*, hinting at royalty; and appropriately the Professor considers Louie's suggested offer of a trip to France at his expense

a "princely invitation" (159). Louie comments that Rosamond does not really care about the intrinsic value of the gifts he has given her, saying that to her a gift "must be beautiful, first of all" (106). Thus, Cather's Rosamond, like Swinburne's heroine, prizes beauty, but is more attracted to desirable, material things.

A further motif in the novel suggests the paramour of the English king. As the Professor looks at one of the wire forms left in his study that once held dresses for his young daughters, it is mentioned that "At times the wire lady was most convincing in her pose as a woman of light behaviour, but she never fooled St. Peter. He had . . . never been taken in by one of her kind!" (19). St. Peter even visualizes the form descending the stairs to dance a waltz. This motif recurs as Louie comments at a dinner party that his wife is Tom Outland's virtual widow (42); and while on their way home Louie's brother-in-law, Scott McGregor, asks his wife Kathleen sarcastically, "Now what the hell is a virtual widow? Does he mean a virtuous widow, or the reverseous? Bang, bang!" (46), a comment resembling one of Scott's newspaper jingles.



Charles Landseer: Assassination of Alboin, King of the Lombards, 1856; private collection.

This biting humor implies Rosamond's meretricious behavior in allowing the usurper Louie to exploit the patent she inherited from her dead fiancé, Tom Outland. As such, the allusions to questionable morals in the novel hint at parallels between the older daughter and Henry's "Fair Rosamond," known to history and legend as a beautiful concubine. And husband Louie even chides Rosamond for being "naughty" (164) when she asserts that Scott blackballed him from serving on a committee in their country club, but Louie then admits: "I love her when she's naughty" (167).

But the fierceness underlying relationships that Cather mentioned in her letters suggests another, very different prototype with a similar name. A noblewoman born in the sixth century, Rosamund was a princess of the Gepids, a Germanic tribe that fought wars against the Lombards. ("Rosamund" is the usual spelling for the sixth century noblewoman.) Recognizing this group as a long-standing enemy, Alboin, the Lombard king, allied himself with the Avars, a people to the east of the Gepid kingdom, and in a pincer movement crushed the Gepids in a last battle. Alboin killed their leader, Cunimund, decapitating him; and the Gepids lost their identity as a tribe as they were subsumed under the Lombards, who invaded northern Italy. After the death of Alboin's first wife he forced Rosamund to marry him. According to legend the cruel Alboin feasted at a banquet and passed around a cup that was made of the hollowed-out skull of Rosamund's father, compelling her to drink from it ("Alboin" *New Britannica* 1, 221). Grievously offended, the Lombard queen sought revenge.

Rosamund had taken a lover, Helmechis, the king's arms bearer, and asked him to assassinate Alboin. Helmechis was not able to convince a strong man at court, Peredeo, to carry out the deed, thus it was arranged that Peredeo would have a liaison with a servant who was actually the disguised Rosamund. Soon realizing he had committed adultery with the king's wife, Peredeo agreed to do the killing. Rosamund assisted by having the king's sword tied to the bedpost so that he could not dislodge it, and when attacked the king could only ward off the assassin with a footstool and was slain. Rosamund later fled with Helmechis, whom she married, to the protection of the Byzantines in Ravenna. Here Rosamund came to favor the Byzantine prefect, Longinus, and devised a plan to murder her husband by poisoning him. The intended victim, though, swallowed only half the drink and forced Rosamund to imbibe the remainder, ending both their lives ("Rosamond" *Ommilexica; Infoplease*). A ghastly tale, it later became the subject of a Piedmontese folk song, *Dona Lombarda* (Marzo 4), and there were other treatments of the topic in the Italian language

including a drama by Vittorio Alfieri (1749–1803), a tragedy in five acts translated into English for an 1856 London stage performance (Alfieri).

When Cather traveled to Italy in 1908 with Edith Lewis, she visited a monastery near Rome where she came upon "the original code of the Lombard League," a twelfth century alliance of cities against the Holy Roman Emperor (*Selected Letters* 109). Cather was likely exposed to the history of the region and may have heard the story of the Lombard queen. But Cather had English language sources at her disposal, including the book titled *Alboin and Rosamond and Lesser Poems* by Robert Burton Rodney, appearing in 1870, and another play by Algernon Charles Swinburne titled *Rosamund, Queen of the Lombards: a Tragedy*. In Swinburne's 1899 drama *Queen Rosamund*, when forced to drink from the skull-cup, vows revenge. She arranges for her servant Hildegard to give up her maidenhood to the warrior Almachildes, but then takes her place. The queen's evil plot becomes apparent as she threatens to have her servant burned at the stake as a harlot if Almachildes does not agree to murder the king. At a banquet Alboin promises to enshrine the skull-cup after everyone drinks from it once more. A poison mixture has been prepared for him, but Almachildes slays the king before he can drink it. Her revenge complete, Rosamund herself drinks from the cup, and a wise old man witnessing the scene pronounces this a horrid and hellish end, not of man's doing.

Aspects of this gruesome account are suggested in Cather's *The Professor's House*. Several references to skulls occur, including Kathleen's taking note of the shape of her father's head that she thinks makes him handsome; and in this description the head is said to be polished, hard as bronze, and throwing off a streak of light "along the rounded ridge where the skull was the fullest" (14), looking more like a statue's head than a man's. Later, in "Tom Outland's Story," the skulls of cliff dwellers are examined by Tom's mentor Father Duchêne, focusing on the likely intelligence of the ancient tribe. The related motif of decapitation appears at several places in the novel; while in his attic study the Professor observes the "headless, armless" female forms used for making his daughters' dresses (18), and after the Professor's grueling shopping trip with Rosamond, Mrs. St. Peter asks him if "Rosamond lost her head?" (153). He replies in the negative, adding that she was perfectly cool. And, as the story of the Lombard queen shows, it was not her but her father who lost his head. A similar colloquial expression occurs in "Tom Outland's Story" when the foreman warns Tom and Roddy not to let their cook Henry guard the cattle, because he lacks physical strength "and he's got no head," meaning he had no experience with cattle and would not know



how to act at a critical moment (195). Roddy advises Henry that when crossing the chilling Cruzados River “You have to keep your head” (204); Henry is later killed on the mesa by a rattler striking him “square in the forehead” (215).

Besides the allusions to skulls and phrases suggestive of decapitation there are references to special drinking cups. Kathleen mentions “*Amis and Amile*” (129), figures in the thirteenth century French romance *Amis et Amiles* who are given identical wooden cups adorned with gold and precious stones by the pope who baptized them; and these cups would later reveal one long-lost friend to the other (362). By contrast the skull-cup that Alboin has fashioned represents a barbaric gesture and incites his wife to revenge. And as recalled by Tom Outland, at a Washington party someone “spilt claret-cup” on Mrs. Bixby’s expensive skirt, causing her husband to emit a painful cry (232).

These allusions hint at parallels with the story of the Lombard queen, and obliquely imply the harshness of the Professor’s older daughter. And added to the several gruesome motifs is that of extermination. As Tom learns from his mentor Father Duchêne, the culture of the cliff dwellers was likely exterminated by aggressive bands of Indians, just as the native tribe of Queen Rosamund was crushed by the powerful Lombards, and no longer existed as an independent group. Several references to wearing animal furs (81–83) suggest the killing of a species to supply the consumer culture with luxury items. And as the Professor reflects on his life, he acknowledges that the delight he had taken in his family’s activities in the old house has been eradicated by the acquisitiveness of Rosamond, Louie, and his own wife, Lillian. Expressions describing this older daughter often suggest queenly aloofness. Seeming distant and uncaring, she sometimes wears a “haughty expression” and the “curl of her lips was handsome, but terrifying” (81). The Professor notices Rosamond wearing things with “a kind of lurking purple and lavender in them,” colors symbolic of royalty which he thinks splendid for her (81). As she descends the stairs leaving his attic study, the Professor notes the aroma of lavender and orris-root (64), the dried root of the beautiful and fragrant iris, a flower symbolic of power and majesty and the origin of the royal scepter (Grieve 434); and its sword-like, bluish-green leaves suggest the sharpness of a weapon that might be used to ward off any envious opponents.

Cather’s repetition of phrases suggests the intensity of feeling throughout the novel. It is mentioned that St. Peter worked “so fiercely by night” (29) as a young scholar, and later his wife Lillian became “fiercely jealous” (50) of the Professor’s student and friend Tom Outland. As a young woman she had “very vehement likes and dislikes” (50), and Kathleen’s husband Scott, whom the

Professor convinced to play the role of the Plantagenet Richard the Lionheart in a college tableau, stands with his brows “fiercely frowning” (74). Here, the reference to the House of Plantagenet is reminiscent of a family torn by bloody feuds, and obliquely hints at Richard’s father, King Henry II, whose paramour was “Fair Rosamond.” As Professor St. Peter notices about younger daughter Kathleen, she sets her chin “so fiercely” (88), and when Lillian questions her husband about keeping the old house, the



*Algernon Charles Swinburne, age twenty-three. Copy of a sketch by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1859–1860.*

ends of the Professor’s formidable eyebrows ascended and he “muttered fiercely” that it was his only extravagance (96). Further showing the harshness that lurks below family relationships, the Professor’s son-in-law Scott notes that Rosamond has run her father “to death” on the shopping trip to Chicago, and that the Marselluses “have no mercy” (151) with regard to using up his strength, and insisting on his time and advice to shop for their Spanish furniture. Like the legendary queen of the Lombards, Cather’s Rosamond is characterized as “revengeful” (84). As a traditional symbol of envy, the color green appears throughout the novel. Kathleen’s hazel-colored hair has “distinctly green glints in it” (38) and there is even mention of her turning “green

with envy” (85). As a natural color, it also appears as the “green” salad at dinner and “green” plants in the sitting room downstairs, and it is the color of the door to the Professor’s garden. Louie presents his wife with emeralds, precious green-colored stones that he can now afford, and asserts that in his view “her name spells emeralds” (75).

