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Cather Studies
Willa Cather’s Ecological Imagination

EDITED BY SUSAN J. ROSOWSKI

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Cather Studies, a forum for Cather scholarship and criticism, is published biennially by the University of Nebraska Press. Submissions are invited on all aspects of Cather studies: biography, various critical approaches to the art of Cather, her literary relationships and reputation, the artistic, historical, intellectual, religious, economic, political, and social backgrounds to her work. Criteria for selection will be excellence and originality.

Manuscripts may vary in length from 3,000 to 12,000 words and should conform to the MLA Style Manual, 1998 edition. Please submit manuscripts in duplicate, accompanied by return postage; overseas contributors should enclose international reply coupons. Because Cather Studies adheres to a policy of anonymous submission, please include a title page providing author’s name and address and delete identifying information from the manuscript. Manuscripts and editorial correspondence should be addressed to Susan J. Rosowski, Editor, Cather Studies, Department of English, University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Lincoln NE 68588-0333.
Read together, the essays in this volume introduce us to the greening of literary studies, a.k.a. ecological literary studies, ecocriticism, environmental literary studies—all terms for a field that is young, in flux, and determined to remain so. These essays also reintroduce us to a Cather we risk forgetting in recent decades’ focus first on gender, then on class and race. I’m referring to the Cather who is profoundly identified with the places that shaped her and that she wrote about.

Place seems “poised to resume its place as a vital human concept,” Glen Love observes as he anticipates the next one hundred years when literary scholars . . . will find themselves, along with other humanists and social scientists, engaged in important, ecologically based interdisciplinary work with the natural sciences. We will necessarily become more interdisciplinary because we live in an increasingly interconnected world, because we need all the intellectual resources we can muster to find a sustainable place within it, and because we will see more and more the relatedness of all of this to the work we do as teachers and scholars of literature.

Love offers an interdisciplinary reading of The Professor’s House that is, “if not overtly scientific, at least leaning in that direction.” He calls for acknowledging archetypes (among other influences) in Cather’s art as representing “biology and the commonality of human nature.” Love argues for the role of science in literary criticism, not to replace interpretation but to reinvigorate it, in (for example) “reconsidering the interpretation of archetypes.”
“My own journey to ecocriticism transpired via a series of environmentally preoccupied conference papers on Willa Cather,” Cheryll Glotfelty recalls in “A Guided Tour of Ecocriticism, with Excursions to Catherland.” From those beginnings a decade and a half ago, Glotfelty comes full circle to reflect upon ecocriticism generally and upon ecocriticism of Cather specifically. An ecological critical method addresses “the interconnections between human culture and the material world, between the human and the nonhuman.”

What is the right relation between human beings and nature? The question fundamental to today’s environmental movement is hardly new, as Joseph Urgo reminds us. After situating Cather within the conservationist debate of her time between utilitarians (who urged reserving land for profitable use) and preservationists (who sought to preserve natural resources for aesthetic, recreational, and spiritual reasons), Urgo argues that *My Ántonia* models a preservationist aesthetic in which landscape and memory are inextricably entangled. In “Biocentric, Homocentric, and Theocentric Environmentalism in *O Pioneers!, My Ántonia,* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*,” Patrick K. Dooley explores Cather’s “divided alliance” in terms of a problematic position illustrated by Aldo Leopold’s essay, “The Land Ethic,” the classic statement of ecological ethics. And in “Willa Cather: The Plow and the Pen,” Joseph W. Meeker reads *O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark,* and *My Ántonia* as espousing an ethic of development rather than of the environment. For Meeker, Cather presents the natural world merely as setting for her characters and as raw material for her pen; furthermore, she “shows little knowledge or curiosity about the natural processes surrounding her characters” and is “disinterest[ed] in her ecological context.”

Thomas J. Lyon reads Cather differently. “The dynamism of nature admits of only permeable borders; requires for its understanding a consciousness loose and free to move,” he writes in “Willa Cather, Learner.” “The learning state is one of intense empathy, involving transcendence of the usual self,” and when the full range of consciousness is awakened, our native sensitivity to relationship comes alive. This larger cog-
nizance is inherently ecological, and lets us see and feel the environment in a participate, intimate way. Willa Cather is one of our greatest nature writers—without even being a nature writer—because she had this living sense of the biotic community. Her capacity to feel for places and for trees—for the cottonwoods being cut down by 1921’s modern Nebraska farmers, for example—came from the same well of consciousness as her novelist’s sympathy for character.

For Cather the instinctive standard of excellence in human endeavor, the reference, is nature. “Sometimes Cather lets us directly into her own creative, environmental imagination,” enacting ecological consciousness.

In “The Comic Form of Cather’s Art: An Ecocritical Reading,” Susan J. Rosowski maintains that the interrelatedness of ecological criticism calls for reading Cather’s work as a whole. Philosopher Susanne K. Langer offers a starting point for Rosowski; beginning with Alexander’s Bridge Cather moved away from the ego-consciousness of tragedy’s end-directed plot with its heroic individual and toward the episodic, contingent form of comedy, which celebrates the “pure sense of life itself” in a pattern of eternal renewal.

Ecological criticism’s interest in the relation between language and nature invites reading literature alongside the botanist’s field guide, the gardener’s plot, the architect’s plan, and the composer’s score. As Janis P. Stout demonstrates, Cather’s personal copy of F. Schuyler Mathew’s Field Book of American Wild Flowers (1902) offers one such starting point. This was the field book Cather carried on her nature walks from 1917 to 1938, heavily annotated in her hand. Cather’s “observant eye” trained by nature walks may lie behind her choice of Benda for the drawings of My Ántonia, Stout continues; “Benda in fact captured in these spare drawings much of the essence of Cather’s spare style.”

In “Social (Re)Visioning in the Fields of My Ántonia, Jan Goggs reminds us that along with training the eye to see, ecological theory and botanical guides represent “significant ways of thinking about how humans exist in their environment.” Ecologists’ arguments about plants (native versus exotic) present an entry
into cultural and political constructions of nativism in Cather’s novel: how a “‘native’ like Jim Burden can tell the story of an ‘exotic’ like Ántonia Shimerda.” My Ántonia shifts the paradigm away from nativism and toward a “flexible notion of place-based community,” according to which “one’s identity is constructed by the community into which one plants oneself.”

Frank Lloyd Wright provides a starting point for Guy Reynolds in “Modernist Space: Willa Cather’s Environmental Imagination in Context.” “For both Cather and Wright, ‘fit’ (a kind of spatial symbiosis between the man-made and the natural) constitutes the regionalist style.” The result is what Reynolds calls Cather’s “organic modernism” in which “the environment of Nebraska is used as an analog for novelistic form; landscape might even create form.” By such a view, Cather’s Midwestern environments are “akin to the spatializing tactics of radical modernists—artists working in literature but also in architecture and painting.”

Music provides an entry into depiction of place for Philip Kennicott in “Wagner, Place, and the Growth of Pessimism in the Fiction of Willa Cather.” “Cather was that rare Wagner listener particularly alert to the power of these encounters” between characters and natural spaces, Kennicott writes; and with that alertness comes her awareness of the political and philosophical debates surrounding his music. One of Ours provides the example, which, Kennicott suggests, is “a Wagnerian world worked out in American terms.”

Literature’s analogy to music appears in “Willa Cather’s Great Emersonian Environmental Quartet.” In this essay Merrill Mauguir Skaggs recalls the role that gender plays in culture and environment: Cather played “riffs” on Emerson’s Nature when she wrote an environmental tetrology that began by critiquing phallocentric Western culture in The Professor’s House and culminated in creating the fully realized female lives of “Old Mrs. Harris.”

Interconnections among nature, culture, and art are the subject of “The Creative Ecology of Walnut Canyon: From the Sinagua to Thea Kronborg.” Here Ann Moseley recalls the actual place that Cather drew upon for her character’s artistic awakening, when “her life becomes inextricably intermingled with its ecology—
with its geological and cultural history and with its natural life.” While nature figures sparely in My Mortal Enemy, sensitivity to the relation of literature to life motivates “Unmasking Willa Cather’s ‘Mortal Enemy,’” where Charles Johanningsmeier argues that S. S. and Hattie McClure are “the real-life models for the novel’s characters” and [interprets] what Cather’s relationship to them was.

Ann Romines explores questions of memory, creativity, culture, and place in Cather’s writing about Virginia. After Cather’s family emigrated to Nebraska, Romines writes, Willa “was confronted with one of the major tasks of her life. She had to learn how to remember Virginia, how to live and write with her Southern inheritance.” Then Romines argues “that much of Cather’s best fiction before her specifically Southern novel of 1940 [Sapphira and the Slave Girl] is, on some level, engaged with the problem of how to remember and to render the South.”

In “Character, Compromise, and Idealism in Willa Cather’s Gardens,” Mark A. Facknitz reminds us that interconnections between culture and nature are revealed in gardens. The garden confirms what we know: “nature gives us, not glimpses of her inward truths, but reflections of cultural assumptions.” Situating Cather in her time, Facknitz notes the “prairie stoicism” of her refusal to succumb to facile alternatives. “She guessed that in the modern moment we needed to travel farther, to ever less comfortable liminal zones like the canyons once inhabited by the Anasazi, to be able to intuit incorruptible nature.” “What happens,” Facknitz writes, “at the threshold between gardened space and wilderness is transcendence . . . of basic categories of understanding.”

Just as the essays collected here introduce ecological literary studies and demonstrate Cather’s centrality to ecocritical ideas and issues, so they invite a reconsideration of the language we use and the stances we take. There is among these essays a remarkable absence of jargon. Rather than performing poststructuralist games of complicating, transgressing, interrogating, and contesting, these essays esteem simplicity, seek connections, and model humility. I recall Glen Love’s discussion of archetype and essence and Ann Moseley’s exploration of how abstracted elements rep-
resent intrinsic form. In a similar vein Mark Facknitz observes, “Finally, the return to simplicity is the point, the destination of the pilgrimage, the first principle of horticulture and the central aesthetic recognition that transformed Cather from an American realist into a survivor of modernism and a major writer.” And Tom Lyon reflects that in “her simplicity of prose” lies Cather’s desire “to convey the sense of the thing itself, in the first purity of response before description.”

This introduction ends with acknowledgments. We have many institutions to thank for supporting the international seminar from which many of these essays emerged: the Nebraska Humanities Council, the Cooper Foundation, the Kimmel Foundation, and the Steinhart Foundation. And there are individuals, also, who supported this inquiry: At the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Richard Edwards, Senior Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs; in Red Cloud, Steve Ryan, Executive Director of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial. And through it all, Margie Rine, seminar coordinator, was at the heart of the seminar and of subsequent work on this volume.
Nature and Human Nature
Interdisciplinary Convergences on Cather’s Blue Mesa

GLEN A. LOVE

There should be no watertight compartments between the fields of human knowledge. Not necessarily because Everything is One; but because, to deal with everything, Homo Cogitans has Only One Mind.
— Helen Couclelis, “Philosophy in the Construction of Geographical Reality”

Human nature is a dead idea. Efforts to uncover a fundamental biological component to human behavior are based on an unsophisticated understanding of both culture and science and contribute little to our exploration of human society. This is an assertion that many scholars would readily agree with, but is it true?
— Andrew Kirk and John Herron, Human/Nature

For the prospective interdisciplinarian, the cluster of ideas surrounding the terms place and human nature increasingly offers literary scholars across-field entry into interesting territory. To begin with place, Aristotle announced in his Physics that “the power of place will be remarkable.”¹ Many writers—George Eliot, Mark Twain, Sherwood Anderson, Willa Cather, Sinclair Lewis, D. H. Lawrence, Eudora Welty, Ernest Hemingway, Laurence Durrell, N. Scott Momaday, Leslie Marmon Silko,
Scott Russell Sanders, bell hooks, to name a few—have directly asserted the importance of place, often attributing to it the role of indispensable participant—even leading character—in their work; “[C]all it what you like,” D. H. Lawrence said, “[b]ut the spirit of place is a great reality” (16).2

As might be expected, it is the eclectic field of geography that has done most to bring place-centered insights of writers and thinkers into the purview of scholarly investigation. Geography has been called the Mother of the Sciences, since it distills and concentrates questions about the nature of our physical surroundings, questions which have been common to all people, everywhere. Throughout human history a regional geographic sense has been a given in all cultures. “Beyond that of any other discipline,” geographer David Lowenthal writes, “the subject matter of geography approximates the world of general discourse; the palpable present, the everyday life of man on earth, is seldom far from our professional concerns” (241). More than any other subject, Lowenthal argues, geography studies aspects of human surroundings on the scale and within the contexts in which they are usually encountered in everyday life.

Such broad-gauge interests and claims have not gone unchallenged by those who find in them evidence of theoretical and methodological fuzziness. Even while defending his field’s interests in and dependence upon many allied disciplines in the natural and social sciences, geographer N. Peter Haggett allows that his field “is unusual (perhaps promiscuous) in the range of its trading partners” (12). The wide-reaching concepts of place and region came under particular questioning in the middle and late years of the twentieth century as outmoded and diminished perceptions no longer relevant to a world of interchangeable, media-fed urban settings and ubiquitous shopping mall experiences. Academics of various disciplines regularly announced the end of nature, place, and region, and a fiction writer like Don DeLillo, in White Noise, provided ominous evidence of an apparent postmodern erasure of place. Critic Dana Phillips notes how one of the book’s teenage characters updates her so-called address book: “She was transcribing names and telephone numbers from an old book to a new one. There were no addresses. Her friends had telephone num-
bers only, a race of people with a seven bit analog consciousness” (qtd. in Phillips 237). Were White Noise to be published today, instead of in 1985, the author would doubtless be underscoring the characters’ placelessness with e-mail and other computer-related identities.