Finally, references to the horse and to protection in the novel also suggest connections to the Lombard queen. In the Professor’s garden is a spreading horse-chestnut tree, and he regrets not having visited Paris with Tom, where “the yellow horse-chestnuts were bright and bitter after rain . . .” (260). Conversing with the Professor, his old German landlord recalls that he had to work like a horse in his youth (53). These and other references are suggestive of the origin of queen’s name Rosamund meaning “noted protector” and “horse protector,” based on the Germanic *bro*s, for horse or steed, and *munt*, protection. As such the name is reminiscent of the Germanic peoples’ deep reverence for horses, whose whinnying, ear movements, and stamping gestures were thought to prophesy outcomes of battles (Sullivan 50–53). As a parent, the Professor recalls his own role as protector, and that it was Kathleen as a girl who needed his protection more than Rosamond, who leaned toward her mother.

As motifs and references in Cather’s novel suggest, two noblewomen who have been the subjects of European legends and literature may have served as prototypes for the character of the Professor’s older daughter: the beautiful paramour “Fair Rosamond” and the harsh, calculating Lombard queen. Although the beauty of Rosamond Marcellus is recognized widely, the Professor has his doubts, and also finds the traits of insensitivity and cruelty, which he regrets. In *The Professor’s House* Cather presents the bitter feelings underlying family relationships, but she also reminds the reader of historical figures, two women of similar name, who probably served as models for the Professor’s older daughter and much of the novel’s imagery, and whose celebrated stories form a connection between the Old World and the New.

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# The Translation in the Closet: Willa Cather and Marguerite Yourcenar

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Among the many gems to be found in Janis Stout and Andrew Jewell's *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* is Cather's 1938 letter to her publisher Alfred A. Knopf, which has brought to light a hitherto hidden connection between Cather and Marguerite Yourcenar, one of France's most renowned writers and the first woman to become a member of the French Academy. The two women had recently met to discuss Yourcenar's ongoing translation of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and Cather takes Yourcenar to task for failing to understand the aesthetics of her novel, as shown by Yourcenar's desire to translate into French the many Spanish words that crop up in the narrative. Cather also deplores Yourcenar's lack of acquaintance with the American

Southwest which she herself regarded as the main protagonist of the novel, and she unfavorably compares Yourcenar's translation with that of Alessandra Scalero for the Italian translation of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. At the time, Yourcenar had already published quite a few novels, essays, and poems, and she was also very much involved in translating the works of other novelists, but she had not yet written the novels that would bring her national and international recognition in the 1950s. The clash between the two women was quite a predictable one—a clash between two strong-willed, self-assured writers whose positions on questions of art and creation could be quite dogmatic at times.

Mark Madigan has already focused on the story of this aborted translation and on the process that eventually led Christine Carel to take up the task of translating the novel for Editions Stock. His findings throw light upon what had so far been regarded by Yourcenar critics as a mere “project,” since no one had ever found any trace of the translation itself.<sup>1</sup> A number of shadowy zones remain, however, and I imagine they will persist until more of Yourcenar's correspondence with her partner Grace Frick is eventually unsealed in 2037 (Savigneau 129). How was *Death Comes for the Archbishop* brought to Yourcenar's attention? Why did she choose to translate it in the first place? And what became of Yourcenar's translation after the work had been taken up by Carel? None of these questions will be given a definite answer in the space of this essay, but a closer look at the lives and works of the two writers suggests that a deeper current of affinities might have run between them after all.

I will focus first on Yourcenar's whereabouts between 1937 and 1949, those twelve years that correspond to a marked decrease in inspiration and creativity in her life. Then I will examine the long, painstaking process that would eventually lead her to publish her bestselling and most outstanding contribution to French letters, *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1951). My belief is that Yourcenar's hidden connection with Cather acted as a catalyst in channeling her own creative energies in the late 1940s, once she had gained enough maturity to draw on the best of the bitter experience of her failed translation. Cather's almost numinous influence consequently illuminates both the genesis of *Memoirs of Hadrian* and its contribution to the new directions generally taken by the historical novel at the time.



Marguerite Yourcenar, Northeast Harbor, Maine, 1985.  
©Thomas Hoepker/Magnum Photos.



## Shadowy Zones: 1937 and 1949

Ironically enough, the first woman to enter the French Academy was not born in France but in Belgium and then left France to settle in the United States, where she later applied for American citizenship. Quite a few observers have underlined that Marguerite de Crayencour, or Madame, as she was later called even by her friends, was acutely aware of her aristocratic origins. Yourcenar's new acquaintances were at once struck by her haughty demeanor and aristocratic bearing,<sup>2</sup> but some of them also noted the twinkle in the eye that revealed her sharp intellect and caustic sense of humor. Even after spending many years in the U.S., she remained aloof, while her companion, Grace Frick, more freely interacted and socialized with their neighbors.

Frick, a young American from Kansas, had fallen for Yourcenar right after their first chance meeting in a Parisian café in 1937. She soon invited Yourcenar to follow her to the U.S., and the two young women consequently set off for America in September 1937. While Yourcenar had been working on the translation of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* since 1935 (Madigan),<sup>3</sup> little is known about her activities during these few months in the U.S. Yourcenar's biographer Josyane Savigneau points out that she would never talk about that first winter in the U.S. (129). In light of Cather's revelation to Knopf, one may wonder if what Savigneau puts down to Yourcenar's desire to protect her private life might have been partly motivated by the spite she felt at having her translation turned down by Cather. One thing is sure: during that period, as if still under the spell of Cather's *Archbishop*, she was also meditating at length upon her own relationship to Catholicism and religious feelings, as indicated in her regular correspondence with Catholic essay writer Charles Du Bos. In one of her letters to him (dated December 1937), she evokes the disorder characterizing the times and leading her to view the Catholic tradition as a most valuable part of our complex inheritance, praising Christianity as "the admirable sum of twenty centuries of experience, and one of man's most beautiful dreams" (letter to Charles Du Bos, dated 21–23 December 1937, Harvard, quoted by Savigneau 131, my translation). And yet later, when asked about the state of her mind at this time in her life, she claimed that she had never been more estranged from Christian thought and religious concerns in general (Savigneau 131–132)—a statement which these letters to Du Bos, published in the mid 1960s, would come to blatantly contradict.

Yourcenar's probable desire to throw a veil of secrecy over her meeting with Cather is also suggested in the contradictory statements she and Frick would later make when it came to dating her translation work. Frick once insisted that Yourcenar had worked on the translation of *What Maisie Knew* in 1937 and 1938 (though the book would not be published before 1947),

while Yourcenar herself maintained that she was, at that time, working on a translation of Greek poet Constantine Cavafy (Savigneau 142). Both statements are now suspect considering Cather's letter to Knopf, as Yourcenar's translation of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was obviously still in progress when the two writers met in 1938. What Yourcenar did in the U.S. in the course of these few months is either open to suspicion or simply goes unrecorded in her correspondence and biographies, as if a veil of silence had been deliberately thrown over that period in her life. Yourcenar sailed back to France in April 1938 and spent the next year or so travelling across Europe. The war broke out just as she was preparing to sail back to New York to spend another winter with Frick in the U.S. This was in September 1939. Little did she know then that her departure marked the beginning of a twelve-year exile.

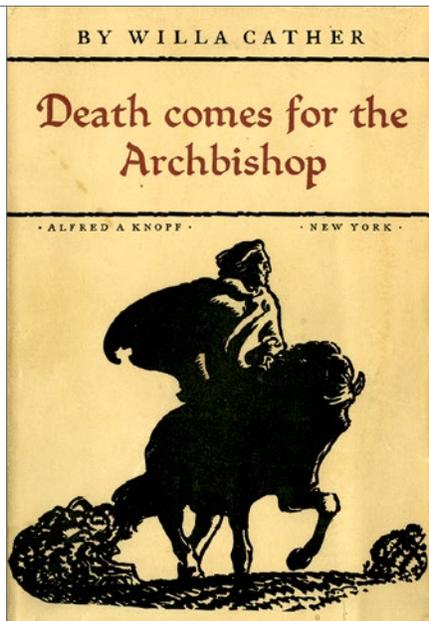
The two women would then try to make a living from teaching and conferences, and strange twists of fate would lead Yourcenar to cross Cather's path in more ways than one. Of all places in the U.S., Mount Desert Island happens to be the summer retreat both writers chose in the 1940s. While Cather spent the last four summers of her life there (between 1943 and 1947), Yourcenar and Frick discovered the place in 1942 and eventually decided to buy a house there in 1950, a house Yourcenar would frequent until her death in 1987. Whether they ever met on the island is open to conjecture but Yourcenar and Frick definitely spent the summers of 1943 and 1944 in Somesville, only a few miles north of Northeast Harbor, where Cather and Lewis had settled. The unexpected arrival of a long-lost trunk from Europe in January 1949 would then clinch the parallel in the personal and professional trajectories of the two writers.

### A Process of Slow Infusion: The Genesis of *Memoirs of Hadrian*

Despite occasional and short-lived spurts of creative energy, the 1940s were marked by a growing lassitude and despondency, Yourcenar having lost all literary ambition and settling into the rut of domesticity.<sup>4</sup> Some extraordinary twist of fate was going to revive these ambitions, however, and allow her to win both national and international acclaim. This twist of fate took the shape of a trunk that Yourcenar had left in a hotel in Switzerland before the war and that was eventually sent to her in December of 1948—a trunk that contained old letters, family papers and also fragments of her work from the 1930s. Most of these were unfortunately thrown into the fire, if we are to believe Yourcenar's account, so that one will never know if the trunk also contained some of the sheets from her aborted translation and perhaps even some of Cather's letters. The only



remnant from the past that Yourcenar freely talks about is a bundle of yellowing sheets starting with the inscription “My dear Mark . . .” *Mark*. . . . What friend or love, what distant relative was this? I could not recall the name at all. It was several minutes before I remembered that Mark stood here for *Marcus Aurelius*, and that I had in hand a fragment of the lost manuscript. From that



“What was there in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* that made it so inseparable from Yourcenar’s lifelong fascination with Hadrian?”



essays *Not Under Forty* (published in 1936), her words undoubtedly echo Cather’s credo when she states: “There are books which one should not attempt before having passed the age of forty. Earlier than that one may well fail to recognize those great natural boundaries which from person to person, and from century to century, separate the infinite variety of mankind; or, on the contrary, one may

attach too much importance to mere administrative barriers, to the customs houses or the sentry boxes erected between man and man. It took me years to learn how to calculate exactly the distances between the emperor and myself” (Yourcenar, *Memoirs* 270–271).