Still, even during this recent history in which place has been threatened with displacement, it has proved resistant to efforts to dismiss it. With the growing emphasis upon ecological thinking, the rapid joining of interdisciplinary fields in the sciences and social sciences, and the rise of new approaches in the humanities like ecocriticism, place would seem poised to resume its place as a vital human concept. The work of contemporary human geographers like Yi Fu Tuan, Edward Relph, and Robert David Sack, for example, has kept the place of place before us. Sack reminds us of the importance of holding together concepts that other fields take apart:

We cannot live without places, and yet modernity is so quietly efficient at creating and maintaining them that whatever the mix and whatever the thickness, thinness, or porosity of places, their existence and effects often seem to be invisible. We run the risk of becoming geographically unaware at the very moment we have to be most aware. . . . A geographical awareness helps reveal how the segments of our lives fit together. It shows how we are cultural and natural, autonomous and independent. Most important, it focuses our will on our common purpose as geographic agents—transforming the earth and making it into a home. (257)

Important arguments for the revaluation of place have also been provided by philosophers of place, from early proponents like Gaston Bachelard and Simone Weil to recent contributors like Edward S. Casey, J. E. Malpas, and David Abram. Their line of reasoning is increasingly influenced by the allying of place to body, in the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in which the primacy of the lived world of bodily experience is the foundation for all human thinking, meaning, and communication. “Just as there is no place without a body,” writes Edward S. Casey, “so there is no body without
place. . . . [W]e are embodied-in-place. . . .” (Getting Back into Place 104). Phenomenology thus confronts a narrowly reductionist cultural constructionism with the lived body, the source of our place in the world and, as Casey calls it, the common but unrealized root of our thought (Getting Back into Place 50).³ Phenomenology may be seen to intersect literary analysis in the pioneering rhetorical criticism of Kenneth Burke, and his perception of poetry, or any verbal act, as “symbolic action,” or “the dancing of an attitude,” which has at its base level a bodily or biological expression (The Philosophy of Literary Form 8, 9, 37).

Phenomenologists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, in their recent book, Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought, employ the findings of the cognitive sciences to argue for the authenticity of the embodied mind and reason. Lakoff and Johnson recognize that if all human reasoning is embodied, then a valid theory of human meaning will have to be grounded in that science for which there is “broad and deep converging evidence,” namely evolutionary-ecological Darwinism, which holds that human rationality is not unique but builds upon forms and inferences present in so-called lower animals (92, 4). In looking to evolutionary biology as the basis for their theory of a human nature, Lakoff and Johnson join literary critics like Joseph Carroll, in Evolution and Literary Theory, and Robert Storey, in Mimesis and the Human Animal: On the Biogenetic Foundation of Literary Representation. Both of these recent works of literary criticism were anticipated to some extent by Joseph Meeker’s pioneering 1974 study of evolution and literature, The Comedy of Survival: Studies in Literary Ecology.⁴

What may be seen in such studies, then, is an important movement toward interdisciplinarity, combining literary and humanistic interests with the braided scientific concepts of evolution and ecology. Place itself has, through the influence of humanistic geographers, been revived as a field of study and positioned for collaborative inquiry. Phenomenology, the study of the experiential core of our lives, has added the working of the body and mind to the power of place, bringing philosophy and the cognitive and life sciences into the mix. The rise of an ecocritical view-
point in the discipline of English literature has led literary critics to begin considering these issues from a fresh, new perspective. Even the academic Left, long resistant to evidence of biological influences on human behavior, or to even the concept of a human nature, may be moving toward a rapprochement with such ideas, as is suggested in renowned ethicist Peter Singer’s new book, *A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution, and Cooperation*. Such realignment may be expected to continue, as evidence mounts in the biological and cognitive sciences that inherited factors have a major role in human behavior.

It seems inevitable to me that literary scholars of the next one hundred years, widely anticipated as the Century of the Environment, will find themselves, along with other humanists and social scientists, engaged in important, ecologically based interdisciplinary work with the natural sciences, bridging the two-culture gulf between them. We will necessarily become more interdisciplinary because we live in an increasingly interconnected world, because we need all the intellectual resources we can muster to find a sustainable place within it, and because we will see more and more the relatedness of all of this to the work we do as teachers and scholars of literature. Anthropology-trained Gary Snyder offers a comfortable common-sense stance for spanning the divide between the humanists and the evolutionary-based sciences when he writes:

Recollecting that we once lived in places is part of our contemporary self-discovery. It grounds what it means to be “human” (etymologically something like “earthling”). . . . [H]ow could we be were it not for this planet that provided our very shape? Two conditions—gravity and a livable temperature ranging between freezing and boiling—have given us fluids and flesh. The trees we climb and the ground we walk on have given us five fingers and toes. The “place” (from the root *plat*, broad, spreading, flat) gave us far-seeing eyes, the streams and breezes gave us versatile tongues and whorly ears. The land gave us a stride, and the lake a dive. The amazement gave us our kind of mind. We should be thankful for that, and take nature’s stricter lessons with
If, as I believe, we are edging toward a virtual science of place, embodiment, and human nature that will undergird our reading and criticism of literature, the work of Western writers like Willa Cather, for whom these concepts have been of defining significance, will serve as fertile ground. Notable scholarship on Cather and place has, of course, already been done, in books like Leonard Lutwack’s ground-breaking *The Role of Place in Literature* (1984), Judith Fryer’s *Felicitous Space* (1986), Laura Winters’s *Willa Cather: Landscape and Exile* (1993), and Diane Dufva Quantic’s *The Nature of the Place* (1995), as well as in numerous chapters and articles from Cather scholars through the years. Many of these pieces appeared in the pages of *Western American Literature*, which, during the long tenure of Tom Lyon as editor, kept alive the power of place and region when it was all but dismissed in other literary venues.

Susan J. Rosowski has called attention in her 1995 article, “Willa Cather’s Ecology of Place,” to “a Cather we have scarcely met” (37), whose emplaced ideas were formed in the intellectual excitement of pioneering botanists and ecologists Charles Bessey and Frederic Clements at the University of Nebraska, whom Cather knew and admired in her student days and long after.5 Citing Michael Kowalewski’s “Writing in Place: The New American Regionalism,” Rosowski finds in Cather’s fiction and its relationship to the discipline of scientific ecology a proper response to Kowalewski’s call for “‘something challengingly new’” in place studies (48). In what follows, I intend to push still further in what I hope to be the direction of the new, with a consideration of a portion of Cather’s *The Professor’s House* from an inter disciplinary perspective, one if not overtly scientific, at least leaning in that direction.

I begin with the suspicion that what is challengingly new may turn out, in a sense, to be old, even archaic, but still, perhaps, challenging in its reconsideration of concepts ignored or pronounced dead by prevailing poststructuralist theory.

My admiration for *The Professor’s House* goes back some
thirty-five years since I first read it. It has been a perennial choice of texts for my classes in American and Western literature at the University of Oregon. This is the fourth scholarly essay I have written on the book. It may be, along with My Ántonia, the most frequently investigated book in the Cather canon. Cather has written approvingly of Sarah Orne Jewett’s observation that “[t]he thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper—whether little or great, it belongs to Literature” (Willa Cather on Writing 47). If such things become literature, it must be because they come to tease the mind of the audience as did the mind of the writer. We can, of course, recognize the description of an archetype here. But what is the archetypal or mythic appeal of The Professor’s House, and why should it draw author and reader as it does? I believe that the answer lies in Willa Cather’s environmental imagination—which is, I would argue, a biological and topographical imagination—and what is surely one of its most intriguing and suggestive manifestations, “Tom Outland’s Story” and the secret of the Blue Mesa.6

Putting it that way makes it sound like a Nancy Drew mystery. But that is how archetypes work. For all of our acculturated subtlety, memorable literature draws us in by appeals that may be shaped by culture but whose origins are often subcultural, epigenetic, in the language of evolutionary biology. Great writers often draw from such primal sources, as Constance Rourke pointed out in her classic study of American humor: “inevitably genius embraces popular moods and formulations even when it seems to range furthest afield. From them literature gains immensely; without them it can hardly be said to exist at all” (130).

Terms like epigenetic and evolutionary biology, or even nature, will perhaps raise for some the uneasy state of essentialist debate among ecofeminists, or call to mind connections to the conflict over sociobiology, which arose in the 1970s and 1980s with the publication of Edward O. Wilson’s textbook by that title. Although the ideas underlying the term sociobiology have already been assimilated into the working theory and assumptions of many scientists and social scientists, what Mary Midgley has called “the fear of biology” continues to haunt other so-
cial scientists and humanists. Writing of this phobia, Midgley says:

This is not a denial of evolutionary theory itself, which is usually conceded as correct in its own sphere, but a steady rejection of any attempt to use it in the interpretation of human affairs. A sanitary cordon is erected at the frontier between the physical and social sciences, at which biological explanations generally and evolutionary ones in particular still tend to be turned back, marked with an official stamp which may read “Fascist,” “Racist,” “Galtonist,” “Innatist,” “Biological Determinist,” or at times most grimly of all, merely “biological.”

This habit is fortunately on the way out, and a modest two-way traffic now does go on, to the general advantage. But a good deal of work is still needed to explain—as is always necessary in these cases—the distortions which gave rise to the prejudice in the first place, and just why they are not actually a part of biological science. (7)

Since Midgley published these words in 1985, a great deal of such explaining has gone on and a considerable amount of cross-disciplinary work has arisen in the natural and social sciences and even in some of the humanities, where human behavior is, of course, a matter of concern. The conception of a universal human nature has, as the result of this and earlier research, increasingly challenged and replaced the widespread assumption, as demonstrated in the second epigraph to this essay, that human nature is a dead idea, and that all human behavior is the product of social conditioning. This axiom, dating from the work of anthropologists Franz Boas, Margaret Mead, and others in the early twentieth century, was, partly at least, a wholly justifiable reaction to the early distortions of evolutionary theory that were common at the time. Unfortunately, the baby—human universals—was thrown out with the bath-water distortions.7 The denial of biology has remained politically appealing ever since because it has made the perfectibility of humankind seem an easy goal. What it wrongly assumed was that there was no middle ground between grim biological determinism and blue-sky freedom. What it overlooked
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was the presence of several million years of the evolution of the human brain and body into common social behavior. The attempt within the social sciences to purge human behavior from human biology has eroded during the last few decades in the face of growing evidence to the contrary, as seen, for example, in the work of Leda Cosmides, John Tooby, and others in the groundbreaking 1992 anthology on evolutionary psychology, *The Adapted Mind.*

Although there are behaviors and beliefs particular to specific cultures, there are also many that are common across all cultures, as anthropologists Donald E. Brown, George Murdoch, and others have established. Within the category of human universals are our similarities in living in social groups rather than alone; in our tendency to form cooperative relationships and to accept reciprocal obligations; in the underlying structure and semantics of human languages; in human facial, hand, and arm gestures; in our use of fire; in our territoriality (including our attraction to specific places); in the play of children; in our distinctions between close and distant kin; in age-grading and age distinction; in division of labor; in dominance relationships between men, women, and children; in rules of social unit membership; in conflicts structured around in-group and out-group relationships; in reasoning; in distinguishing right from wrong; in religious or supernatural beliefs, and so on.

It is necessary to stress that such classifications carry no evaluative judgments. As bioethicist Peter Singer writes:

I am not saying that because something like hierarchy, or male dominance, is characteristic of almost all human societies, that therefore it is good, or acceptable, or that we should not attempt to change it. . . . My point is not about deducing an “ought” from an “is” but about gaining a better understanding of what it may take to achieve the goals we seek. (38)

Human universals offer corroboration of our place within, not above, nature. They are evidence of the commonality to which we are bound in our evolutionary history. It is worth noting, for example, that many traits like language, reasoning,
tool-making, even culture itself, which once were confidently assumed to separate us from the rest of the animal world, have now been shown to exist in other animals, especially in our closest relative, the chimpanzees, with which we share nearly all of our genetic makeup. The discovery that reason itself is evolutionary, say Lakoff and Johnson, “utterly changes our relation to other animals and changes our conception of human beings as uniquely rational. Reason is thus not an essence that separates us from other animals; rather, it places us on a continuum with them” (4).

If human nature affirms, as seems self-evident, the validity of what we call the human condition, archetypes of wide-reaching significance take on an importance that has been ignored in recent decades and are deserving of much greater attention. That Cather found the story of the far mesa archetypal is beyond dispute. She made it the emotional center of two of her novels, The Song of the Lark and The Professor's House, and of her 1909 short story “The Enchanted Bluff,” and elements of it, as David Harrell points out in his From Mesa Verde to The Professor’s House, are found in many of her other works. Cather admitted in a 1925 interview that “‘[w]hen I was a little girl nothing in the world gave me such a moment as the idea of the cliff dwellers, of whole civilizations before ours linking me to the soil,’ ” and Edith Lewis identifies the mythic elements of this early enchantment when she says of Cather’s visit to Walnut Canyon in 1912, “‘She had never seen any cliff-dwellings before; but she and her brothers had thought and speculated about them since they were children. The cliff-dwellers were one of the native myths of the American West; children knew about them before they were conscious of them’ ” (qtd. in Harrell 8).

Harrell’s book details revealing differences between “Tom Outland’s Story” and the factual history of Mesa Verde’s discovery, as well as the scientific archaeology and anthropology subsequently carried on there. In doing so, Harrell underscores many of the elements by which Cather sets aside historical reality in order to heighten the mythic and emotional power of her story. The Blue Mesa carries a particularly thick texture of meaning for Cather. Further inquiry into her treatment of human nature and embodied place in Tom’s relationship to the Cliff City
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indicates something of her keenly archetypal and place-centered imagination.

Most noticeably, of course, the mesa’s height as a natural feature of the landscape lifts it to a metaphorical level that Cather reserves for her characters’ moments of high spiritual achievement. But within the mesa’s heart is the Cliff City, enclosing a cluster of incipient meanings central to the novel. “Tom Outland’s Story,” like the work as a whole, is engrossed with the human need to find one’s place, literally and figuratively. The Blue Mesa not only draws Tom Outland into his search for the right place, but also offers in the Cliff City the opportunity to ponder the human significance represented by the stunning record of a civilization that has been built into it. “Carving out places,” writes geographer Robert David Sack, “and creating a world occurs in the simplest preliterate societies. Identifying parts of the landscape, clearing sites, erecting shelter, bounding areas, establishing rules about what should or should not be in the place, knowing where to be and when, where to find this or that resource, and conveying all this through an oral tradition is world-building” (7). No less is it in a written tradition, not only in “Tom Outland’s Story,” but in books 1 and 3 of The Professor’s House, where the characters in a modern setting are also carving out places and trying to find their roles within them.

Thus, Cather has tapped into the nascent archetypal potentialities of the Cliff City, which lies waiting for what Tom can make of it, a lost civilization that was the product of millions of years of evolutionary development, during all of which time, place, and geography were life-and-death matters, when the ability to read the landscape correctly amounted to a survival factor. Yet the cliff dwellers’ evolutionary step forward, a literal leap from earth into a fixed habitation, and an agricultural rather than a wandering way of life, could not, in Cather’s perception of it, survive the aggressiveness of surrounding hunter-gatherers who, unlike the cliff dwellers, suffered no decline in the arts of war as the price of high cultural attainment. All of this embedded in the parallel context of the Professor’s contemporary world in which ideals continue to fall victim to a reigning aggressive materialism.

The reigning irrationalist assumptions in poststructuralist crit-
icism may have denied the reality of nature and human nature, but Cather, like those I have been citing, had not. If Cather is seen today as politically suspect from such perspectives, perhaps it is time to begin questioning the politics, rather than Cather. Joan Acocella, in her important new book on Cather and academic politics, notes that Cather is the victim of “political critics’ revenge on the ‘liberal humanism’ of the fifties and sixties” (64). Acocella writes, “How wearying is the tone of recent political criticism of Cather, so aggressive, so righteous, calling her to the dock to answer whether she was as good as the critic” (68). Cather calls up the perception of a shared human condition not only through her own commentary but also through the words of characters she admires, like Father Duchene and Tom Outland. Note that Cather puts into Father Duchene’s mouth what she calls, in her 1916 Mesa Verde essay, the most plausible explanation of the Cliff Dwellers’ extinction (Rosowski and Slote 85).

Duchene feels reverence for Tom’s Cliff City because it represents the desire of “humanity” for a home, “some natural yearning for order and security. They built themselves into this mesa and humanized it” (221). To Tom, Father Duchene calls the Cliff Dwellers “your people” (221), a characterization that Tom accepts when he later upbraids his friend Roddy for selling the artifacts that belonged “to all the people . . . to boys like you and me that have no other ancestors to inherit from. . . . I’m not so poor that I have to sell the pots and pans that belonged to my poor grandmothers a thousand years ago” (242–43). Later, in book 3, Professor St. Peter longs to “look off at those long, rugged, untamed vistas dear to the American heart. Dear to all hearts, probably—at least calling to all” (270). My italics in these passages emphasize Cather’s implicit argument for a deeper human unity than today’s unexamined assumptions of absolute cultural relativism might find acceptable. Tom’s sins as an excavator doubtless qualify today as cultural appropriation, and it is useful to have these aspects of his story pointed out to us. But we also need to keep in mind that they are consistent with Tom’s deep sense of his own human bonds with the lost inhabitants of the Cliff City. We might also reflect, with some humility, that for their time, these actions would have been seen largely as Cather saw
them, as noble and self-sacrificing. And if we were alive at the
time, we would, at our best, likely have seen them that way as
well.

Moreover, Tom’s perception of a shared humanity takes on
new significance in the light of recent genetic research that leads
most scientists to discount the idea of separate and distinct human
races. Steve Olson, in Mapping Human History: Discovering the
Past through Our Genes, notes that traditional racial classifica-
tions ignore the overwhelming genetic similarity of all human
individuals. “One need go back only a couple of millennia to
connect everyone alive to a common pool of ancestors” (Olson
47). Tom’s universalist sentiments are now verified by the DNA in
our Darwinian bodies.

In the same context, Tom’s reverential naming of the mummi-
ﬁed body of the woman among the ruins as “Mother Eve” proves
remarkably prescient. A recent genetic discovery ﬁnds that all of
the mitochondrial DNA sequences that exist in all six billion of
us in the world today come from the mitochondrial DNA of one
single woman who lived about 200,000 years ago, our common
ancestor, the so-called Mitochondrial Eve (Olson 23–27, 237).

Cather reminds us of the presence of the archaic human past
within any of us when she reveals, in book 3, that a discour-
aged Professor St. Peter had reverted to a preintellectual state
and had become “a primitive. He was only interested in earth and
woods and water. Wherever sun sunned and rain rained and snow
snowed, wherever life sprouted and decayed, places were alike to
him” (265). Cather uses style itself here to convey her mean-
ing, with sentences and phrases shortened and freed from quali-
fication and subordination, disregarding any reach for graceful
synonyms that might muffle the hard truth: “sun sunned . . . rain
rained . . . snow snowed.”

It is as if Cather were anticipating, and undercutting, the post-
modern assumption that culture and language have somehow
lifted us above our biology and rendered our bodies and their
elemental emplacement inconsequential. Such invocations of a
deeply felt presymbolic existence are frequently encountered in
Cather and to note them is to memorialize many of her most
powerful scenes: the children on the river sandbar, glimpsed from
the window of a passing train, recalling to Bartley Alexander of *Alexander’s Bridge* the dreams of his youth; young Jim Burden feeling himself melting into the slow fecundity and self-sufficiency of the pumpkin patch; Ántonia’s children swarming up out of the root cellar in a kind of evolutionary fast-forward, an explosion of the victory of the life force over the underground world of the dugout that claimed the Shimerdas in their early days on the Divide, and which still holds the father in his suicide’s grave; Thea Kronborg of *The Song of the Lark* lying on the floor of her bedroom, bathed in moonlight which seems to pour its essence into her young body, thirsting with creative desire.

Cather’s art is, of course, complex enough to embrace other influences than the archetypal. But, given the tendency of much contemporary criticism to dismiss anything that speaks of biology and the commonality of human nature as deterministic or reductionist—while single-mindedly promoting its own brand of cultural reductionism—we should be at pains to reexamine what Dorothy Van Ghent described years ago as a quality of Cather that “allowed the back door of her mind to keep open” to archaic and instinctive influences. For Van Ghent, Cather’s best fiction is characterized by “a sense of the past not as an irrecoverable quality of events, wasted in history, but as persistent human truth repossessed—salvaged, redeemed—by virtue of memory and art” (5).

One such line of reexamination is presented by Edward O. Wilson in his latest book, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*. There Wilson applies a theory of gene-culture coevolution to an interpretation of the arts. “We know that virtually all human behavior is transmitted by culture. We also know that biology has an important effect on the origin of culture and its transmission. The question remaining is how biology and culture interact, and in particular how they interact across all societies to create the commonalities of human nature” (126). Briefly summarized, “culture is created by the communal mind, and each mind in turn is the product of the genetically structured human brain” (127). Here and in his earlier book, *Biophilia*, Wilson uses, to illustrate the creation of an archetype, the example of human reactions of fear and fascination toward snakes—spread across
many different cultures of the world—as the genetic component, formed out of hundreds of thousands of years of human evolution in proximity to snakes. “Poisonous snakes have been an important source of mortality in almost all societies throughout human evolution. Close attention to them, enhanced by dream serpents and the symbols of culture, undoubtedly improves the chances of survival” (127). The culture draws upon those reactions of fear and fascination to create art, thereby transforming the natural snake into the archetypal serpent of art.

One recalls, at this point, Cather's versions of zero at the bone on the matter of snakes: the ominous dread of the snake-serpent expressed in the “Snake Root” chapter of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, or Jim Burden’s battle with the giant rattlesnake in *My Ántonia*, a creature presented in unmistakably prototypical terms, who “seemed like the ancient, eldest Evil. Certainly his kind have left unconscious memories in all warm-blooded life” (45–46). Such primal memories also manifest themselves in *The Professor’s House* with the intrusion of the snake-serpent into the relationship between Professor St. Peter’s two daughters, Kathleen and Rosamond: “‘When she comes toward me, I feel hate coming toward me, like a snake’s hate,’ ” Kathleen confides to her father, whose response is described as an anguished suffering in which he replies, “‘We can’t, dear, we can’t, in this world, let ourselves think of things—of comparisons—like that’” (85). Then there is the rattlesnake that strikes old Henry Atkins, Tom and Roddy’s cook and companion, as they are exploring mesa ruins, killing the old man almost instantly. Although, as David Harrell reports, snakes were not a problem in the actual Mesa Verde–Wetherill excavations (126), the “terrible” (216) death of old Henry seems another example of Cather’s heightening of the mythic trials of Tom’s quest.

Traditional Freudian interpretations of snakes as phallic representations and dreams as forbidden wishes that evade the brain’s censorship have been recently seriously questioned or replaced by biological explanations. As Wilson says, “If brain and mind are at base biological phenomena, it follows that the biological sciences are essential to achieving coherence among all the branches of learning, from the humanities on down to the physical sci-
ences” (Consilience 81). What is new from an interdisciplinary point of view, then, in such literary criticism (as is also seen in the books of Joseph Carroll and Robert Storey), may require us to reconsider something old, something akin to the archetypal criticism of Northrop Frye in his Anatomy of Criticism, sweeping through graduate English departments forty years ago. The work of Frye, who has been called by Frank Kermode “the major figure in literary criticism of our century,” may, according to Carroll, today be severed from its questionable mysticism and obsolete science and revised by strong new underpinning drawn from recent research in the cognitive and behavioral sciences (117, 382–90).

Wilson rightly emphasizes that a theory of the biological origin of the arts is only a working hypothesis, vulnerable and meant to be tested, but that it offers the humanities the attraction of a reinvigoration of interpretation, just as science would benefit from the interpretive and intuitive power of the arts. A scientific theory that is consistent with what we know from the recent cognitive sciences is worth our attention as literary scholars in reconsidering the interpretation of archetypes, those defining elements of art, reminding us, as Robert Frost put it, of what we didn’t know we knew. Such a rapprochement with science squares with the existing evidence, then, and may offer exciting new possibilities for productive interconnections. If the sciences have a role to play in interpretation, they cannot replace interpretation, as Wilson acknowledges. The human brain is the world’s most complex biological phenomenon, with 100 billion neurons and 100 trillion synaptic connections. Thus the variety and intensity of responses and connections as they play back and forth between artist, subject, and critic are virtually infinite. There will always remain work for the critic to do.

The Professor’s House, particularly “Tom Outland’s Story,” then, is rich in archetypal elements, as has been noted in several critical treatments, especially in David Harrell’s book, in Susan Rosowski and Bernice Slote’s 1984 article, “Willa Cather’s 1916 Mesa Verde Essay: The Genesis of The Professor’s House,” and in John N. Swift’s 1986 essay, “Memory, Myth, and The Professor’s House.” It seems likely to me that the publication of “Tom Outland’s Story,” as reported by Cather, in French, Polish, and Dutch,
as a short narrative for school students learning English, may owe something to the appeal of Tom Outland as a version of the code Western hero (“On The Professor’s House” 30). “Tom Outland’s Story” reminds us that “The Western” in fiction and film is a clear example of the appeal of archetypes across cultural lines, leading to the Western’s emergence by the mid-twentieth century as what has been called a contemporary world-wide myth.

“Tom Outland’s Story,” centered as it is upon the discovery and archaeological investigation of the Cliff City, is a particularly packed meditation on biological-cultural coevolution in which Cather recreates a complex pattern of human history including, incidentally, a deadly serpent and a Mother Eve, but most important a hidden lost Eden that sprang from its hunter-gatherer origins on the plain into a fixed habitation, a Catherian city in the sky, named for the sky’s color.

Along with these thematic elements, an interdisciplinary and scientifically aware reading of the novel might note its sensitive response to the often-ignored phenomenological base of our directly felt bodily experience. Cather affirmed such experience when she claimed that “art appeals primarily to the senses” (Willa Cather in Person 146). Tom’s life on the Blue Mesa is one of heightened physical attunement to his surroundings: a keenly sharpened sense of colors, sights, tastes, textures, sounds, silences, and especially the feel and smell and taste of the air itself. These pre-reflective sensations, like Shakespeare’s bites and blows of weather, “are counselors / That feelingly persuade me what I am.” They suggest Merleau-Ponty’s claim of “our primordial inherence in the world.”16 The frequently noted array of houses and dwellings in the novel seem related to the sense of bodily emplacement that such structures arouse, returning us, as Edward Casey suggests, to our bodily emplacement “immeasurably enriched” (Getting Back into Place 178). Like the phenomenologists, Cather never loses the sense of normative significance that characterizes subjective physical experience.

If the thing that teases the mind is the archetypal element, it does not become literature, as Jewett and Cather affirm, until it is put down rightly on paper. Human universals are fine, but it’s what the writer does with them that counts. To conclude, it is
worth calling attention to the artistry with which Cather puts down on paper the climactic moment of “Tom Outland’s Story.” In the episode of discovery Cather skillfully creates a form that clusters the final revelation of his search with a heightened sense of place and bodily sensation. To apply Kenneth Burke’s terms, form is the arousing of an expectation in the minds of the audience and then the adequate satisfying of that expectation (“Psychology and Form” 31). Cather has carefully prepared us as readers for this moment.