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Yourcenar’s 1937 trip consequently marked the beginning of a long period of time when discouragement and even despair got the better of her. Retrieving her old papers eleven years later was the trigger that energized Yourcenar into a productive phase of creative frenzy. Hadrian’s specter had come back to haunt her, but this time Yourcenar was determined to exorcise her double and give it literary shape and existence. Her next step was most unexpected from someone who had suddenly found the renewed energy to finish a long-standing project. No sooner had she made the decision to get back to work than she started packing her suitcases and set off on a trip to New Mexico! Cather’s letter to Knopf now throws quite an ironic light upon such a decision, since one of her two major bones of contention, and possibly the root of her discord with Yourcenar, is that the young woman had never even set foot in the Southwest, knew very little about it, and consequently intended to “paraphrase” Cather’s descriptions of the landscape (*Selected Letters* 548). Once more, Hadrian and Latour appear to be closely connected, despite the temporal and geographical distance separating them. Once Yourcenar had reached her destination she could at last familiarize herself with the landscapes that had been so much a part of Latour’s adventures. This was very much like a rebirth for Yourcenar, as noted by Frick in her diary; she had not seen her companion so happy for years (Savigneau 191). This was the book of a lifetime, a book that had been lying dormant inside her for almost thirty years, whose progress had been marked by many fits and starts,

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but also (as Yourcenar probably intuited herself) the book that would bring her lasting fame in the literary world.

## Revisiting the Historical Novel

What was there in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* that made it so inseparable from Yourcenar's lifelong fascination with Hadrian? In fashioning what was going to become their respective masterpieces, both Cather and Yourcenar were attempting to capture a moment of transition in the history of mankind, a time of chaos when old assumptions were crumbling away and when the shape of things to come was still undefinable. One can easily understand why the story of a French priest stranded in desert landscapes and confronted with the ancient beliefs of the local populations had such an appeal for Yourcenar. Both protagonists belong to a time of transition between pagan times and Christianity, and both will struggle to impose some form of order on the primeval chaos they face: "Just when the gods had ceased to be, and the Christ had not yet come, there was a unique moment in history, between Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, when man stood alone." A great part of my life was going to be spent in trying to define, and then to portray, that man existing alone, and yet closely bound with all being," states Yourcenar in her "Reflections" (*Memoirs* 269).<sup>5</sup>

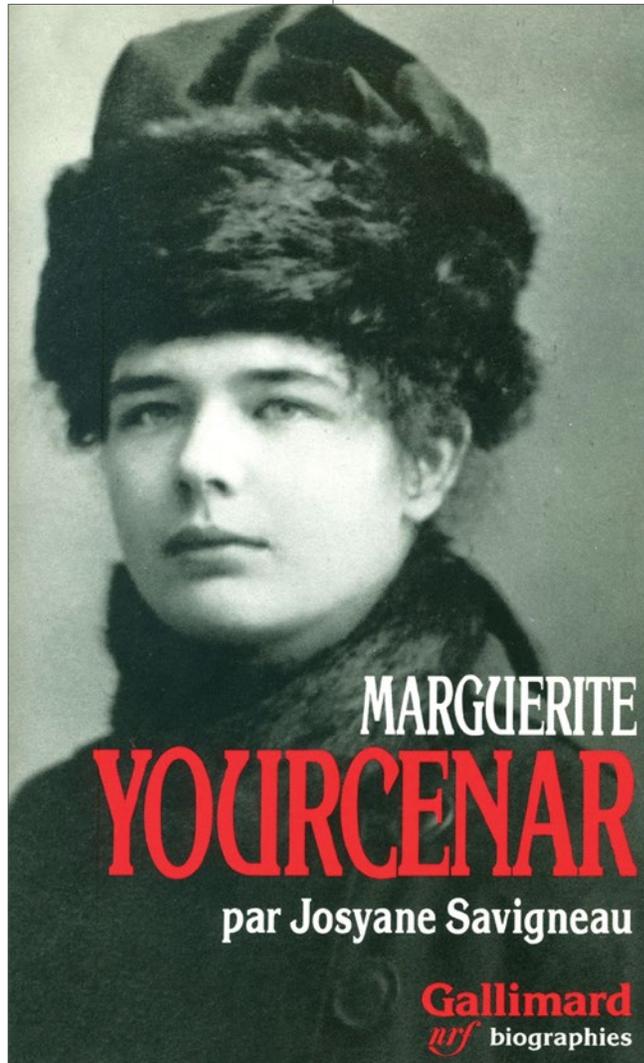
Yourcenar's work was somehow out of sync with the main literary currents of the time and *Memoirs of Hadrian* naturally resisted being forced into a neat category. Critics have diversely referred to it as fictional memoirs, apocryphal memoirs, a biography or even a lyrical biography (Julien 96). Yourcenar herself is said to have used the word "narrative" (*récit*),<sup>6</sup> the same word Cather used to refer to *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in her famous 1927 letter to the *Commonweal*. As noted by Anne-Yvonne Julien, the *nouveau roman* was then bursting onto the literary landscape, with emphasis on experimental practices and narrative deconstructing and negating forms of humanism that

had proved powerless in the face of so many wartime atrocities (7). Inversely, *Memoirs of Hadrian* (and later *The Abyss*) affirm Yourcenar's belief in the redemptive virtues of humanism in the face of chaos, and though she might appear to have taken refuge in the faraway past (the second century CE with Hadrian, the sixteenth century with Zénon in *The Abyss*), this is merely a strategy to approach her own times from a renewed, enlightened perspective.

Like Cather before her, she revised the outdated form of the historical novel to address from a different angle a number of concerns that were actually quite topical.

Yourcenar also had to resolve fundamental questions of point of view, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* might well have played a role in helping her handle some tricky issues. Her very first attempts to approach the emperor's life had been done in the form of dialogue and from the point of view of Antinous, the Greek youth who soon became Hadrian's favorite. Dissatisfied with such experiments, Yourcenar destroyed these early drafts and in 1934 settled for a new narrative strategy, very likely around the time she discovered *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which she apparently started translating in 1935. At this time she wrote that famous sentence: "I begin to discern the profile of my death"—a powerful sentence that she would retain sixteen years later in her final composition and that

definitely sets the tone for the work in progress. 1934 was also the year she published a collection of three stories whose title (*La Mort conduit l'attelage*) strangely echoes Cather's novel.<sup>7</sup> Positing death as the initial standpoint from which a whole life will be assessed resulted in giving more weight and significance to each and every detail of this life. In both works also, Rome is used as a starting-point from which to encompass a wide panorama of experience: Latour's exploration of the vast desert landscapes of the American Southwest and Hadrian's travels to the far reaches of the Roman empire.



Yourcenar as a young woman, as shown on the cover of Josyane Savigneau's 1990 biography, Marguerite Yourcenar: L'invention d'une vie.



Julien underlines that, in Yourcenar's eyes, Hadrian embodied a form of political intelligence in the Greek sense of the term; this political intelligence showed, she says, in his concern for innovation and reform, his desire to save a fragile economy, to improve the status of the slaves and their protection by the law, to stabilize the Roman empire, to put into practice the ideas of Greek philosophers and to respect the contribution of Greek art and culture (157). The same concerns characterize Latour. That Hadrian was connected with the world of the *Archbishop* in Yourcenar's mind is suggested by her observation that the young Mexican boys she saw in Santa Fe were not so different, after all, from the little boy Hadrian used to be (Goslar, *Yourcenar* 172). The personalities of the French archbishop and the Roman emperor bear more similarities than one might recognize at first sight. Both are cultivated, refined, immersed in classical culture, and also characterized by a curious blend of asceticism and hedonism. The course of Hadrian's meditation roughly follows the episodes of Latour's adventures in the Southwest: reflections on food, on the various forms of freedom, on ambition, on family bonds, on the value of friendship, on slavery, mankind, women's condition, the fragility of human civilizations, and the inevitability of death (Julien 177). The "haunting appeal of unknown lands and barbarous climes" (Yourcenar, *Memoirs* 282–283) exerts itself on both men, and Hadrian's ambivalent attraction to certain primitive sacrificial rites of initiation echoes Latour's unsettling experience in the ceremonial cave in the Pecos, where he listens to "one of the oldest voices of the earth" (137), the rumblings of some powerful subterranean river. In both cases, be it in the Orient or in the American Southwest, the mysteries of unknown territory stand out as a locus of otherness, where man loses his stability and experiences a profound feeling of alienation (Julien 168). Critics have shown how prominent the theme of the frontier was in *Memoirs of Hadrian*, both as a geographical and ontological location (the extreme edges of the Roman Empire, the border zone between Hadrian's civilized self and the barbarian, more primitive side of his own unconscious).<sup>8</sup> Lastly, Hadrian's "passion for the poetry and legend of an earlier day" (Yourcenar, *Memoirs* 282) is also one that Latour would have found most congenial if we consider his own attempts to preserve "the old legends and customs and superstitions [that] were already dying out" (289).

As if she had at last learned from Cather's attempts to make her aware of the fundamental role of the landscape, Yourcenar presents Hadrian as a man whose mindscape changes under the influence of the landscape in the course of his journeys across the Empire. His and Latour's visions seem to fuse when Hadrian evokes "the landscape of [his] days [that] appears to be composed,

like mountainous regions, of varied materials heaped up pell-mell" (*Memoirs* 32). Yourcenar was also well aware that Hadrian was first and foremost an architect, and it is no coincidence that her attempt to reconstruct his past should run parallel with an evocation of all the cities, buildings, and memorials that now crystallize the memory of the emperor. Yourcenar saw in the edifice "a self-sufficient entity, both a drama in itself and the setting for this drama, the place of a dialogue between the will of man that was still inscribed in this giant masonry work, lifeless mineral energy, and irrevocable Time."<sup>9</sup> She must therefore have been struck by Latour's similar wish to build a cathedral that would be very much like an extension of himself and of his dreams, a cathedral that "seemed to start directly out of those rose-coloured hills—with a purpose so strong that it was like action" (283–284), quite a fitting climax in the life of a man for whom action had always taken precedence over pure reflection and contemplation.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

My aim has not been to reduce the extraordinary complexity and erudition of *Memoirs of Hadrian* to the influence of a single book. Many critics have delved into the hundreds of books Yourcenar immersed herself in to write the story of the emperor, and they have shown to what extent this masterpiece was the product of what is known as "innutrition", i.e., a long process of familiarization, assimilation and eventual appropriation of the sources in which a writer finds creative inspiration. I do believe, however, that *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is one of those great classics on which Yourcenar's world-famous work drew, and that it even acted as a catalyst in her decision to take up the unfinished work she had been struggling with for nearly thirty years. Poring over the long list of books (6,876 in total)<sup>11</sup> to be found in Yourcenar's private library will bring no result. Cather is conspicuously absent from her bookshelves, though such writers as Henry James, Virginia Woolf, and many other American or English writers can be found there. If we consider, along with Yourcenar, that "one of the best ways to reconstruct a man's thinking is to rebuild his library" (*Memoirs* 273), then *Death Comes for the Archbishop* must recover the place that it has long been denied in Yourcenar's intellectual formation.