The Blue Mesa, high and intriguing, has occupied Tom’s thoughts and hopes of exploration since he had first seen it, perhaps even before, as it had teased the imagination of prairie children, who knew of such a place before they were conscious of it. Now, several strayed cattle from the herd in Tom and Roddy’s care have swum the river and disappeared in the canyon winding into the mesa. Tom quickly prepares to follow them. He swims the river with his horse and, at first running beside the horse to keep warm, begins trailing the cattle into the canyon as it twists back into the mesa. Cather’s keen sense of place and the lived sensations of the body in place are immediately evident in Tom’s description:

The bluish rock and the sun-tanned grass under the unusual purple-grey of the sky, gave the whole valley a very soft colour, lavender and pale gold, so that the occasional cedars growing beside the boulders looked black that morning. It may have been the hint of snow in the air, but it seemed to me that I had never breathed in anything that tasted so pure as the air in that valley. It made my mouth and nostrils smart like charged water, seemed to go to my head a little and produce a kind of exaltation. I kept telling myself that it was very different from the air on the other side of the river, though that was pure and uncontaminated enough. (200)

Here is the bodily phenomenological immediacy of the opening window in the crowded interior of the Dutch paintings, which Cather later cast as the metaphor for “Tom Outland’s Story”: “Then I wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh
air that blew off the Blue Mesa, and the fine disregard of trivialities which was in Tom Outland’s face and in his behaviour” (“On The Professor’s House” 31–32).

Soon the ground becomes so rough that Tom hobbles his horse and goes on alone. “My eyes were steadily on the ground—a slip of the foot there might cripple one” (201). The act of coming into the country calls to mind Leonard Lutwack’s observation that “[t]he quality of a place in literature is subtly determined by the manner in which a character arrives at it, moves within it, and departs from it” (59). Hemingway, whose style and manner had much to learn from Cather, was also deeply engrossed with writing about coming into a place, walking into the country.17 “Some days,” he wrote, “it went so well that you could make the country so that you could walk into it” (qtd. in Tanner 82). As Stephen L. Tanner points out, for Hemingway,

[m]aking country—that is, creating place—was the real challenge. “The people were easy to do.” He [Hemingway] thinks of a number of writers who do people well and concludes, “They weren’t after what he was after.” People were easy to do, he reasons, because “nobody knew anything about them. If it sounded good they took your word for it.” Implied here is that everybody knows what a sense of place is; they won’t take your word for it—you must satisfy their sensuous and emotive apprehension of topos or physical location. (85)

Cather shares what Tanner calls Hemingway’s topographical imagination, making the most of the excitement of coming into the county, walking into the country. Nick Adams, walking into the country of the Big Two-Hearted River has much in common with Tom Outland walking into the Blue Mesa. Basic to Tom’s experience is the primacy of bodily movement, swimming the river, running, walking and scrambling over stony ground, finally stopping to catch his breath, a moment of physical repose after strenuous motion, which will find its counterpart in the immortal repose of what he is to see. Cather’s sensitivity to the significance of human movement is a novelist’s corroboration of
Maxine Sheets-Johnstone’s claim that “[p]rimal animation and tactile-kinesthetic experience are at the core of our infancy and remain the unsurpassed core of our adult being. Indeed, the wonder of being lies in aliveness and the wonder of aliveness originates in movement. Human being, and the being of all who must learn to move themselves, is foundationally and essentially kinetic” (*The Primacy of Movement* 271).

Cather at this point in the story skillfully heightens our eventual gratification of fulfilled expectations by purposefully misdirecting our attention for the moment to the ground, under Tom’s feet, with its dangerous footing, a jumble of stones fallen from above.

It was such rough scrambling that I was soon in a warm sweat under my damp clothes. In stopping to take breath, I happened to glance up at the canyon wall. I wish I could tell you what I saw there, just as I saw it, on that first morning, through a veil of lightly falling snow. Far up above me, a thousand feet or so, set in a great cavern in the face of the cliff, I saw a little city of stone asleep. It was as still as sculpture—and something like that. It all hung together, seemed to have a kind of composition: pale little houses of stone nestling close to one another, perched on top of each other, with flat roofs, narrow windows, straight walls, and in the middle of the group, a round tower. (201)

Tom happens to glance up. From his ground-held scrutiny of the jumbled and chaotic canyon floor at his feet, his eyes lift in an involuntary glance, and he beholds—just when he and we least expect it—the secret of the Blue Mesa. A revelation of composition overhanging formlessness, confusion transformed into composition, both the country and the materials out of which countries are made. The vision suggests an actualized creation myth of the early people of this place, in which chaos is magically transformed into a fitting home place. The climactic sentence beginning “Far up above me” may be one of the great sentences in Cather, in literature. Periodic, dramatic, a string of parallel phrases serving to heighten the significance of the very simple main clause that follows: “I saw . . .” and all rounded off by the
singlesuggestivemodifier, “asleep.” In this fine moment Tom lifts up his eyes to the hills, and the teased mind gets it all down rightly on paper. This is why the writer writes and why the reader reads.

To sum up, what I am arguing here is that, to paraphrase Henry James, the house of criticism has many rooms. And many of them deserve more looking into. There is nothing more worthwhile for the scholar or for scholarship than honest interdisciplinary work. I join my colleague William Howarth in urging variety in environmental criticism and “in knowing more disciplines than literature” (7). And no interdisciplinary work has more to offer now than the various fields of biology, ecology, physical anthropology, and evolutionary psychology, to which literary theorists and critics have thus far paid little attention.

Cather’s unusual richness of mind and imagination repays study from the many ecocritical approaches that are now developing in response to individual and collective environmental imaginations. She avoids the one-dimensional approach that reads culture and nature according to the current reigning ideological stance. Her version of the Cliff Dwellers’ story also questions much of the current romanticizing of the hunter-gatherer past as an ecological paradise, yet she recognizes in it our common evolutionary development. She sees the promise of the stunning architecture and the ordered agriculture of the early mesa people, “growing strict fields of corn and beans,” in the words of Gary Snyder’s fine poem “Anasazi” (3), but she understands the Cliff Dwellers’ vulnerability to human and natural-based catastrophe. She looks beyond culture to its roots in human animality, as is suggested in the mummified figure of Mother Eve, with its broken skull, its pierced side, and its face frozen in a scream of agony. The mummy’s scream is the embodiment of the human potentiality for destructiveness or sexual aggression. The emptiness of the Cliff City, whether one attributes it to murdering marauders or prolonged drought, is a lesson in stone that biology counts, that past human life has been almost unbearably hard, and that all progress has been dearly bought.

In this sense, “Tom Outland’s Story” and The Professor’s House remain intensely contemporary, calling upon us to face our own nature. Reading the scene as a human tragedy, an ecological
violation of the local carrying capacity, or an earlier “global warming,” the silence and emptiness of the Cliff City reminds us that we cannot culturally construct the world any way we choose.

Cather’s best work demonstrates that it is not the minor differences that divide humans culturally but the major similarities uniting us as a species that make for memorable literature. For “Tom Outland’s Story,” as for all stories, the medium is the message. Stories are one thing that makes us human, and their origins are at the heart of our evolutionary development. Tom’s story is the opening window letting in the disregarding wind that sweeps away pettiness and confusion and joins us to reverberating human experience. Narration serves an ancient and literally humanizing function of lining out a meaningful structure from the wretched mess of ordinary existence. That this particular story contains its own questioning of the cathartic power of such narrative—as seen, for example, in Tom’s guilt over his dismissal of his friend Roddy Blake, and in Professor St. Peter’s virtual withdrawal from his family and from life itself under the near-suffocating influence of Tom’s heroic idealism—these are ironies that nevertheless depend for their effect upon the continuing appeal of Tom’s archetypal example. Like the drawings in the Lascaux caves, “Tom Outland’s Story” reminds us of the timelessness, the antiquity of human aspirations as they reach for meaning and coherence through artistic expression.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Casey, The Fate of Place, ix.
2. Other testimonials to the power of place may be found in Lutwack’s The Role of Place in Literature.
3. Literary critic Leonard Scigaj effectively applies Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological ideas, and those of his interpreters like David Abram in The Spell of the Sensuous, to his recent ecocritical study, Sustainable Poetry.
4. Meeker’s book has recently been revised and republished by the University of Arizona Press. For more on these and related works, see Love, “Science, Anti-Science, and Ecocriticism” and Love, “Ecocriticism and Science: Toward Consilience?” An important book relating
bioevolutionary evidence to the larger role of art in human life is Ellen Dissanayake’s *What is Art For?*

5. For further connections between Cather and science, see, for example, Love, “The Cowboy in the Laboratory,” Quirk, and Reynolds.

6. “Tom Outland’s Story,” may seem to be confined to book 2 of the novel’s tripartite structure, but the story of Tom Outland permeates the entire novel.

7. For the history of the twentieth-century conflict over human nature, see, for example, the books by Brown, Degler, and Pinker.

8. As the editors, Cosmides, Tooby, and Barkow, say in their introduction, “The central premise of *The Adapted Mind* is that there is a universal human nature, but that this universality exists primarily at the level of evolved psychological mechanisms, not of expressed cultural behaviors. On this view, cultural variability is not a challenge to claims of universality, but rather data that can give one insight into the structure of the psychological mechanisms that helped generate it” (5). See, also, Jolly 257, ff.


10. On Cather and heights see Love, “The Cowboy in the Laboratory” 118, 165, n.15. Also see McGiveron.

11. For a view supportive of Cather in its critical questioning of a hunter-gatherer “golden age,” see Flores.

12. On this point, see the discussion in Randall 217–18, and in Reynolds 124–49.

13. See, for example, Anderson 133–46.

14. For further discussion of the book’s stylistic experimentation, see Love, “The Professor’s House: Cather, Hemingway and the Chastening of American Prose Style.”

15. See, for example, Wilson, *Consilience* 74–81; Carroll 174–75; Storey 84–86. Likewise, Freudian discounting of place moves us even further from the explanatory power of evolutionary biology.

16. The Merleau-Ponty quotation is from Langer (154). The Shakespeare reference is found in *As You Like It*, act 2, scene 1.

17. On Hemingway’s stylistic indebtedness to Cather, see Love, “The Professor’s House.”

18. See Carroll, Storey, and Entrikin for further discussion of narrative in this context. For an important recent defense of literary universals, see Hogan.
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Rosowski, Susan J., and Bernice Slote. “Willa Cather’s 1916 Mesa Verde
My own journey to ecocriticism transpired via a series of environmentally preoccupied conference papers on Willa Cather. After working the ground in Cather’s fiction for several years I felt the need to formulate a general critical manifesto, which I presented with some trepidation at the 1989 Western Literature Association conference in a paper entitled “Toward an Ecological Literary Criticism,” coincidentally the same year that Glen Love delivered the WLA Presidential Address, entitled “Revaluing Nature: Toward an Ecological Criticism.” Both Glen and I urged that the time had come for literary scholars to respond more actively to the environmental crisis. Glen speculated that literary studies have remained indifferent to the environmental crisis in part because “our discipline's limited humanistic vision” has led to a “narrowly anthropocentric view of what is consequential in life” (229). He recalled that Norman Maclean’s *A River Runs Through It* was rejected by a New York publisher on the grounds that “‘These stories have trees in them’” (225), and he recommended that the profession learn to revalue nature-oriented literature, literature that can redirect us from “ego-consciousness” to “eco-consciousness” (232). While Glen urged his colleagues to rethink pastoralism and to pay more attention to nature-oriented literature, I argued for an ecological critical method, proposing the term *ecocriticism* for a critical practice that would take as its subject “the interconnections between human culture and the material world, between the human and the nonhuman” (4).

I suggested that Elaine Showalter’s model of the three develop-
mental stages of feminist criticism might provide a useful scheme for cataloguing three analogous efforts in ecocriticism. The first stage in feminist criticism, the “images of women” stage, is concerned with representations, concentrating on how women are portrayed in literature. Analogous efforts in ecocriticism study how nature is represented in literature—virgin land, Eden, Arcadia, howling wilderness. The second stage Showalter distinguishes, the women’s literary tradition stage, rediscovers, revises, and reconsiders literature by women. In ecocriticism, similar efforts recover and describe the genre of nonfiction nature writing and, in addition, identify and study ecologically oriented fiction, poetry, and drama. Showalter’s third stage is the theoretical phase, which raises fundamental questions about the symbolic and linguistic construction of gender and sexuality. Similar work in ecocriticism examines how literary discourse has constructed the human. This critique questions dualisms prevalent in Western thought that separate mind from body, men from women, and humanity from nature.3

What was curious, from the point of view of this manifesto calling for the “greening” of literary studies, is that much ecocritical work had, in fact, already been done. When I drafted a working bibliography of ecocriticism, it grew to 330 titles.4 Behold, ecocriticism already existed. What didn’t exist was any institutional presence of this vibrant field of study—no journals, no jargon, no jobs. Thus began a tremendously collaborative effort to create a scholarly community and put ecocriticism “on the map.” The result is that today, as an anthology released just this month notes, ecocriticism “boasts a national organization, a journal, Modern Language Association (MLA) affiliation, a proliferation of courses across the land, and a lengthening shelf of book-length studies” (Harrington and Tallmadge ix). The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was established in 1992 and now has one thousand members, with chapters in Japan and England, biennial conferences, a scholarly journal (ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment), a newsletter, an annual bibliography, a graduate mentoring program, special regional symposia, and a superlative website (www.asle.umn.edu). The ecocritical movement has been fea-
tured in the New York Times Magazine, the Chronicle of Higher Education, the Washington Post, the London Times, the Utne Reader, PMLA, and elsewhere. As Lawrence Buell, chair of the English Department at Harvard and author of The Environmental Imagination, recently observed in a special ecocritical issue of New Literary History, “the study of literature in relation to environment” has “begun...to assume the look of a major critical insurgency” (699).