## NOTES

1. See Mireille Brémont's recent article "Marguerite Yourcenar, infatigable traductrice" (2013). Brémont quotes such sources as Bérengère Deprez's *Marguerite Yourcenar and the USA* (2009) and Lucile Desblaches's "Marguerite Yourcenar: De la



traduction à la création” (1995), neither of which convinces her to think that Yourcenar’s translation of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* had gone beyond the state of a mere project. In her biography of Yourcenar, Michèle Goslar includes a passing reference to the translation of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* in the list of works that Yourcenar left unfinished or simply destroyed (371). Cather is not even mentioned in the voluminous index.

2. See Florence Codman’s testimony in Savigneau’s biography (126–127). After emphasizing that anyone would have found it difficult to resist her charm and authority, Codman remembers that Yourcenar was also very stubborn and had very fixed opinions on literature (127).

3. Cather’s novel might have been introduced to Yourcenar through one of the expatriate writers she frequently met in Paris, among them Gertrude Stein, Janet Flanner and Natalie Barney (see Georgia Hooks Shurr’s “Marguerite Yourcenar et le ‘drame noir’ américain,” 29).

4. This long period of inactivity has puzzled quite a few scholars. Some, like Goslar, have wondered about possible links with Yourcenar’s geographical exile. Goslar even sees in these ten years of near silence (only three short plays in the space of ten years, compared with the fifty or so publications that preceded her departure for the U.S.) the reflection of Yourcenar’s desperate fight against the temptation of absolute emptiness (“L’Exil et le silence,” 178).

5. The first sentence is actually one of Yourcenar’s favorite statements by Flaubert, whose works and correspondence were a rich mine of inspiration for both Cather and Yourcenar.

6. She also occasionally referred to it as “a meditation bordering on history” and “imaginary memoirs” (Julien 96).

7. Unaware of the Cather connection, critics usually trace a line of filiation between Yourcenar and Dickinson whose famous lines “Because I could not stop for Death / he kindly stopped for me; / The carriage held but just ourselves / And Immortality” also resonate in the title of the collection.

8. See Levillain’s illuminating analysis of the theme (60–74).

9. “. . . l’édifice se suffit: il est à la fois le drame et le décor du drame, le lieu d’un dialogue entre la volonté humaine encore inscrite dans ces maçonneries énormes, l’inerte énergie minérale, et l’irrévocable Temps” (“Le Cerveau noir de Piranèse,” 136). My translation.

10. This is indeed something else Latour and Hadrian have in common and which inspired profound respect in both Cather and Yourcenar. Yourcenar once said that the only other historical figure she had ever been tempted to write about was Omar Khayyám, but that the latter was too much of a “pure contemplator” and

of a “somber skeptic,” she said before adding “the world of action meant little to him” (274).

11. See Yvon Bernier’s inventory of Yourcenar’s and Frick’s books in *Petite Plaisance*, their home on Mount Desert Island.

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# The Haunting Continent: Europe in Cather

John J. Murphy

A review of Willa Cather's major canon, in which I include the Avignon fragments as the final entry, reveals Europe's presence as most predominant in her first and final novels. The first, *Alexander's Bridge* (1912), which she disparaged unfairly in one of her expository fictions, "My First Novels [There Were Two]" (1931), is an important novel not only as a lead-in to *The Professor's House* (1925) but to the strategy of setting distinguishing subsequent work. Place becomes a state of mind, as when Bartley Alexander and Hilda Burgoyne enjoy a golden day in London. "I think people were meant to be happy, a little," she says, and the narrator comments, "On such rare afternoons the ugliest of cities becomes the most beautiful, the most prosaic becomes the most poetic, and months of sodden days are offset by a moment of miracle" (84–85). Of course, I will overlook, intentionally or not, evidence readers might add to this survey of Europe as a state of mind or, perhaps, an obsession of Cather's.

## Early Novels

Seven of the eleven chapters of *Alexander's Bridge* are set in London, and in one of these (IV), the Paris of the couple's first infatuation is recalled intensely enough for Bartley to exclaim, "I was back there" (54). The sense of place in these scenes and their tangible and thematic contrast to those set in America are integral to the issue of Europe in Cather, a comparable and even weightier issue than that of the Southwest. Both locales are symbolized by windows. "His existence . . . becoming a network of great and little details" (37) and feeling "dead inside," Bartley reveals in his letter to Hilda that their London affair "has been as if a window beside me had suddenly opened, and as if all the smells of spring blew in to me" (92). Cather thus echoes herself in describing the structure of *The Professor's House*, the first part "rather overcrowded and stuffy," stifling for her professor. "Then I wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa . . ." (*On Writing* 31–32). In the early novel, thin sunlight on naked trees and dark, stormy winter storms in Boston frame a London of theatre and of Hilda's dining room hung round with French prints below shelves of blue china. The dinner there, as Ann Romines notes (83), provides "essential nourishment . . . missing" in the Boston scenes and is the occasion of Bartley and Hilda's Paris reminiscence, full of picturesque detail. Characteristically foggy and dull, Cather's London provides the setting for this jewel-like Parisian set piece, like the "turquoise set in dull silver," as the epigraph of *The Professor's House* has it, that is "Tom Outland's Story." Bursts of brightness in London include the golden day of

Bartley's last scene there and, earlier, his contemplation of "the trails of smoke behind the Houses of Parliament catch[ing] fire in the sunset" (34), a painterly scene recalling Claude Monet's 1900–1901 impressionistic studies of the *Houses of Parliament* (including *Sunset*, *Stormy Sky*, and *Effect of Sunlight in the Fog*) as well as the flame-colored sunsets in Tom's story.

While Cather claimed that in her second "first novel," *O Pioneers!* (1913), she replaced a European setting she knew "very casually" with the familiar Nebraska she knew "very well" and "really did care about" (*On Writing* 92), this other first novel is rife with ambiguity about what she termed her "home pasture" (Bennett 200–201). True, Cather's Nebraska is uninterrupted by London scenes, but, rather, filtered through rural French ones. Her oft-quoted landscape descriptions of "green and brown and yellow fields," of windmills and men and horses at harvesting, of plains that "rise a little to meet the sun" like "the plains of Lombardy" (*O Pioneers!* 73–74) resemble late nineteenth-century French landscapes, like Vincent van Gogh's *Enclosed Field with Ploughman* (1889). Her landscapes are reworkings as well of the descriptions she wrote during her 1902 visit to Barbizon and the "high, windy, dusty country" around Arles (*Willa Cather in Europe* 169), where van Gogh spent his last years. In *O Pioneers!* the French church of Sainte-Agnes high on a hill "with miles of warm color lying at its feet . . . reminded one of the churches built long ago in the wheatlands of middle France" (189). Yet in spite of all this borrowing as well as the mining of European classics like "Keats's 'The Eve of St. Agnes'" and Canto 5 of Dante's *Inferno* (Murphy, "Comprehensive" 124) for her tragic love story, this Cather novel hardly visits Europe in what might be designated as "scenes."

However, the Old World always haunts: Mrs. Bergson struggles to duplicate her life in Sweden; Alexandra, a sunlit Swedish maiden with milk pails, reads *Frithiof's Saga*; Swedish songs are mentioned; there are comparisons of Swedish, Bohemian; and French cultures. Marie's father recalls Frank Shabata's mother fertilizing cabbage on her Elbe valley farm, and old Mrs. Lee, her girlhood on a dairy farm in Gottland. Alexandra tells Emil the history of their ship-building grandfather's disgrace in Stockholm and of their father's letter-writing to the country to which she hopes he returned in death, yet she never expresses a desire to visit. At the end, she anticipates an ocean voyage with Carl, noting that she hadn't been on the water since the voyage from Sweden when she was a little girl and would dream of the shipyard full of masts where her father worked. But the anticipated voyage is toward the future, to Alaska. *O Pioneers!* concludes with an impressionistic splash of yellow wheatfields.



Cather's two subsequent novels, *The Song of the Lark* (1915) and *My Antonia* (1918), resemble *O Pioneers!* in being haunted by rather than visiting European countries Cather herself never visited. Perhaps the best approach to the earlier novel is through its final chapter, in which Thea Kronborg comes into "full possession of things she had been refining and perfecting for so long" (525). The components of this "possession" include her Scandinavian ethnicity enhanced by Germanic and eastern European culture. While neither Kronborg parent is an immigrant, and although Thea herself is "very sensitive about being thought a foreigner" (16), she remains, as Dr. Archie reflects at the outset, "a little Swede, through and through" (10), without the American superficialities that Mrs. Kronborg detects in her older daughter, Anna, and Herr Wunsch characterizes in young American ladies as "a grinning face and hollow in the insides" (87).

Thea's talent and unconventional qualities are supported by Ray Kennedy's insurance, Dr. Archie's loan, and Fred Ottenburg's somewhat dubious Arizona vacation, but directed toward a "profession" by European immigrants. The Kohlers create the German setting for Wunsch's introduction of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* and insistence on the necessity of "only one big thing—desire. And before it, when it is big, all is little" (84). Thea is "shaken" by Wunsch's outbursts and shares with him the "secret" of her artistic self (87–88). Hungarian-born pianist Andor Harsanyi also unsettles her, counsels her on every artist's responsibility: "Every artist makes himself born" (196). Harsanyi "discovers" her voice, steers her toward her operatic career, and gives her a ticket to the Chicago Symphony, where she hears her first Wagner and Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, *From the New World*. Czech music by a Czech composer who recognized affinities between African-American spirituals and Czech songs and dances (Stefan 203–04) becomes the vehicle of Thea's empathy with her homeland: "the sand hills . . . the reaching and reaching of high plains, the immeasurable yearning of all flat lands," and "first memories" (221). Previously, the flat country, wet fields, and morning light in French painter Jules Breton's *The Song of the Lark* occasioned a similar revelation and, according to Cather, "taught" Nebraskans and other prairie dwellers "to hear the lark song for themselves" (*The World and the Parish* 843).

Thea's "full possession" experience is as a Wagnerian heroine, and excerpts of his German libretti pepper this text, but the Germany of her cultivation and debut is absent. For German lands, readers have only Herr Wunsch's reverie of the old country: "Pictures came and went. . . . Faces, mountains, rivers, autumn days in other vineyards far away. He thought of a *Fuszreise* [hike] he had made through the Hardt Mountains in his student days; of the innkeeper's pretty daughter who had lighted his pipe for him in the garden one summer evening, of the woods above Wiesbaden, haymakers on an island in the river" (105).



## Middle Novels

Reveries and memories of Bohemia, another place Cather never visited, appear in *My Antonia*, although as the first-person account of Jim Burden, this novel's Europe is primarily a creation of Jim's reading, embellishing both his Bohemian immigrant friend Antonia Shimerda and the ethnic communities of his Nebraska boyhood. In the novel's third book Cather hints that Virgil's classical pastoral *Georgics* determines the form and content of Jim's memoir. He views the pastoral as the poet's attempt to bring the Muses from Greece to the Italian countryside of his childhood, an accomplishment in which "the pen was fitted to the matter as the plough is to the furrow" (256). Jim's musings take place in his college study in Lincoln with its large map of ancient Rome, photograph of the Tragic Theater at Pompeii, and west-facing window open to the prairie. Rome, Pompeii, and much of the Italian countryside Cather knew firsthand from her 1908 trip to Italy, about which she wrote enthusiastically to her siblings and friends (*Selected Letters* 108–15). She complains in a letter to Sarah Orne Jewett that we've been "reared upon" "a coarse and stupid conception of Italy," and thanks Jewett for her gift of Alice Maynell's essays, including "The Lesson of Landscape," "the only truthful writing I have ever read about Italy—in English. . . . How beautiful and truthful she is about all this pale-colored lovely earth . . ." (112).

Not only does Cather's novel share Virgil's themes of hard work, seasonal challenges, family togetherness, and fruitful agriculture, but set pieces like the snake-killing, the wolves story, the summer storm, the plow at sunset have counterparts in *Georgics*, and their patterns of arrangement are similar. The pictorial imagery of Virgil's poem, like the novel's, includes descriptive detail in the vein of genre and landscape painting, the total effect of which, notes translator L. P. Wilkinson, "is a panorama of rural life, a supremely artistic documentary" (see Murphy, *My Antonia: The Road Home* 45). Jim's Nebraska, however, if inspired by and filtered through Virgil's Italy, is created out of firsthand experiences, although with many European tags: Jim pastes a print of "Napoleon Announcing the Divorce to Josephine" in his picture-book for Antonia's little sister, hired man Otto Fuchs contributes crèche figures from Austria to decorate the Burdens' Christmas tree, Norwegian neighbor Mrs. Harling plays "the old operas . . . 'Martha,' 'Norma,' 'Rigoletto,'—telling [the children] the story while she played" (170), in Lincoln Jim attends Dumas's *Camille* with incidental music from *La Traviata*.



But the major foil to Jim's new world "material out of which countries are made" (7) are Old World reminiscences of the Bohemians. Ashamed of her family's poverty and the avaricious behavior of her mother, Antonia repeatedly assures Jim of the privileged status of her father. Before the picnic scene, the fragrance of elder blossoms brings tears to her eyes. Elderbushes grew in their yard in the old country, where her papa would sit with his friends and she would overhear their "beautiful talk. . . . About music, and the woods, and about God, and when they were young" (228). Similar memories are prompted by the chirping insect—the story of Old Hata, who "sang old songs to the children in a cracked voice, like this" (38); by Mrs. Shimerda's gift of dried mushrooms—Jim's image of "some deep Bohemian forest" (77); and by Mr. Shimerda's suicide, which generates Anton Jelinek's story of helping a priest bring the Sacrament to soldiers during a cholera epidemic. For me, the most moving Old World reverie is Anton Cuzak's, who shares with Jim his early acquaintance with opera star Maria Vasak (Cather's fictitious name for Emmy Destinn, a champion of Czech nationalism). As a city man who "liked theaters and lighted streets and music," Cuzak finds life on the prairie difficult: "Sometimes I git awful sore on this place and want to quit. . . ." He is anxious to hear of Jim's visits to his old haunts in Prague and Vienna. "Gee! I like to go back there once," he confides to Jim. "Sometimes when I read the papers from the old country, I pretty near run away. . ." (354–55).

In *One of Ours* (1922), Cather returns for the first time since *Alexander's Bridge* to a Europe she knew firsthand, if somewhat casually, for a setting. The companion novel, however, is *The Song of the Lark*, for in each a sensitive youth smothered by prairie life seeks and achieves escape to a larger world associated with Old World culture. Like Thea, Claude Wheeler is somewhat rescued by European friendships. He is introduced to "an atmosphere of mental liberty" (23) by his Bohemian friend Ernest Havel, who denounces American braggadocio and naiveté and inability to find satisfaction within the mind and daily routines of life. Although brought to America for its advantages, he cherishes memories (albeit of hardship) of the old country, which Cather fashions into one of her poetic sketches of places she knows only secondhand:

He saw a half-circle of green hills, with snow still lingering in the clefts of the higher ridges. . . . In the meadows at the foot . . . was a little boy [himself], playing by the creek and watching his father and mother plough with two great oxen. . . . His mother walked barefoot. . . . His father always looked down. His mother's face was almost as brown and furrowed as the fields. . . . [H]e used to wonder why his parents looked so old. (188–89)

At college in Lincoln, Claude is befriended by the German-American family of a classmate and introduced to a world of

conversation, books, and music. Although poor, the Erlichs "knew how to live . . . and spent their money on themselves, instead of on machines" (66). While with the mother of this family of boys, as she bakes German Christmas cakes and sings sentimental German songs, Claude "felt happy and full of kindness, and thought about beechwoods and walled towns, or about [German-born revolutionary] Carl Schurz and the Romantic revolution" (69). These influences as well as his university course on European history and thesis on Joan of Arc contribute to his ideal of the war. She provides him with a French counterpart to the image cluster associated with Mrs. Erlich: Joan becomes a figure within "a luminous cloud, like dust, with soldiers in it . . . the banner with lilies . . . a great church . . . cities with walls" (93).

The war in Europe challenges prairie complacency, highlighting people's naiveté and materialism. Claude's father's initial concern is its impact on the price of wheat. His mother hunts the attic for a map of Europe, "for which Nebraska farmers had never had much need" (219), and sits in the red grass by her mailbox to read the war news, concerned about the fate of Paris, to her "the wickedest of cities, the capital of a frivolous, wine-drinking, Catholic people" (232), yet among which "there must be many God-fearing people" (229). And Claude is forced to rethink his romantic views of Germans as a people "pre-eminent in the virtues Americans most admire," who "sing all those beautiful songs about women and children" (224, 229). To "these quiet wheat-growing people," the war becomes a menace "not to their safety or their goods, but to their comfortable, established way of thinking" (225). Difficulty develops with proud German neighbors, and some, like Mrs. Voigt, who runs a railroad restaurant, are terrorized without cause. Young farmers like Claude and his neighbor Leonard Dawson, primed by journalistic propaganda, volunteer for "Belgium, the *Lusitania*, Edith Cavell" (316–17), but really, in essence, to pursue what Ernest Havel criticizes as that "something outside yourselves to warm you up" (79).

Claude's arrival in Normandy with the AEF provides Cather with an opportunity to draw on her own 1902 introduction to France. Steven B. Shively has noted distinctions between Claude's response to France and Cather's, indicating that, while Claude's France "includes the seeds of Cather's own," she "removed the energy, the joy, and most of the color" of her 1902 travel articles to focus on "great opposing forces" (30–31). George N. Kates illustrates Cather's borrowings here from her Dieppe, Rouen, and Barbizon articles, especially the description of the inn at Barbizon, where she enjoyed meals under a great horse chestnut tree: "To be sure, the spreading tree in the [novel, at the Jouberts'] . . . will become a cherry; but its genesis, even to a threatening summer shower from which it offers shelter is probably here, halfway across France" (*Willa Cather in Europe* 116). Added to these early experiences are those of Cather's two-week journey



in 1920 to the war-torn area of France to retrace the odyssey of her doughboy cousin G. P. Cather (Claude's prototype) and visit his grave. The details of her trip to Cantigny and the cemetery at Villiers Tournelle are outlined in a July 7, 1920 letter to her father indicating that the region is still devastated (*Selected Letters* 295). Certainly there is evidence in this final book of an actuality more convincing than the poetic reveries of Bohemia, Germany, and Scandinavia.

Strategic in this book are scenes set within or around churches the doughboys explore during their first days in France. Claude watches as the wounded, "psychopathic" American and his country girl seek shelter beneath the broken statue of a bishop extending his blessing in the doorway of the battered façade of Dieppe's church of St. Jacques. In the destroyed village where Claude visits Mlle. De Courcy, a little girl leads him into the ruins of a church, "where the blue sky was shining through the white arches" and the "Virgin stood with empty arms over the central door; a little foot sticking to her robe . . . where the infant Jesus had been shot away" (503). In Beaufort, Claude hears of the tragic affair and suicides of the curé's niece and a Bavarian soldier, and meets the ravaged curé, "holding his hands against his breast to keep them from shaking, and look[ing] very old . . . broken, hopeless, as if he were sick of this world and done with it" (573). Yet through all of this there is a strain of hope. In the cloister garden at the Red Cross barrack, after Olive de Courcy takes a woman carrying her baby into the shelter, "Claude sat alone . . . tasting a new kind of happiness, a new kind of sadness. Ruin and new birth; the shudder of ugly things in the past, the trembling image of beautiful ones on the horizon; finding and losing; that was life, he saw" (515). In the abbey church of St. Ouen, "still as the stone figures in the chapels" and amid the sound of the great bell, while trying to fathom Gothic architecture, Claude stares up at the rose window and experiences his epiphany: "The purple and crimson and peacock-green of this window had been shining [for hundreds of years] before it got to him. . . . He felt distinctly that it went through him and farther still . . ." (450–52). Kates regards Cather's 1902 piece on Rouen the genesis of this scene. "This is her great tribute," he writes, "to what is finest in the Old World, and has endured. . . . We could ask no better example of her sensitiveness, her scale of values" (92–93). For me, the scene is the crux of Cather's career and as such should be clustered with "The Novel Demeuble" (1922) and "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" (1923).