Perhaps the new visibility of literature and environment studies inspired this year’s Cather seminar theme. Reviewing recent and emerging ecocriticism of Willa Cather reveals a strikingly variegated palette of green readings. I should warn you that some of these treatments fault Cather for being unenvironmental. I believe that such attacks do not endanger Cather’s reputation as a major writer but, rather, confirm it. Critics of neglected authors must necessarily highlight the strengths of their subject; it is only when a writer’s canonical status is secure that he or she begins to attract heated scholarly debate. Thus, I view these skirmishes as a healthy sign in Cather studies.

Louise Westling, in a chapter on “Willa Cather’s Prairie Epics” in her 1996 book The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction, concurs with a 1990 essay by Mike Fischer entitled “Pastoralism and Its Discontents: Willa Cather and the Burden of Imperialism.” Westling reads Cather as writing from “imperialist nostalgia” (80) in the tradition of the pastoral poet Virgil, “sentimentalizing...colonized space” (72) and “encod[ing] a benign version of the conquest of the Plains, erasing its violence” (81). Thus, buffalo slaughter and Indian wars—the precursors to immigrant settlement—form no part of Cather’s prairie epics. For Westling, despite Cather’s feminist sympathies and strong female characters, her prairie novels ultimately “remain part of a male semiotic economy of heroic action that inscribes the individual will upon the face of the earth” (81). The “love and yearning” that Alexandra in O Pioneers! feels toward the wild land serves to romanticize the fact that what she will do is “buy up” (59) the land of her bankrupt neighbors and plow it under for profit and property. In a pattern that West-
ling finds present throughout American literature, “Cather has inscribed a kind of Manifest Destiny for her entrepreneurial Amazon, masking Alexandra’s aggrandizement as joyous eroticism” (68). In creating prairie epics that leave the violence offstage, Cather performs the “cultural work” (72) of “grant[ing] literary validation to the process of exploitation that the railroads set in motion” (59).

Susan Rosowski’s 1999 Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature shares Westling’s interest in Cather’s prairie epics and is also keenly attuned to gender issues in American literature, but this study of “national identity and the American West” (ix) reaches very different conclusions. Rosowski traces expressions of desire in Cather’s writing about the West, beginning with her earliest published work, proceeding through the short stories and on to O Pioneers!, culminating in My Ántonia. Rosowski charts a progression that moves from “an untamed nature to be conquered to a wildness within to be freed” (67). She argues that “[r]ather than writing about a virgin land waiting to be despoiled, Cather conceived of the West as female nature slumbering, awakening, and roaring its independence” (79). In Rosowski’s reading of Cather, then, the land is never subdued; it retains its wildness and generativity, which is closely allied with the wildness in women. Rosowski concludes that in prairie epics such as O Pioneers! and My Ántonia, Cather “sent Adam packing and claimed paradise for women, restoring to them a psychosexual identification with nature and appropriating for them the promise of nature’s wildness” (79).

Gerard Dollar, discussing The Professor’s House, disagrees. In his 1998 essay “Misogyny in the American Eden: Abbey, Cather, and Maclean” he notes a disturbing tendency in American nature writing to “define women out of paradise” (97–98). Dollar interprets the Blue Mesa scenes in The Professor’s House as a version of “the western Eden—or, the wilderness Edenic” (98) and, in the vein of Annette Kolodny’s The Lay of the Land, he finds that nature is “a site for men both to escape women and to bond with other men” (98). In this male “quest for a sacred space in nature” (99), one finds the paradox that
the highest spiritual development, through contact with nature, is found alongside what Freud would surely label arrested development. The male’s affirmation of a wilderness self comes at the price of denying or repressing a sexual self and a social self; it is as if the natural world becomes the man’s true spiritual mate—an idealized womanly Other who makes flesh-and-blood women at best an irrelevancy, at worst a temptation away from “pure” male self-fulfillment. (99)

Thus, Dollar concurs with Westling’s contention that Cather is writing squarely within the American male literary tradition.

While gender-conscious ecocritical readings produce certain patterns of findings and create particular kinds of debates, readings that take a more androgynous or gender-blind view of Cather and her characters tend to focus on philosophical or formal issues rather than feminist ones, thus engaging a different set of questions and opening up yet another way to understand Cather’s environmental imagination. Judith Fryer’s 1987 essay “Desert, Rock, Shelter, Legend: Willa Cather’s Novels of the Southwest” finds similarities between Cather and painter Georgia O’Keeffe, artists who found the Southwest to be “felicitous space,” a term coined by Gaston Bachelard in his *The Poetics of Space*, referring to spaces that create a feeling of being centered and safe. As artists their challenge is to craft works of art in which desire is “concentrated within form” (29). For Cather, this meant “paring down language so that words exist as objects—physical things implying spiritual connectedness” (Bachelard 29). Fryer’s version of ecocriticism studies the formal properties of Cather’s work, showing how the desert landscapes of the Southwest influenced her prose style.

Carol Steinhagen, in a 1999 article entitled “Dangerous Crossings: Historical Dimensions of Landscape in Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*, *The Professor’s House*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*” takes a philosophically inflected approach to some of the same Southwestern texts. Steinhagen identifies characters who yearn for the “all” feeling, a dissolution of ego, a melding with
nature. Of course, there is a danger to this “crossing”: dissolution of the ego means death of the individual self. Achieving a sense of oneness with nature depends upon experiencing an ahistorical nature, a land before landscaping. Even to think of land as landscape implies a distance and separation from it, which is a historical development tied to rationalism. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* Cather comes the closest to making the dangerous crossing into prelandscaped land in that she gives the underground river scene great power, she respects the Native way of dissolving into the landscape, and she shows Bishop Latour at the end of his life embracing the fresh morning air. Yet in her next novel, *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather retreats back into history, praising the settlers’ transformation of the land into civilization. Being “beyond landscape” finally posed too much of a conflict for Cather, “who used her pen to create a country of ‘the material out of which countries are made’” (80). In other words, Steinhagen points out, writing itself is a form of landscape making.

Ecocritics of Cather’s work are quickly establishing what might be called a “canon” of environmental scenes, which have become critical meccas. One of these passages describes Alexandra’s “new consciousness of the country” and appears on the poster of this seminar. Another takes place in Grandmother Burden’s garden in *My Ántonia* when young Jim leans back against a warm pumpkin and experiences a moment of unity with the universe: “that is happiness, to be dissolved into something complete and great,” which, incidentally, are the words engraved on Cather’s tombstone.” Steinhagen began her reading of Cather with this scene, and William Howarth in “Ego or Ecocriticism? Looking for Common Ground” (1998) also gravitates to it, but rather than pondering its metaphysics, he looks at its physical grounding. Howarth questions why this mystical insight takes place in a prairie draw, of all places. He points out that the dynamic process of erosion and deposition that created the draw and made it so fertile—such a fit place for a garden—contrast sharply with the grasslands on the levels, which were ultimately ploughed under and planted with monoculture crops, depleting
the soil, drying it out, and exposing it to winds that blew it away, leaving the grasslands today a depressed and depopulated region. In his analysis of this single moment in the novel, Howarth draws upon the sciences of ecology, geology, and biology, thus illustrating one of his principal tenets that ecocriticism be interdisciplinary.

Turning now to emerging ecocriticism on Cather, I note two dominant trends as well as a constellation of concerns that might foretell the future of scholarship in this area. By far the most frequently repeated word in articles and presentations on Cather’s ecological imagination is \textit{place}, as in “Sense of Place,” “Function of Place,” “Representations of Place,” “Use of Place,” “Reading in Place,” “Experience of Place,” “Erotics of Place,” “Legacies of Place,” “Hierarchy of Place,” “Voices of Place,” “Theory of Place,” “Place as Agency,” and “Placing Cather.” Clearly, as one recent paper is entitled, “Place Matters” in Cather studies, suggesting the power of one way of understanding ecocriticism as “add[ing] place to the categories of race, class, and gender used to analyze literature.” A second favorite word is \textit{garden}, as in “Willa Cather’s Gardens,” “Eve’s Garden,” “Creation Garden,” “Old and New World Gardens,” “Regionalism’s Writers of the Garden,” and “Poetics of Gardening.” Indeed, gardens are crucial to the signifying system of Cather’s writing and will reward closer attention; the topic might make a nice special issue of \textit{Cather Studies}.

Other topics mirror emerging trends in ecocriticism itself. Lawrence Buell in his 1999 \textit{NLH} article “The Ecocritical Insurgency” maps five areas of flourishing ecocritical activity. First, as Howarth has forecast, Buell notes a strong contingency of science-oriented ecocritics, those who synthesize literary studies and environmental sciences. Correspondingly, recent papers have appeared with titles such as “Conservation,” “Flora and Fauna,” “Field Guides,” “Contested Waters,” “Organic Modernism,” and “Interdisciplinary Convergences.” Second, Buell finds in today’s ecocritical discourse what he calls “theory anxiety,” manifested by both hostility to and engagement with social construction theory. This area of study is reflected by papers on “Constructing Environments,” “Construction of Race,” “Eco-
A Guided Tour of Ecocriticism

logical Realism,” and “Dialogic Environmentalism.” Third, Buell notes a proliferation of studies of landscapes, regions, and places, and of particular landscapes such as wetlands, mountains, rivers, watersheds, forests, and deserts. Landscape in Cather has received much notice in the past and continues to attract attention with papers on “The Prairie,” “Panther Canyon,” “Virginia,” “Rural Nebraska,” “Desert Landscapes,” “The Great Plains,” and “The Divide.” Buell’s fourth area describes various recent critiques of anthropocentrism and androcentrism, directing attention to representations of human/nonhuman relationships and issues of dominance, a topic often treated by ecofeminists. In this vein, one finds papers on topics such as “Land as Other,” the “Human and Nonhuman,” “Heidegger,” the “Gaze,” and “Crossing Boundaries.” Finally, Buell acknowledges activity in environmental rhetoric, in “unpacking modes of articulacy across every expressive genre” (709). This kind of cross-generic work is featured in papers on “Eco-Candor” in Cather’s letters, Cather’s “Comedies of Survival,” and Cather’s relationship to essayists such as Montaigne, Emerson, and Thoreau, and poets such as Wordsworth. It would appear, then, that despite the relative lack of a Cather presence in ASLE, Cather scholars are in synch with current trends in the study of literature and environment.

To conclude this tour of ecocriticism, I’m going to list some ecocritical projects that I’m hoping Cather scholars will pursue in the coming years. I’m not greedy—there are only a thrifty seven items on this list: Bibliography, Cities, Neglected Writings, Other Disciplines, Bodies, Animals, and Literary Ecosystems.

Bibliography

We need a good bibliography and review essay of ecocritical scholarship on Cather, including work that predates the term ecocriticism. In the late 1980s, when I was doing research for my dissertation, I found a multitude of such studies, some of them published as early as the 1920s. In the absence of a thorough inventory of environmentally valenced Cather criticism, not only
are we doomed to reinvent the wheel, but we will fail to give credit where credit is due.

CITIES

An excellent new critical anthology, edited by Michael Bennett and David Teague, is entitled *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments*. Bennett and Teague point out that “ecocriticism has come to be associated with a body of work devoted to nature writing, American pastoralism, and literary ecology” (3), and they see this as unnecessarily limiting the potential of the movement. The essays they collect, “explore the theoretical issues that arise when one attempts to adopt and adapt an environmental perspective to analyze urban life” (10). Their five subheadings include Urban Nature Writing, City Parks, Urban “Wilderness,” Ecofeminism and the City, and Theorizing Urban Space. Although Cather’s most famous work takes place in thinly populated Western landscapes, she chose to live in New York City, and, in fact, set several of her works in cities. I suggest entering this critical avenue via the Bennett-Teague anthology.

NEGLECTED WRITINGS

Ecocritical work on Cather has tended to focus on her Midwestern and Southwestern novels. Very little has been done on *Shadows on the Rock* or *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*—equally rich novels from an environmental standpoint—not to mention *Alexander’s Bridge, One of Ours, My Mortal Enemy, The Old Beauty and Others*, and Cather’s poetry, nonfiction, and unpublished documents. Wasn’t it ecologist Aldo Leopold, referring to microorganisms in the soil, who said that “To keep every cog and wheel is the first precaution of intelligent tinkering”? Cather’s so-called minor works are important pieces of the puzzle, and these works will open up in new ways and teach us new things if we revisit them from an ecocritical perspective. Several of the strongest Cather studies chart the evolution of her talent and
subjects, treating her books as chapters in the development of her imagination. In this spirit, it would be interesting to chart her choice of settings over the course of her career, speculating on the complex relationship between setting, story, and biography.

OTHER DISCIPLINES

We’ve seen above how William Howarth brings the natural sciences to bear in his reading of the pumpkin scene in My Ántonia. Interdisciplinary analysis could illuminate her other work as well. The different words we use to designate land have affinities with specific disciplines; thus, place suggests an approach informed by geography, nature by philosophy, landscape by art and history, ecosystem by the natural sciences, environment by political science, and earth by theology. Important work remains to be done in each of these areas. Another project in this category would be to read the scientists that Cather read in order to place her in the scientific climate of her time. For example, Sue Rosowski tells us that Cather was profoundly influenced by the work of Charles Bessey, a botanist, and Frederic Clements, the founder of modern ecology. How, then, is their influence felt in her fiction and aesthetic principles? What are the connections?

BODIES

In a recent critical anthology entitled Reading the Earth (1998), Deborah Slicer, a philosophy professor, contributes a wonderfully thought-provoking essay called “The Body as Bioregion,” in which she regrets that “[m]ost environmentalists, including the bioregionalists, have little to say about the body” (113). In her view the body is an ecosystem: “To be ‘home’ is first to inhabit one’s own body. We are each, as body, a biological ecosystem as complex, efficient, and as fragile as the Brooks Range, the Everglades, a native prairie” (113). She quotes from Wendell Berry’s The Unsettling of America: “‘While we live our bodies are moving particles of the earth, joined inextricably both
to the soil and to the bodies of other living creatures. It is hardly surprising, then, that there should be some profound resem-
blances between our treatment of our bodies and our treatment of the earth’” (Slicer 113). Ecocritical attention to corporeal-
ity in Cather’s writing would become aware of the bodies that Cather gives to her characters; it might also study representations
of hands, aging, race, health and illness, diet, hygiene, physical
disability and deformity, and physical labor.11

A N I M A L S

Recent years have witnessed a stampede of criticism and theory about animals. Animal studies become a means of ex-
amining construction of species; exploring the boundaries be-
tween human and nonhuman; thinking about the literary tropes
of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism; interrogating cultural
practices such as zoos, pet ownership, and filet mignon; studying
processes of domination, demonization, and domestication; and
raising fundamental questions about subjectivity and identity. We
know that Cather’s earliest writing was about animals. Her first
piece of extant writing, probably composed when she was about
thirteen, is an essay in which she argues that dogs are better than
cats. Her high-school graduation speech defended animal expe-
rimentation.12 Ivar, in O Pioneers!, is thought to be “crazy” in part because he treats animals humanely. What else has Cather
written about animals? How have they figured in her life and
work? Of particular interest in such a study would be border
characters such as Marek Shimerda in My Ántonia, the boy who
has webbed fingers and who barks like a dog and whinnies like
a horse. What is going on here? What anxieties are being played
out in this character?13

L I T E R A R Y E C O S Y S T E M S

A book I really admire is Diane Quantic’s The Nature of
the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction (1995). In this ambiti-
tous synthesis, Quantic decides not to devote chapters to individ-
ual authors but, instead, after years of reading Great Plains literature, she constructs thematic chapters, centered around particular myths. Quantic’s study is a fine example of organic ecocriticism, namely, a critical methodology arrived at “inductively” (xx) after thorough immersion in a region’s literature. Cather figures as a recurring example in readings drawn from a wide selection of her novels and short stories; however, rather than treating Cather in isolation or on a pedestal, Quantic views her in a web of literary relationships—a “literary ecosystem”—in which Cather’s is one voice in an energetic, place-based conversation. This relational approach is true to the spirit of ecology, which looks at systems and interactions rather than isolated individuals or single works. One can imagine a large number of different literary ecosystems in which Cather participates and that would repay study. For example, how about looking at Cather with other between-the-wars writers, or including her work in a study of childhood or aging in literature, or amongst other writers on migration and immigration, or with writers on aesthetics, or perhaps in a green cultural study of foodways? The contexts are limitless.

As you can see, some extraordinarily fertile soil waits to be tilled. If the last decade of Cather studies has been the “gender and sexuality” period, the new millennium may well begin with a fruitful ecocritical decade. As Alexandra said to her brothers, predicting a bountiful future for the Divide, “‘I know, that’s all . . . you can feel it coming’” (67).

NOTES

1. These papers, in the order they were presented, include, Burgess [Glotfelty], “‘A New Consciousness of the Country’: Sarah Orne Jewett, Willa Cather, and a Female Literary Tradition”; “Through the Garden Gate: Cather’s Use of a Female Symbolic Space”; and “Literary Criticism/Environmental Activism: Can a Close Reading of the River in Willa Cather’s The Song of the Lark Help Curb Toxic Waste?”

2. The term ecocriticism is credited to William Rueckert, who coined it in his 1978 essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.”

4. See Burgess [Glotfelty], “Literature and the Environment: References.”

5. These articles are available on the “Introduction to Ecocriticism” page of Asle Online http://www.asle.umn.edu.

6. Sara Farris takes a similar approach in “American Pastoral in the Twentieth Century: O Pioneers!, A Thousand Acres, and Merry Men,” including a discussion of the working class and working poor.

7. Woodress 505.

8. This definition appears in Rosowski’s letter to seminar participants. A fine review of perceptual and theoretical geography and their applicability to literary place studies of the American West appears in Krista Comer’s recent Landscapes of the New West: Gender and Geography in Contemporary Women’s Writing. Cather scholars may find Comer’s approach helpful for rethinking place in Cather.


11. Woodress, citing many examples, notes that “Cather had a horror of mutilation, especially of the hands” (27). For a fascinating study of how Sapphira Colbert attempts to compensate for her aging body, see Angela M. Salas, “Willa Cather’s Sapphira and the Slave Girl: Extending the Boundaries of the Body.”

12. Description of the dog and cat essay is in Woodress 48. Cather’s graduation speech is reprinted in Woodress 60–62.

13. An interesting medical diagnosis of this character can be found in Patrick Shaw, “Marek Shimerda in My Ántonia: A Noteworthy Medical Etiology.”

WORKS CITED


In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt issued proclamations establishing Muir Woods National Monument (California); Grand Canyon National Monument (Arizona); Pinnacles National Monument (California); Jewel Cave National Monument (South Dakota); Lewis and Clark Cavern National Monument (Montana); and Wheeler National Monument (Colorado). Also, in 1908, Jim Burden had a reunion with Tiny Soderball in Salt Lake City. We don’t know whether they went to Natural Bridges National Monument in Utah, but it too was proclaimed a national monument in 1908. In 1909 Congress passed An Act to Create the Calaveras Bigtree National Forest, authorizing the acquisition of lands in California to protect stands of Sequoia washingtoniana. Early that same year President Roosevelt issued a proclamation establishing Mount Olympus National Monument (Washington), and later in 1909 President Taft issued proclamations establishing Oregon Caves National Monument, Mukuntuweap National Monument (Utah), and Shoshone Cavern National Monument (Wyoming). In 1909, conservationists appointed by Roosevelt found their momentum checked by conflicts with Congress and Taft appointees. As a result, conservation became the subject of national debate, pitting the utilitarians, those who wanted to reserve land for subsequent, profitable use, against the preservationists, who were more anxious to preserve natural resources for aesthetic, recreational, and spiritual reasons.¹

The rate of park and monument creation slowed but did not
stop under Taft. In 1910, Congress passed the Withdrawal Act authorizing the president to withdraw public lands from entry and reserve them for “water-power sites, irrigation, classification of lands, or other public purposes.” And, to protect the logging industry, Congress reaffirmed its ban on the creation or enlargement of national forests in six Western states. However, also in 1910, Congress established Glacier National Park (Montana) and President Taft issued a proclamation establishing Rainbow Bridge National Monument (Utah). In 1911, the first of four National Park Service conferences convened at Yellowstone National Park to explore the need for a National Park Service (the others were held in 1912, 1915, and 1917); participants included officials of the Interior Department and the Forest Service, the owners of park hotels and camps, and representatives for the railroads. Perhaps Jim Burden was there.

When Cather began writing *My Ántonia* in 1916, conservationist momentum received a second wind under Woodrow Wilson. That year Congress passed the National Park Service Act, creating the National Park Service and housing it, significantly, within the Department of the Interior.² The Park Service was created expressly to “promote and regulate the use of the Federal areas known as national parks, monuments, and reservations . . . by such means and measures as conform to the fundamental purpose of the said parks, monuments, and reservations, which purpose is to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations.” Commercial logging and recreational hunting were prohibited, and grazing was sharply controlled. The passage of the National Park Service Act was a victory for the preservationist side of the conservation movement (*An Act to Establish*).

In 1916 Congress established Hawaii National Park and Lassen Volcanic National Park (California). President Wilson also issued proclamations establishing Sieur de Monts National Monument on Mount Desert Island, Maine, and Capulin Mountain National Monument, New Mexico—these are located, coincidentally, in two of Cather’s favorite states. Northeast Harbor,
where she stayed later in her life, is the tip of Mount Desert Island. Three years later, in 1919, Lafayette National Park (renamed Acadia National Park [Maine] in 1929) was established by Congress. In 1917 Congress established Mount McKinley National Park (Alaska) and at the National Park Service conference that year attendees explored the role of the parks in American life. In 1918, the year *My Ántonia* was published, Congress approved a Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which implemented a 1916 Convention (between the United States and Britain, acting for Canada) for the Protection of Migratory Birds, and established responsibility for international migratory bird protection. The next year Congress established Grand Canyon National Park (Arizona) and Zion National Park (Utah), while President Wilson issued a proclamation establishing Scotts Bluff National Monument (Nebraska).

The era of *My Ántonia* was one of national landscape preservation. But national-parks creation is no coincidental context for the novel. Among the book’s points of genesis was Willa Cather’s trip to Mesa Verde National Park in 1915. In addition, Cather was subtly influenced by the public debate over preserving natural lands—especially since some of those landscapes, in Maine, New Mexico, and Colorado, for example, were in places to which she would often return and so would have wanted unchanged. The forty years between 1880 and 1920 are known as the “formative years” of American environmentalism (and of Willa Cather), and the first decade of the century is described by one historian as having been seized by a kind of “national panic” for conservation as a result of the closed frontier (Worster 7). The era is marked as well by the cultural work of writers intent on making conservation a matter of public spirit and national policy. We may want to include Willa Cather within this environmentalist, intellectual awakening.

The “panic” phase of the conservation movement culminated in a conference of governors held at the White House in 1909, where President Roosevelt proclaimed that “[t]he conservation of our natural resources and their proper use constitute the fundamental problem which underlies almost every other problem of our National life” (qtd. in Blanchard, “Introductory Statement”). A joint statement by the governors echoed Roosevelt and de-
declared that the “conservation of our natural resources is a subject of transcendent importance, which should engage unremittingly the attention of the Nation, the States, and the People in earnest cooperation” (193). Speakers at the conference included scientists, policymakers, legal experts—the roster included William Jennings Bryan, whose statement might have been ghostwritten by Jim Burden:

[L]ast September I visited the southern part of Idaho . . . I had been there ten years before. I had looked upon these lands so barren that it seemed as if it were impossible they could ever be made useful. *When I went back this time* and found that in three years 170,000 acres of land had been reclaimed; that where three years ago nothing but the sage brush grew they are now raising seven tons of alfalfa to the acre, and more than a hundred bushels of oats; when I found that ten thousand people are living on that tract; that in one town that has grown up in that time there are 1,910 inhabitants, and that in the three banks they had deposits of over $500,000—I had some realization of the magic power of water when applied to these desert lands. (204, emphasis added).

The similarity to Jim Burden’s rhetoric of progress is striking. We might say that Bryan saw those Idaho farmlands as “one of the great economic facts, like the wheat crop of Russia” or the cornfields of Nebraska (*My Ántonia* 132).

Bryan’s sentiments reflect the conservation movement’s initial, utilitarian motivation: to protect American resources from irresponsible or wasteful development and reserve them for responsible and profitable use. Gifford Pinchot, America’s first professional forester, the head of the Forestry Division in the Roosevelt administration, a staunch utilitarian and arguably the founder of United States conservation policy, outlined three “great facts” about conservation in 1910. “The first great fact about conservation is that it stands for development. There has been a fundamental misconception that conservation means nothing but the husbanding of resources for future generations. There could be no more serious mistake.” Conservation, in Pinchot’s definition,
means “first of all the recognition of the right of the present generation to the fullest necessary use of all [natural] resources. Conservation demands the welfare of this generation first, and afterward the welfare of the generations to follow” (42). Secondly, “conservation stands for the prevention of waste” (44). And third, “[t]he natural resources must be developed and preserved for the benefit of the many, and not merely for the profit of a few” (46). These three principles, efficient use, minimization of waste, and maximum distribution of profit, or effect, remain central to government policy today. They are as well, curiously enough, central to Cather’s aesthetics, where the efficient use and elimination of wasted words produce the maximum effect of meaning. However, Cather seems less utilitarian than aesthetic in her thinking about landscape and language.

On the side of the preservationists, foremost among its principles was that preservation meant not saving everything, but selecting some aspects for preservation (the most striking, notable, or emblematic) and allowing others to go to market development. Some critics today take issue with the aesthetic principle by which the preservationists advocated national-park creation and maintenance. Alison Byerly labels it “part of the picturesque legacy” that “has had a crucial effect on public land management policies. It has taught us to value nature,” she asserts, “but the criterion for evaluation is the quality of the aesthetic experience a landscape provides.” She refers to the paradox whereby we experience the natural world only after constructing it, “by constructing an aesthetic image of the wilderness that allows us to avoid confronting its reality” (Byerly 53–54). Byerly is right, of course, and that was the point, just as the aim of art is to select and simplify, in Cather’s words: “finding what conventions of form and what detail one can do without and yet preserve the spirit of the whole—so that all that one has suppressed and cut away is there to the reader’s consciousness as much as if it were in type on the page” (On Writing 102). The creator of a national park does much the same thing, deciding how much forest can be allotted to the logging company while preserving the spirit of the whole for the citizen’s aesthetic experience of the wild. Deep into a national forest, one might thus experience the inexplicable presence of the
trees not standing, the millions of acres that have been cleared and developed around the preserve for the good of that same civilization that possesses the “unaccountable predilection of the one unaccountable thing in man,” as Cather once described the aesthetic impulses of humanity (On Writing 19).