Cather's subsequent novel, *A Lost Lady* (1923), is in conjunction with these two essays: it is a lean, un-Dreiserian attunement of the estranged, romantic youth in a suffocating and dying society theme. The major European ingredient is the social framework: the provincial American industrialist playing the knight who enshrines his lady in his moat-bordered castle—in this case an "ugly enough" (11) frame house hidden beneath vines and shrubbery, just as

its occupants are common enough stripped of their pretensions. The town of Sweet Water is the lord's domain in a prairie country where the "social strata" is divided between "bankers and gentlemen ranchers," like Captain Daniel Forrester, and "homesteaders and hand-workers" (7). Resentful, scheming Ivy Peters is the challenger, an agent of the decline of such gentility. Niel Herbert, Cather's limited point-of-view character, himself pretentious and somewhat prissy, is its staunch defender, and the German Blum boys, its servants. The novel carefully charts decline, from Ivy's opening remark about the Captain's lady, Marian Forrester, "I'm just as good as she is" (18), to his joining his hands over her breast near the end, at which point Niel dismisses her as "a common woman" (161–62). Ironically, the Captain's noblesse oblige during his bank's failure in the Panic of 1893 brings ruin to his wife. Alone among his bank's directors, he sacrifices certain securities and government bonds so that his depositors (railroad employees, mechanics, day-laborers—many of them immigrants) should not lose a dollar. In need, Marian turns to Ivy Peters, who, in effect, replaces the Captain. Without titles or official status, such a social aristocracy gives way, surrenders, in Edith Wharton's words, "an old tradition of European culture" and suffers "moral impoverishment" (*A Backward Glance* 7). Niel's reading of the Bohn classics (Byron, Fielding, Goethe, Montaigne, and the love stories in Ovid's *Heroides*, which I argue elsewhere is a major source of Cather's novel ["Euripides"]), and his admiration for the Captain and his lordly peers seems to make him the likely heir, although, alas, he himself becomes a part of the decline he laments, a petty young man, but without the pragmatic resourcefulness he abhors in Peters. There are neither reveries of nor visits to Europe in *A Lost Lady*.



## Later Novels

*The Professor's House* (1925), Cather's modernist experiment, "at once exemplifies and exhausts the prevailing modernist form of her era" (Millington 49). It both visits and is haunted by the Europe, particularly France, Cather knew firsthand. There are several European or ethnic European characters: the St. Peter family seamstress, Augusta, is German-American; landlord Appelhoff is a German immigrant; the German Fechtig hauls away the Blue Mesa artifacts; Tom Outland's tutor, Father Duchêne, is Belgian; castaway Englishman Henry Atkins is Tom and Roddy Blake's cook. References to European letters, art, and music heavily pepper the text: Virgil's *Aeneid*; Caesar's *Gallic War*; Euripides and his *Medea*; Lucretius; Plutarch; Shakespeare's *Othello*, *MacBeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra*; *Aucassin and Nicolette*; Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*; Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; Anatole France's



*Le Mannequin d'osier*; Brahms's *Requiem*; Thomas's *Mignon*; the Bayeux tapestry, Dalou's *Monument to Delacroix*. Political and historical references also underpin "meaning" here: the Crusades, the Age of Chivalry, the Great War, the Dreyfus case.

Godfrey St. Peter's *affaire de coeur* with France is sustained for many years on the pitch best described in a comment Ernest Hemingway is said to have made to a friend: "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast." St. Peter's student years in Paris and his life with the Thierault family in Versailles are "long" and "happy" (32) and become a pleasant reflection in later years. Cather paints a poignant vignette of an All Souls' Day he spent in Paris, breakfasting on the rue de Vaugirard, walking in the rain along rue St. Jacques and rue Soufflot toward the Panthéon, everything "wet, shiny, quick-silvery grey, accented by black crevices, and weather-worn bosses white as wood-ash." He bought pink dahlias from a young country couple, met a group of charity school girls "in hideous dark uniforms," was prevented by a crowlike nun from giving his flowers to one pretty girl, and then strolled through the Luxembourg Gardens to Gare Saint-Lazare for the train back to Versailles (101–03). Godfrey met his wife in this Paris Cather describes so convincingly, and both, when older and fraught with concerns, reflect on their youth there while attending *Mignon* in Chicago. "How it does make one think of Paris, and of so many half-forgotten things," Lillian murmurs. He responds, "it's been a mistake, our having a family and writing histories and getting middle-aged" (92). Yet the Professor had kept up the feast, enjoyed dashes back to France, staying with Charles Thierault in Marseilles, sailing out of the Gulf of Lions and along the southern Spanish coast, where one day "looking up" at "the ranges of the Sierra Nevadas," he experienced an epiphany, and the design of his multi-volume *Spanish Adventurers* "unfolded in the air above him" (105).

But subsequent disappointments with his wife and daughters, the death in Flanders of his companion Tom, and the torturous process of relinquishing the kind of second youth that proved to be in Bartley Alexander's case "the most dangerous of companions" (*Alexander's Bridge* 40), transform Godfrey's moveable feast into a Lenten supper. He deeply regrets never vacationing with Tom in Paris. "He had wanted to revisit certain spots with him: to go with him some autumn morning to the Luxembourg Gardens, when the yellow horse-chestnuts were bright and bitter after the rain, to stand with him before the monument to Delacroix and watch the sun gleam on the bronze figures" (260). In deep despair, near the end, "he thought he would like to drive up in front of Notre Dame, in Paris, again, and see it standing there like the Rock of Ages, with the frail generations breaking about its base" (270). The image refers back to his earlier comments in the lecture hall on science and religion, about life being "a rich thing" "[a]s long as

every man and woman who crowded into the cathedrals on Easter Sunday was a principal in a gorgeous drama with God" (68). The Easter reference prefigures the resurrection implications at the end of this novel, and the entire passage recalls Edith Lewis's account of her visit with Cather to Paris in 1920, that Cather "wanted to live in the Middle Ages" and "spent nearly all [their] time in the section between the Seine and the Luxembourg gardens, and on the Île de la Cité and the Île-St. Louis" (119). Many of Cather's critics had and have difficulty taking seriously, or at least not ironically, this direction of her career, especially those attempting to prove her a modernist or to define her modernism. In a recent review of Turkish novelist Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar's *The Time Regulation Institute*, Martin Riker explains that some books are "in a category all their own, in one sense new, in another sense old, as if to remind us that this thing called literature is much larger than our own little moment" (11). Without taking Cather at face value to some extent, how do we account for Godfrey St. Peter's discussions with seamstress Augusta on Holy Days, Ember Days, the Virgin's litany, the Magnificat? Might these be fragments of a venture toward transcendence?

The spiritual struggles of Myra Driscoll Henshawe in *My Mortal Enemy* (1926) bridge the Professor's suffocation and the spiritual deliverance of Father Latour in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). Myra's story is haunted by Ireland, her material poverty a result of Ireland's historical troubles. She is disowned by her wealthy Irish uncle for marrying the son of an Ulster man, but not before this uncle takes her to Ireland for a summer and has her portrait painted there. She exudes Irish pride: "Oh, hear the penny whistle. They always find me out." She stopped a thin lad . . . playing *The Irish Washerwoman* on a little pipe, and rummaged in her bag for a coin" (22). She play-acts in lilting Irishisms, especially at strategic moments: "Be sure I did" (7); "If at any time a body was"; "It's not a woollen petticoat or warm mittens that Madame is needing" (25); "and me in a hansom cab" (34); "And we so safely hidden—in earth" (52); "Will you be pleased to take your things and go, Mrs. Casey. . . . It's owing to me infirmities . . . that I'll not be able to go as far as me door wid ye" (73)—this last a dismissal of the narrator for sympathizing with Myra's husband, whom Myra suspects of infidelity. Of course, there are also the usual kinds of Cather European cultural references shedding light on the narrative, here exposing bits of Myra's tragedy: to Shakespeare plays, Schiller's *Mary Stuart*, Bellini's *Norma*, Schubert's paean to spring, a Heine poem on a tear from the past and one on a sinner's flower. Chief among these references are the *Casta Diva* aria from *Norma* and Gloucester's cliff in *King Lear*. The aria reflects Myra's conflict of loyalties between love for her husband and for her church and uncle, and the cliff image, submission to divine will.

The crisis, between worldliness/mortal loves and submission to fate, is resolved in Myra's unorthodox return to the Church—

unorthodox in violating the general view of kindness and charity: “In age we lose everything; even the power to love” (72), she exclaims near the end. This return is colored in medieval and early Christian images: of a sinner coming home to an abbot or abbess to die, of candlelit catacombs and early saints. The image of Augusta standing like the Rock of Ages has its counterpart here in Myra’s body “wrapped in her [Austrian] blankets, leaning against the cedar trunk, facing the sea. Her head . . . fallen forward; the ebony crucifix . . . in her hands” (81–82). She has let go what Professor St. Peter had let go, perhaps experiencing something similar to what Claude Wheeler had while looking up at the rose window at St. Ouen. As her attending priest confides to the narrator, “She’s not at all modern in her make-up, is she?” (76).

We might ask the same of Cather at this stage of her career. Facing cultural degeneration and loss, she turned elsewhere for a subject. “[S]he was put to the critical labor of finding a purer past . . . that could propose images that would last forever,” writes Marcus Klein, and “discovered an aesthetic proposed by Catholicism. . . . It was not the doctrinal Church that attracted her. But there was a magnitude in Catholicism that was sufficient to her, and a tradition . . . so ancient as to be effectively out of time (xv–xvi). Our first response might be that Cather’s view of the Church was the naïve idealized one of an outsider, yet a careful consideration of the two great Catholic novels and the Avignon fragment distinguishing her final phase indicates her awareness of corruption, abuse, politicking, exploitation, peacockery, and arrogance in an organization that also embraced the devout, the gentle in spirit, the merciful, those who hunger for justice. Nor can her discovery of the Church be confined to the 1920s. The June 10, 1908 postcard she sent her brother Roscoe from Rome, depicting the dome of St. Peter’s from Villa Dorea Pomphili, suggests interest in the eternal qualities Klein singles out. As the dome “looms up from the east,” she writes, “it is borne in upon one that there is where the modern world was born. From the day Charlemagne was crowned there and before, the Vatican was fashioning modern Europe. Next in wonder to the Rome of the Empire is the Catholic Rome of the middle ages” (*Selected Letters* 113).

Indeed, this postcard to Roscoe informs the Prologue of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, a scene in a villa (albeit in the distant Sabine Hills rather than the proximate Pomphili Gardens) dominated by a view of St. Peter’s. The *Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock* (1931), which Cather, with “a reluctance to leave that world of Catholic feeling and tradition” (Lewis 155), was to write next, are narratives spliced by European (mostly French) scenes. They are of various types and serve these texts in various ways. Some illuminate Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s “hypothesis” that the subject of Cather’s books “is the effect a new country . . . has on people transplanted to it from the old traditions of a stable, complex civilization” (quoted in Woodress 452). Certainly this

is true of our introduction to Bishop Latour as he makes his way through the confusion of conical hills in the New Mexico desert. The placing of this scene abruptly subsequent to the elegant clerical dinner and the sun flashing on the metallic surface of Michelangelo’s great dome is startling, yet relieved by Latour’s discovery of correspondences between this new country and Europe: the wooden figures of the saints in New Mexico resemble “the homely stone carvings on the front of old parish churches in Auvergne” (28), and the water-head at Agua Secreta, where arrow-heads and corroded Spanish medals and a sword hilt had been found, were “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” (33).

Another jarring experience occurs at the missionaries’ first Christmas in Santa Fe. After Father Vaillant’s struggle to produce a French meal with native substitutes and Latour’s return home in spirit while writing to his brother, when the two sit down to converse in French and enjoy dinner with French wine, their thoughts meeting in the “tilted cobble street, winding down a hill, with the uneven garden walls and tall horse-chestnuts on either side,” they are startled by drunken cowboys and Indians, “rifle-shots and blood-curdling yells . . . and the galloping of horses” (44). Variations of such contrasts are repeated throughout the text, perhaps the most significant when Latour decides against retiring in France, finding himself homesick for New Mexico while in Clermont. “Beautiful surroundings, the society of learned men, the charm of noble women, the graces of art, could not make up to him for the loss of those light-hearted mornings of the desert. . . . he had come back to die in exile for the sake of . . . [s]omething soft and wild and free . . .” (287–88). Nevertheless, it is exile.

Here’s a brief sampling of the profuse returns to and echoes of Europe in this novel: awakened by the Angelus bell ringing from San Miguel, Latour imagines he is in Rome, near St. John Lateran; discovering the yellow hill from which his cathedral will be quarried, he almost feels he is facing Avignon’s Papal Palace; in Stone Lips and when travelling through the mesa country, French Gothic architecture becomes the analogy. In a revealing scene in Vaillant’s sister’s convent in Riom, Latour is taken to a window opening upon a blind street by a young nun who helps sew vestments for Vaillant. She explains that for her, when she stands by this window, the strange landscape of New Mexico is beyond the turn of the street, and Mother Philomène pictures her brother and the Bishop “moving through [this landscape] in their cassocks, bareheaded, like the pictures of St. Francis Xavier with which she was familiar” (68).

Similarly patterned in accordion-like folds, moving back and forth between the familiar and unfamiliar, France and America, *Shadows on the Rock* represents a long step backward toward the Middle Ages. The medieval Midi Romanesque cathedral Latour



builds near the end of his life has its northern counterpart in the opening description of Quebec. The “scattered spires and slated roofs” of “the French stronghold” “were roughly Norman Gothic in effect. They were made by people from the north of France who knew no other way of building” (8, 10). Covered in snow, “Quebec seemed shrunk to a mere group of shivering spires; the whole rock looked like one great white church . . .” (159). The explicit comparison of the town to a theatric European Nativity scene and the implied one to the Counter-Reformation fortress altar of Notre Dame de la Victoire guarding the sacred Host manifests the well-ordered universe mentally occupied by the sisters and bequeathed to Christendom by Thomas Aquinas in the late Middle Ages. Within this context the reader is offered several devotional accounts: the apparition of the Bayeux sinner Marie to Mother Catherine de Saint-Augustin requesting prayers; the life of Father Noël Chabanel, professor priest of Toulouse, who committed himself to a tortuous mission among the Hurons and suffered martyrdom by the Iroquois; the miracle of the ape of Saint-Malo; the apparition of the Child Jesus to Saint Edmund of Canterbury promising lifelong protection. Threatening this tidy world are forces best described by the adjective *savage*, indigenous peoples and their habitat, the forest, “the dead, sealed world of the vegetable kingdom . . . choked with interlocking trees . . . strangling each other in a slow agony . . .” (11), the counterpart here of the confusing desert landscape that confronts Father Latour in New Mexico.

The theme of exile is at the heart of *Shadows* and of the conflict between Cécile Auclair and her father, Euclide, “the philosopher apothecary of Quebec” (7). He dines at the hour he did in Paris to keep civilized and French, and reminds Cécile of life at home on the Quai des Célestins in the parish of Saint-Paul to refresh her early memories of the old shop there where she was born. He tells of his excitement as a boy when Count Frontenac returned after several years to his townhouse adjacent to this shop. Many of Auclair’s reminiscences are dark ones of injustices and starvation—of knife-grinder Bichet, who was tortured and hanged for stealing two brass kettles; of people dying of starvation in the streets of Paris, even in his own parish, while Court life at Versailles grew increasingly lavish—yet his overriding desire is to return. Cécile, however, was only four when she sailed to Canada, and only “thought she could remember it [Paris] a little” (23). For her, Quebec is home, although she remains faithful to her dying mother’s instructions to sustain life in the French manner and keep it from being “disgusting, like [the lives] of the poor savages” (32). Cécile stays very much a daughter of France, albeit “a foreign shore” to her (123), and when she visits the Harnois farm on the Île d’Orléans is so disgusted by the effect of the forest on domestic life that she rededicates herself to French ways because they are now hers.

The feeling of exile is most evident when Count Frontenac prepares for death and instructs Auclair to have his heart returned

to Paris in a lead box, to Saint-Nicholas-des-Champs. Both men, deeply disappointed at not being able to return to France, “were thinking of a scene outside the windows, under the low November sky—but the river was not the St. Lawrence. They were looking out on the Pont-Marie, and the hay-barges tied up at the Port-au-Foin. On an afternoon like this the boatmen would be covering the hay-bales with tarpaulins . . . and about this time the bells always rang from the Célestins’ and the church of Saint-Paul” (288). They discuss the changes that have occurred in this section of Paris and on the Île Saint-Louis, a locale very familiar to Cather as was its history. Auclair lives on in Quebec to enjoy Cécile’s growing family and comes to terms with a place removed from the upsetting events in Versailles: “he believed that he was indeed fortunate to spend his old age here where nothing changed; to watch his grandsons grow up in a country where the death of the King, the probable evils of a long regency, would never touch them” (321). Yet France still haunts Auclair, as it does Latour, and his resignation to fortune is the muted equivalent of the Archbishop’s release into the morning.



## Last Novels

Cather’s last completed novels, *Lucy Gayheart* (1935) and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), swerve from the drift toward Catholicism evident in her previous four novels. In *Lucy Gayheart* she returns to the prairie and Chicago as settings, although in such a general way that her novel could be set in New England or Pennsylvania. This story of a pianist who outgrows her small country town and leaves to study in Chicago recalls *The Song of the Lark*, even to the German landlady. Europe haunts primarily through music, used thematically to complement Lucy’s vacillating and arrested development, from the first *lied* she hears Clement Sebastian sing, Schubert’s “Lied eines Schiffers an die Dioskuren”—The Sailor’s Song to the Twin Stars—to her realization before her death that the air from Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*, in which she accompanied Sebastian, refers to life’s “fugitive gleam,” which can be “an actual possession” (194–95). (Cather changed the oratorio text in question from “If with all your hearts ye truly seek Me, ye shall ever surely find Me” to “If with all your heart you truly seek Him, you shall ever surely find Him.”)

Sebastian himself is a Europeanized Chicagoan, having left at eighteen to live abroad. His life crisis and involvement with Lucy is encapsulated in his performance of Schubert’s *Die Winterreise* song cycle: “he presented [the melancholy youth] as if he were a memory, not to be brought too near into the present. One felt a long

distance between the singer and the scenes he was recalling, a long perspective” (40). This distance had been bridged by the talented youth Sebastian had adopted until his wife’s jealousy drove the boy to a boarding school. Now, nearing fifty, estranged from his wife, without a family or even a country, Sebastian finds, perhaps takes advantage of, impressionable, young Lucy. His European elegance and simplicity make Lucy’s hometown boyfriend, Harry Gordon, seem crude and self-important, and when Harry proposes marriage and makes light of her “fling” in Chicago, Lucy refuses him with a lie—this within the context of a week of Italian and German opera and a visit to a loan exhibit of French Impressionists. Harry’s joyless marriage on the rebound and his remorse after Lucy’s death lead him to Red Cross work in France during the Great War that claimed both Claude Wheeler and Tom Outland.

There are obvious echoes in this novel of both *The Professor’s House* and *Alexander’s Bridge*, including from the latter the drowning of Sebastian in Lake Como. Mark Madigan cites a July 17 postcard Cather sent to her brother Roscoe during her 1908 visit there, describing a “wild day” on the water, as the genesis of this scene (18). In the novel, the contents of the cablegram from Milan are included in a newspaper account: “Yesterday Clement Sebastian and James Mockford [his accompanist] were drowned when . . . the hurricane from the mountains broke upon them [and their] boat was turned over immediately. . . . Mockford must have fastened himself to his companion with a strangle-hold and dragged him down. The bodies had not yet been recovered” (146–47). For its visual impact this macabre, European-set episode recalls the Russian wolves story in *My Antonia*.