Liberty Bailey, in The Holy Earth (1915), argued that “[o]ur relation with the planet must be raised into the realm of spirit; we cannot be fully useful otherwise. We must find a way to maintain the emotions in the abounding commercial civilization” (2). Bailey’s work was part of a larger movement among naturalists to redefines the American’s sense of the land, away from profit making and toward spirit making. Establishing an aesthetic appreciation for wildlands, in other words, was a crucial and quite consciously advocated concept among naturalists in Cather’s era. A decade earlier, Nathaniel Shaler, in Man and the Earth (1905), linked environmental awareness to Darwinian evolution, suggesting that the “esthetic sense is the result of a natural process of development” (181). Shaler argued that human beings are stewards of the planet, who “have been sorely hindered by ancient misunderstandings” and so now need to be “reconciled to their great house and eager to help its order” (232–33). Dallas Lore Sharp, in The Lay of the Land (1908) praised the new “back-to-nature” trend in national magazines. “And this desire to know Nature is the reasonable, natural preparation for the deeper insight that leads to communion with her” (124). Sharp quotes Charles Kingsley and anticipates Jewett’s remarks to Cather: “‘He is a thoroughly good naturalist,’” says Kingsley, “‘who knows his own parish thoroughly’ ” (214).

This was the milieu into which Cather offered My Ántonia—one where policymakers and technocrats, capitalists and intellectuals, were grappling with the right relation between human beings and nature. At issue was the question of how to preserve the American wilderness experience as an art form, how to transform carefully selected wildlands into sites of heightened experience, valued by virtue of the capitalist sacrifice of profit represented by preservation. Preservationist aesthetics reflect Cather’s own aesthetic principles as well. In “The Art of Fiction,” Cather suggests, “Any first-rate novel or story must have in it the strength
of a dozen fairly good stories that have been sacrificed to it” (On Writing 103). Any first-rate park, say, the Grand Canyon, must have in it the strength of a dozen fairly good canyons sacrificed to highway bridges. Natural resources might thus be understood as the national imagination, out of which crystallize its first-rate landscape experiences.

Not since the beginning of the frontier era had so much public energy gone into the question of human life and its environment; but here, in the decades following the close of the frontier, leading to the publication of My Ántonia, the question took on a new urgency. Conservation commissions met at the state, national, continental, and international levels. In 1908, the National Conservation Commission conducted an inventory of U.S. natural resources, and issued its three-volume report in 1909. In 1910, Commissioner Charles Van Hise called for “a profound and wide campaign of education which must begin at the universities, in national and state organizations, and must extend from them through the secondary and primary schools to the whole people. There is no other question before the nation of such fundamental importance to the distant future of the country” (13). Hise cites Supreme Court decisions that recognize the state as possessing “a standing in court to protect the atmosphere, the water, and the forests within its territory, irrespective of the assent or dissent of the private owners of the land most immediately concerned” (363). And in 1911, Mary Huston Gregory made a connection Cather would have appreciated, when, after listing “the many special beauties which are among the world’s wonder-places,” she asserts that “[t]o these must be added the relics of ancient civilization, the homes of the Cliff Dwellers, the work of the Mound Builders, and such fragments as still remain of the occupation in various times and places of certain Indian tribes, and of the Norsemen and the Spaniards” (303).

Jim Burden is emblematic of the conservation debate. He is both a legal counsel for the railroads (and so he profits by land development), and he is a preservationist, someone you can count on for funding “big Western dreams” (xi) of uncovering secret canyons and lost parks. It’s Jim’s “interest in women” that sparks this narration, as we know, and just as the nation has set apart cer-
tain landscapes to allow its citizens to enjoy nature, Jim “set apart time enough to enjoy [his] friendship” with Ántonia (xii). There’s an equation at work there: Jim’s connection with Ántonia does for him what the nation’s connection to its landscape does for its people. The parallel evoked is an aesthetic experience, which for Cather is serious and vital business. After all, the “gift” in the portfolio is a novel. The novel, as it emerges from the national-parks era, is an aesthetic projection of the will to preserve. What Jim gives Cather when he gives her his manuscript is indeed a gift—something worth saving.

Jim remembers very little about his initial ride into the prairie: “I do not remember crossing the Missouri River, or anything about the long day’s journey through Nebraska” (5); “I do not remember our arrival at my grandfather’s farm” (8). However, once he becomes accustomed to the landscape, his memories sharpen and subsequent days are not so lost. “I can remember exactly how the country looked to me as I walked beside my grandmother” (15); and “All the years that have passed have not dimmed my memory of that first glorious autumn. The new country lay open before me” (27). From this point on, every incident of significant memory for Jim Burden will be preceded and framed by an account of the natural world, some natural occurrence or setting preserved within the narrative.

“One afternoon we were having our reading lesson on the warm, grassy bank where the badger lived. It was a day of amber sunlight . . . I had seen ice on the little horse-pond that morning, and . . . we found the tall asparagus, with its red berries” (36). So begins chapter 6, the scene where Jim and Ántonia come across the grasshopper, living past his season, “as if he were waiting for something to come and finish him” (37), whose song (“a thin, rusty little chirp” [38]) in turn reminds Ántonia of a woman she remembers, Old Hata, with her “cracked voice” (38). Both memories—Jim’s of the reading lesson and Ántonia’s of Old Hata, are preserved within the contours of the natural world.

The snake-killing episode, which alters their relationship, opens, “This change came about from an adventure we had together” (41) and then, before getting to the narration of events, Jim provides a thick description of landscape by way of preface,
or perhaps, acknowledgement: “There had been another black frost the night before, and the air was clear and heady as wine. Within a week all the blooming roads had been despoiled—hundreds of miles of yellow sunflowers had been transformed into brown, rattling, burry stalks” (42).

Sometimes the seasons are keyed to significant recollections: “While the autumn color was growing pale on the grass and cornfields, things went badly with our friends the Russians” (48); or “the debt grew faster than any crop he planted” (49). Seasons also envelope narrative points in time. “The first snowfall came early in December. I remember how the world looked from our sitting room window as I dressed behind the stove that morning” (60); “As soon as the snow had packed hard I began to drive about the country in a clumsy sleigh” (61). The day Mrs. Shimerda and Ántonia come to visit is similarly contextualized: “The week following Christmas brought in a thaw, and by New Year’s Day all the world about us was a broth of gray slush, and the guttered slope between the windmill and the barn was running black water. . . . One morning, during this interval of fine weather, Ántonia and her mother rode over” (85); and later, “The big storm of the winter began on my eleventh birthday, the 20th of January” (88).

You will recall how Jim’s memories of Mr. Shimerda are inextricable from his consciousness of winter. “There, on the bench behind the stove, I thought and thought about Mr. Shimerda. Outside I could hear the wind singing over hundreds of miles of snow. It was as if I had let the old man in out of the tormenting winter, and were sitting there with him. I went over all that Ántonia had ever told me about his life. . . . Such vivid pictures came to me” (98). Shimerda’s grave, finally, is in itself an attenuated national park, a patch of preserved landscape, “with its tall red grass that was never mowed” (114) but was instead consciously preserved, untouched by roads and unsurveyed by the development companies, set aside to allow tired drivers a chance to wish him well.

Consistently, in “The Shimerdas,” Jim’s memories are acknowledged and made possible by memories of the landscape, in turn housing Jim’s memories: “One Sunday I rode over [to the Shimerda’s] with Jake to get a horse-collar which Ambrosch had
borrowed from him and had not returned. It was a beautiful blue morning. The buffalo-peas were blooming in pink and purple masses along the roadside, and the larks, perched on last year’s dried sunflower stalks, were singing straight at the sun, their heads thrown back and their yellow breasts a-quiver. The wind blew about us in warm, sweet gusts. We rode slowly, with a pleasant sense of Sunday indolence” (122–23).

In the town setting of “The Hired Girls,” however, Jim’s experience with the landscape is limited to an upstairs window where “we could see the winding line of the river bluffs, two miles south of us,” a view he refers to as “compensation for the lost freedom of the farming country” (141). Nonetheless, this glimpsed landscape fuels memory. For example, Jim recalls teasing Ántonia as she prepares a cake one “crisp autumn evening, just cold enough to make one glad to quit playing tag in the yard, and retreat into the kitchen” (154). He recalls just when the dancing pavilion arrived: “It must have been in June, for Mrs. Harling and Ántonia were preserving cherries” (187). Even his pre-college exercises in rote memorization are closely associated with that glimpsed landscape: “Morning after morning I used to pace up and down my sunny little room, looking off at the distant river bluffs and the roll of the blond pastures between, scanning the Aeneid aloud and committing long passages to memory” (224). Ántonia, about to tell the story of the tramp who jumped into the thrashing machine, acknowledges first that:

One day it was just awful hot. When we got back to the field from dinner, we took things kind of easy. . . . I was sitting against a straw stack, trying to get some shade. My wagon wasn’t going out first, and somehow I felt the heat awful that day. The sun was so hot like it was going to burn the world up. After a while I see a man coming across the stubble, and when he got close I see it was a tramp. (171)

The hired girls are memorable because they literally embody the landscape—their bodies have worked it and it has in turn graced them with figures and spirits that Jim can recall with ease: “[O]ut-of-door work had given them a vigor which. . . . made them conspicuous among Black Hawk women” (192). Jim’s de-
sire to maintain a constant, unchanging vision of Ántonia, then, parallels his own era’s efforts at land preservation. “Her warm, sweet face, her kind arms, and the true heart in her; she was, oh, she was still my Ántonia!” (218). Remembering Ántonia is an act of preservation, both for her sake and for Jim’s. Like an American visiting the Grand Canyon, what Jim wants from Ántonia is perpetual wildness and youth. “Ántonia seemed to me that day exactly like the little girl who used to come to our house with Mr. Shimerda” (230).

While a university student, Jim becomes cognizant of what until then had been subconscious: the connection between landscape and memory. “Mental excitement was apt to send me with a rush back to my own naked land and the figures scattered upon it” (254). When one of those figures, Lena Lingard, appears before him, he articulates Cather’s preservationist trope in the novel, aligning his twin desires to memorialize Ántonia and to be the first to memorialize and thus preserve the Nebraska landscape. “It came over me, as it had never done before, the relation between girls like those and the poetry of Virgil. If there were no girls like them in the world, there would be no poetry” (262). If there were no landscapes like those preserved in national parks and on land reserves, there would be no nation, no historical sense, no experience of wildness, and no spirit of American identity—there would be no country into which to bring his Muse. He brings this connection with him when he returns to visit Ántonia in “The Pioneer Woman’s Story” and finds that he remembers “the conformation of the land as one remembers the modeling of human faces” (298). To Jim the experience is one of recognition: the knowledge of who he is, embedded deeply in the contours of the landscape.

Jim’s reunion with Ántonia awakens him to his past and to his own memories of youth. In the same way that a national park evokes within us the origins of America as wilderness, as frontier, as the material out of which a country is made, visiting Ántonia in “The Pioneer Woman’s Story” leads Jim to feel “the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there” (313). And as he leaves, recall, he believes
“that a boy and girl ran along beside me, as our shadows used to do, laughing and whispering to each other in the grass” (314), preserved forever by the face of Ántonia and the conformation of the land. The preservation of “My Ántonia,” furthermore, is a gesture toward remembering the significance of all the girls, especially those like Tiny Soderball and Lena Lingard, whose lives have developed so well as businesswomen. By preserving Ántonia, Jim memorializes them in the same way that a national forest preserves all forests behind the civilization. If Ántonia had had a good marriage to Donovan and disappeared into middle-class life, then all the girls would have been forgotten and the Muse would have never entered the country.

After his visit, Jim is off to law school to learn how to serve the railroads and other commercial and utilitarian purposes. Nonetheless, the space of twenty years cannot lessen the power of Ántonia to bring him back. Her eyes are worth preserving: “I had seen no others like them since I looked into them last, though I had looked at so many thousands of human faces” (321). In her orchard Jim is restored to his own youth. Like an urbanite at Yellowstone, Jim feels that “[e]verything was as it should be: the strong smell of sunflowers and ironweed in the dew, the clear blue and gold of the sky, the evening star,” so that early days return to his mind. “I began to feel the loneliness of the farm-boy at evening, when the chores seem everlastingly the same, and the world so far away” (336). His experience in Black Hawk is quite different, as we would expect, as town is the site of development and progress. “Most of my old friends were dead or had moved away. Strange children, who meant nothing to me, were playing in the Harling’s big yard when I passed; the mountain ash had been cut down, and only a sprouting stump was left of the tall Lombardy poplar that used to guard the gate. I hurried on” (357). To counter this assault on memory, Jim leaves town and wanders “out into the pastures where the land was so rough that it had never been ploughed up, and the long red grass of early times still grew shaggy over the draws and hillocks. Out there I felt at home again” (358). Progress has no memory, though life, as we live it, is constructed out of a fleeting present and continuously expanding recollections. Without memory, significance cannot
construct. Cather wrote *My Ántonia* in the era of the establishment of national parks, when the frontier’s closure meant that the wildness of open lands, if it were to continue to form the soul of the nation, had to be preserved. Bringing the Muse into her country at this time meant explaining, on aesthetic grounds, why we must preserve the landscape and reserve significant portions of it as monuments to what it was that formed the national psyche and spirit.

When Jim leaves town for his origins, he finds that the road that brought him from Black Hawk to his childhood home “had been ploughed under when the highways were surveyed,” except for a half-mile or so. Nonetheless, the preservation of this half-mile is enough: “I had only to close my eyes to hear the rumbling of the wagons in the dark, and to be again overcome by that obliterating strangeness” (359). In 1910, Gifford Pinchot claimed that “[t]he success of the conservation movement in the United States depends in the end on the understanding the women have of it” (101), and women’s organizations played an important role. Cather employed her understanding by showing how one young lawyer’s consciousness could be changed by a woman’s representations—hers, and Ántonia’s—changed for the better, as far as his effect on land policy may proceed. In 1921, Cather told the *Lincoln State Journal* she had “made a plea for the preservation of the native trees. . . . Farmers say that cottonwood draws moisture from the fields. I am not asking them to plant more, but to let stand those great trees that are dear to the pioneers” (40). How can we convince people of the value of preservation? Cather’s contemporaries—scientists, governors, presidents, jurists, naturalists—argued for the education of Americans about the value of preserving lands from finite development.