In 1938 Cather returned to Back Creek Valley in Frederick County, Virginia, to reacquaint herself with her birthplace as the setting for *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, based on her own early memories, the lives of her maternal ancestors, and Frederick County history prior to the Civil War. Edith Lewis describes the visit as “memorable,” “intense and thrilling” (182). Written some seventeen years after *A Lost Lady*, *Sapphira* seems a prototype of the earlier novel, which depicts a post-Civil War diluted Western version of a stratified Southern-style society. Europe in *Sapphira* is decidedly British, with a dash of French added for intrigue. Sapphira Dodderidge, the slave-owning mistress, boasts an English mother and Back Creek Valley land deeded to her ancestors by Thomas, Lord Fairfax in 1747. Here, Henry Colbert, whom she stooped to marry, operates a mill. Henry’s ancestors are French, from Flanders, and his brothers, notorious rakehells. Both Sapphira and Henry are from Loudoun County, east of the mountains, whose aristocratic residents looked down on Back Creek Valley folks. Sapphira’s carriage is decorated with a British heraldic crest, and in her dropsical condition, she is carried about like a queen in a throne-like chair affixed to poles. Her personal house slave, Till, slave girl Nancy’s mother, was raised by the Dodderidges’ English

housekeeper, and thus prefers quality people, is able to read, write, and possesses what Cécile Auclair would term kind ways. Nancy’s great-grandmother, the matriarch Jezebel, was captured from an African tribe of cannibals, came to America on a British slaver, and was eventually bought by the Dodderidges. Contributing to the novel’s social layering are rivalries within the descending order of Episcopalians, Lutherans, and Baptists.

If *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* can be connected to the four novels prior to *Lucy Gayheart*, it would be through the English hymns, the King James Bible, and the works of John Bunyan that Henry seeks comfort in during his moral dilemmas. He is puzzled that “nowhere did his Bible say that there should be no one in bonds” (112), and turns to William Cowper’s “God moves in a mysterious way” for an answer in God’s design (113). His struggles with his carnality as a Colbert and with his ambiguous fondness for Nancy, which has estranged him from his wife, are relieved somewhat by Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. He diminishes the slave girl’s sexuality by identifying her with Bunyan’s Mercy. When his nephew chases her, he feels the “poison in the young scamp’s blood [stirring] something in his own” (208), and reads in Bunyan’s *The Holy War* the conquest of Mansoul by Diabolus, then finds consolation in its retaking by Prince Emmanuel, who “apprehended Carnal-sense, and put him in hold” (210). A direct connection to *Shadows on the Rock* and the unfinished Avignon story, *Hard Punishments*, is where Baptist minister Fairhead watches Sapphira’s granddaughter Mary take up the bowl of broth that cures her of the diphtheria that claims the life of her sister:

A white figure emerged from the stairway and drifted across the indoor duskiness of the room. It was Mary, barefoot, in her nightgown, as if she were walking in her sleep. She reached the table . . . and lifted the bowl of broth in her two hands. . . . She drank slowly, resting her elbows on the table. Streaks of firelight from the stove flickered over her. . . . There was something solemn in what he saw through the window, like a Communion service. (255)

Willa Cather, after years of being haunted by Europe, set to work on a short *novel démeublé* set entirely in Avignon, France, within and around the Papal Palace, the building Cather first saw in 1902 and, according to Lewis, “stirred her as no building in the world had ever done” (190). Among the fragments left us of this unfinished work is a scene depicting Midnight Mass in the Old Chapel of Benedict XII. It is circa 1340, and the principals are two boys mutilated for crimes against the papal state and the old, almost blind priest who befriends them:

While the tenor priest from Toulouse was singing the mass, Father [Ambrose] closed his eyes and shut off even such poor sight as he had, to rest the more wholly upon the music and the beautiful words. And in the cadence of the



priest he seemed to sense the awe of the close-packed crowd around him,—like a heart beating under his hand. . . .

The priest from Toulouse sang the last beautiful words, “*Natus est*,” here among them[,] within them. In his own heart, Father Ambrose knew[.] And beside him he felt the shiver of delight that ran through his pupil Andre, and a sob he heard from that unfortunate creature with the useless hands. Yes, He made the blind to see, the lame to walk, the dumb to speak,—and to all the future a release from bondage. . . . (“Avignon” 5)

Near the end, I’m tempted to conclude, Cather’s journey approached the heart of the Christian story in her beloved France.

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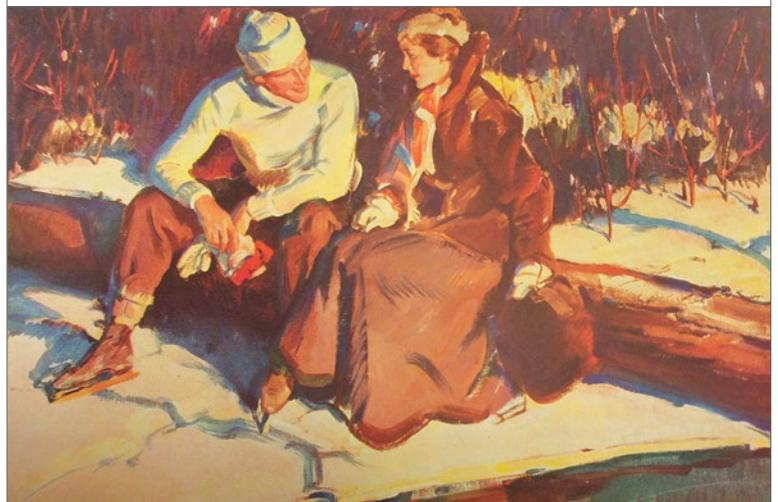
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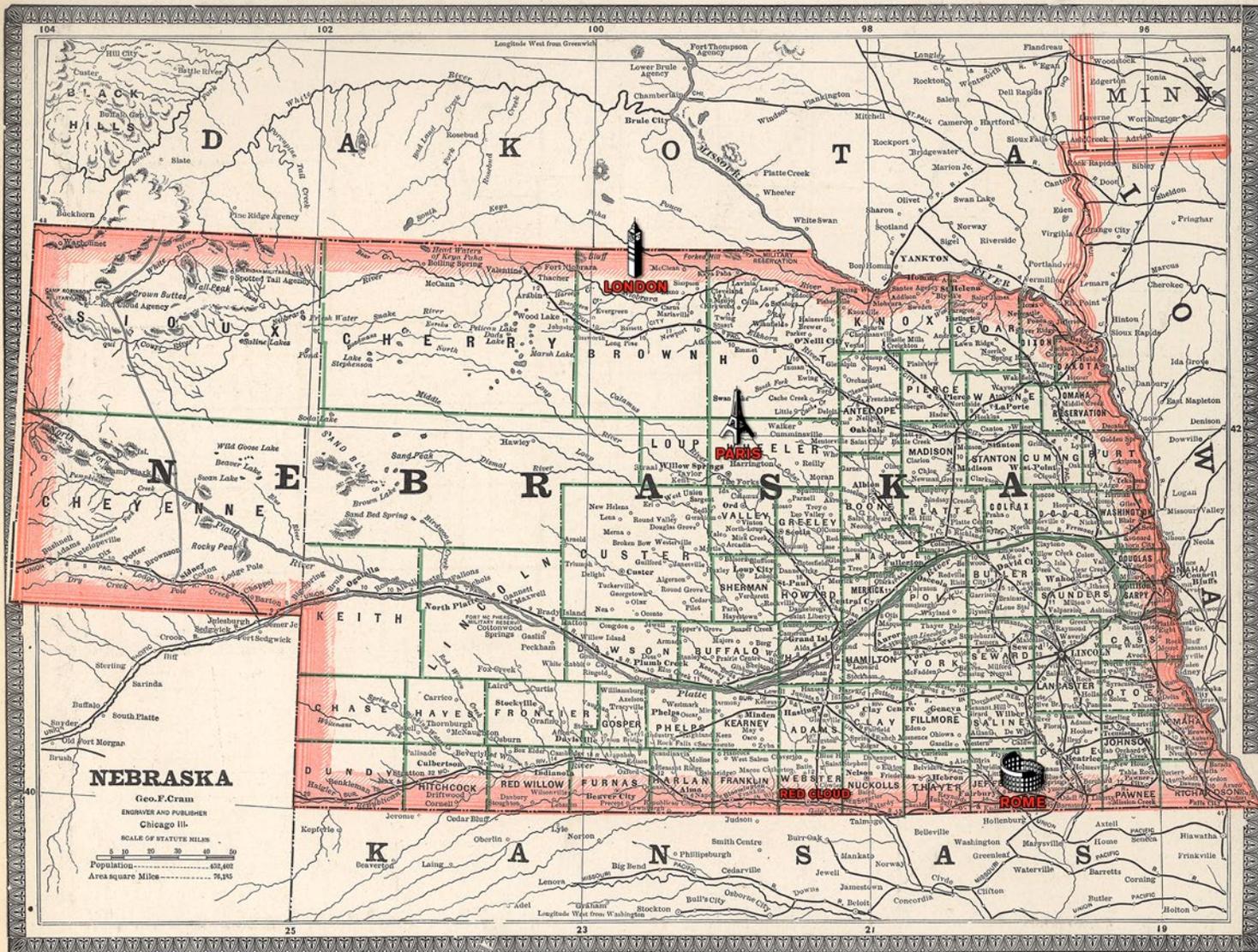
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*An illustration by Pruett Carter from the 1935 serialization of Cather's Lucy Gayheart in Woman's Home Companion. See page 29 for additional illustrations in the series.*





*“I got my guide book for Rome the other day. Seems queer to be really on the way to Rome; for of course Rome has always existed for one, it was a central fact in one’s life in Red Cloud and was always the Capital of one’s imagination. Rome, London, and Paris were serious matters when I went to the South ward school—they were the three principal cities in Nebraska, so to speak.”*

—Willia Cather writing to her brother Roscoe, March 2, 1908. From *The Selected Letters of Willia Cather*