In *My Ántonia*, Cather models a preservationist aesthetic by constructing a work of art in which her protagonist’s capacity to remember his own life is inextricable from the landscape of his childhood and the figures with whom his childhood was entangled. A major portion of his own past, Jim admits, consists of what “Ántonia’s name recalls to me” (xiii). And if it were not for these preserved places—preserved by Ántonia’s choice to stay on the land—Jim would quite literally have no memories;
he would have lived no life and may have remained, perpetually, crossing the country by train. His initial blanks—"I do not remember crossing the Missouri River or anything about the long day’s journey through Nebraska" (5); “I do not remember our arrival at my grandfather’s farm” (8)—might then extend as a kind of horror throughout his experience, like some Muse who can’t find the country calling her name.

Jim Burden was “an obscure young lawyer” (x), a railroad man, known for his interest in “hunting for lost parks or exploring new canyons,” an interest as strong as his “interest in women” (ix)—both of which interests, in women and in lost canyons, are identified, by Cather, as “Western and American.” Before starting My Ántonia, Cather visited Mesa Verde, not quite a canyon, but lost for some time. David Harrell claims that “this trip to Mancos and Mesa Verde in August 1915 was not just a stimulating excursion but also the major step along the way toward the composition of one of her finest narratives,” The Professor’s House (35). More immediately, Cather’s visit to Mesa Verde in 1915 provided her the direct inspiration for a novel she began right after the trip, one with aesthetic, not factual or content-similarity to Mesa Verde National Park. It was her visit to the ruins of Mesa Verde—or more accurately, her visit (when she quite literally got lost in the park), as Jim Burden, someone who “means action” (xi) when he travels—that awakened Cather to a connection with deep cultural currency in the second decade of the twentieth century, that between knowledge of the landscape and the human capacity to remember.

Traces of Cather’s Mesa Verde excursion may be found on the pages of My Ántonia. Cather wrote about her trip to the Anasazi ruins in an essay published in the Denver Times in 1916. “In the morning you take another train for Mancos,” Cather wrote, describing the trip to Mesa Verde, “a friendly train with invariable friendly passengers and a conductor who has been on that run for fourteen years and who can give you all sorts of helpful information” (Rosowski and Slote 82). Jim Burden’s description of his train ride from Chicago to Black Hawk is quite similar: “[W]e were under the protection of a friendly passenger conductor, who knew all about the country to which we were going and
gave us a great deal of advice in exchange for our confidence” (4). As Cather approached Mesa Verde in 1915, she noted how it “stood as if it had been deserted yesterday; undisturbed and undesecrated, preserved by the dry atmosphere and by its great inaccessibility” (Rosowski and Slote 84). The prairie landscape, in turn, preserved its meanings for Jim, and he notes how “The dust and heat, the burning wind, reminded us of many things” (ix). Of the Cliff Dwellers, Cather wrote: “The great dramas of the weather and the seasons occupied their minds a good deal, and they seem to have ordered their behavior according to the moon, the sun, and the stars” (Rosowski and Slote 85). They must have known what Jim Burden knew, that “[t]he pale, cold light of the winter sunset . . . was like the light of truth itself” (167) because “[o]n the farm the weather was the great fact.” In the winter, in Black Hawk, “the scene of human life was spread out shrunken and pinched,” like some mumified old corpse (175). “Certainly it is the human record, however slight, that stirs us most deeply, and a country without such a record is dumb, no matter how beautiful” (Rosowski and Slote 85). Cather wrote this first of Mesa Verde, and then, a year or so later, of Nebraska: “There was nothing but land: not a country at all,” (7) until Jim Burden emerges with his preservationist ideals: “for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country” (256).

Cather’s experience at Mesa Verde had a profound effect on the shape of her fiction and on her aesthetic sensibilities. But one thing she may have realized right away: The preservation movement of the early twentieth century (Mesa Verde was established as a national park in June 1906—just one month after Tom Outland left Washington, by the way) applied not only to ancient ruins but should properly inform as well the way we think about the landscape we live in now: Mesa Verde—the national park, the Anasazi use of landscape, the American act of preservation—is writ large in the structure and form of My Ántonia. In its historical context, the novel suggests that while we may want to restore and remember the ruins of ancient civilizations, and preserve our frontier heritage by setting aside wilderness landscapes, we also must work to insure that the past we are making now survives future development. All that is left, once the human beings have
died, is the landscape they created. “All of our landscapes, from city park to the mountain hike, are imprinted with our tenacious, inescapable obsessions,” according to Simon Schama. “So that to take the many and several ills of the environment seriously does not, I think, require that we trade in our cultural legacy or its posterity. It asks instead that we simply see it for what it has truly been: not the repudiation, but the veneration of nature” (Schama 18). All use is veneration: what human beings do with the landscape, from cliff dwelling to plowing to (yes) pavement, is veneration in the sense that it is done to further civilization. Neither utilitarians nor preservationists can claim to represent nature’s preference, when both utilitarians and preservationists are inextricable from the natural environment they embody and inhabit. When Jim acknowledges “all the human effort that had gone into” the “flat tableland” of Nebraska, transforming what was once a wild landscape into a patchwork “broken up into wheatfields and cornfields” and changing “the whole face of the country” (298), he creates an aesthetic experience of the latest American land-dwellers and their way of inscribing a civilization into the landscape. Mesa Verde Park saves not so much the Anasazi—they’re long gone—but saves the idea that landscapes embody the past. Preserving landscapes, in turn, is remembering: it is the aesthetic expression and the physical behavior of memory itself.

In preparation for her visit to Cliff City, Willa Cather read C. C. Mason’s 1914 report “The Story of the Discovery and Early Exploration of the Cliff Houses at the Mesa Verde.” Mason was among the first modern Americans to come upon the Anasazi ruins. Mason describes finding four skeletons in Cliff City: “The skull of each of the three older people had been crushed in, and between them on the floor was a large stone ax, the blade of which just fitted the dent in the skulls” (qtd. in Harrell 50). Cather provides an identical detail in casting the death of Mr. Shimerda, when Jake testifies that Krajiek’s axe “just fit the gash in the front of the old man’s face” (93). That’s evidence of a (Merrill) Skaggsian literary conversation, either between Cather and Mason, Mother Eve and Mr. Shimerda, or the mysteries of Cliff Dwellers and the equally awesome experiences of early Sod
Dwellers in the Nebraska prairie lands. In any case, to know these landscapes is to look squarely into the face of such mysteries; one can miss them no less likely than one can dodge an axe to the forehead. The aesthetic experience of Mesa Verde stimulated Cather’s thinking about her own Nebraska childhood. It led her to return to materials she had explored in *O Pioneers!* but without the interest in land speculation or triumphant female farmers and unconsummated love affairs. What Jim Burden gave Willa Cather when he presented his manuscript to her was something he saw in *Ántonia* that Willa Cather had not recognized before her visit to Mesa Verde. The realization may have effected so profound a transformation that she imagined she had become another person as a result.

At the fourth National Parks Conference in 1917, Herbert Quick, member of the Federal Farm Loan Board, issued a call for American authors to write about American natural settings, “to fill the literature of the United States . . . with the beauties and the graces and the charms and the grandeur of the national parks of this country.” This, Quick argued, “would be the finest thing in the world for the people of this country, because,” as Jim Burden might have said, “as a matter of fact, a man sees in nature what he takes to nature. A man brings back from the journey nothing more nor less than what it gives him.” The national parks, like the national literature, declare “that the time has now arrived when we must make our own legends, and our own superstitions” (Interior 130). Today, the American ecologist and philosopher David Abram, at the forefront of contemporary ecocriticism, has much the same argument: “Our task . . . is that of *taking up* the written word, with all of its potency, and patiently, carefully, writing language back into the land.” The “we” in Abram’s words is us, critics and peddlers in literary studies. “Our craft is that of releasing the budded, earthly intelligence of our words, freeing them to respond to the speech of the things themselves—to the green uttering-forth of leaves from the spring branches” (Abram 273). Reading land out of the language of Cather’s novel requires that we ask again what it was that Cather sought to preserve in *My Ántonia*. In 1918, Jim Burden gave Willa Cather what the nation was busily giving itself through its frenetic efforts to preserve as
much of its wildlands and natural wonders as was possible given the equally frenetic demands of American capitalism and corporate expansion. In Jim Burden’s legal portfolio was Cather’s revelation (“the old pull of the earth”) of the autochthonous quality of memory. The era Cather lived in was consumed by the connection it sensed between the American landscape and the nation’s vitality—its history, its economy, and its future. In Congress, in commissions, and in literary expression, the nation was groping to remember, despite rapid expansion and world war.

From our perspective, and with our charge to write language back into the land, we can see that the culture of national-park creation was one that desired above all the preservation of its own memory, and so inscribed its sense of the past into landscapes to rival the ruins of ancient civilizations. Of the Anasazi, Cather wrote, “They seem not to have struggled to overcome their environment. They accommodated themselves to it, interpreted it and made it personal; lived in a dignified relation with it. In more senses than one they built themselves into it” (Rosowski and Slote 85). She may as well have described her own era, as the nation accommodated, interpreted, and assured that emblems of its national wildlands would be available forever as sites of personal experience. Jim’s gift to her contained the landscape, the open expanse, and the grounded revelation of Willa Cather’s environmental imagination. In more senses than one, she built herself out of it.

NOTES


2. Hays describes a division over national parks policy, between those who wanted them protected as sacred places and those who wanted them open to grazing and lumbering. The debate took tactical form when Congress deliberated on whether Parks should be with the Department of Agriculture or with the Interior Department. The result was a victory for advocates of nature aesthetics. See Hays, 1959.
3. “The passing away of the great frontier of the West came as an unpleasant shock to many Americans... Even as late as the 1870s, it had been possible to believe the nation would never run out of timber, minerals, or open lands. The fact that wonderlands such as Yellowstone were not officially discovered until early in the decade only reinforced this conviction. Yet within the space of a few years this belief no longer seemed tenable... the close of the frontier lent a new sense of urgency to protection programs” (Runte 59).

4. For a fuller exploration of this relation, see Swift and Urgo.

5. See H.R. 5998, An Act Creating Mesa Verde National Park (June 29, 1906). Consequently, when Tom takes pottery with him when he leaves Mesa Verde in the winter of 1906–07, he is guilty of the misdemeanor outlined in Sec. 4 of the act, carrying a maximum fine of $1,000 or one year in prison, “and shall be required to restore the property undisturbed, if possible.” Perhaps that’s why he went into the army.

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Biocentric, Homocentric, and Theocentric Environmentalism in O Pioneers!, My Ántonia, and Death Comes for the Archbishop

PATRICK K. DOOLEY

The classical statement of ecological ethics is Aldo Leopold’s “The Land Ethic,” published posthumously in 1949 as the last part of A Sand County Almanac. Leopold observed that human ethical sensitivity can be seen as a gradually widening circle of beings respected as possessing intrinsic worth. That is, beings within “the magic circle” should not be regarded as mere things to be used as a matter of expediency. Leopold noted that, in the distant past, the circle has expanded from self to family, to clan, then to tribe, nation, and race and on to the entire human race. More recently, some animals (dolphins, porpoises, whales, and primates) were considered worthy of respect. Leopold’s proposal is that we enlarge our sense of community to include all animals, then all living things and eventually, to the land itself:

All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. . . . The land ethic simply enlarged the boundaries of the community to include soils, water, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.

In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from a conqueror of the land-community to a plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such. (203–04)
In two areas, Leopold’s position is problematic. First, does that land have intrinsic as opposed to instrumental value and second, what is entailed by “respect”? Leopold’s ambiguity is critical at both points. In the first, Leopold is unclear whether we ought to acknowledge that the land actually possesses intrinsic value or that we ought to confer upon it a quasi-intrinsic value. In his second ambiguity, he sometimes translates respect into a wise use of the land, an imperative requiring careful conservation practices; at other times, he shifts his position and urges hands-off preservationist policies. Leopold’s ambiguities are clearly connected—if the land possesses intrinsic value, an ethical stance of noninterference seems warranted. He states, for example, “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise” (224–25). On the other hand, if the land ought to be valued as if it has intrinsic value, another sort of ethical position is dictated. In this second case, because the land has value for us humans, a moderate, wise-use conservation morality is appropriate, “a land ethic of course cannot prevent the alteration, management, the use of these ‘resources’ [soil, water, plants and animals] but it does affirm their right to continued existence, and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state” (204). Philosophically speaking, the “hands-off” versus “wise-use” debate hinges upon a more basic, metaphysical disagreement—a clash of homocentric versus biocentric world-views. In what follows I will explore Cather’s divided alliance: While her deepest environmental impulse, it seems to me, is in favor of a homocentric position of conservation, she also, though less often and with less fervor, sides with a biocentric position of preservation. My examination looks at My Ántonia, O Pioneers! and Death Comes for the Archbishop.

**Cather as a Wise-Use Conservationist**

Cather assumes as obvious and not requiring argument or justification that the natural world exists to serve human welfare and to satisfy human desires. It is, however, a pristine world
that must be humanized, for in its original, natural state, it can be an alien, hostile place where settlers, native as well as emigrants, are unwelcome foreigners:

The little town behind them had vanished as if it had never been, had fallen behind the swell of the prairie, and the stern frozen country received them into its bosom. The homesteads were few and far apart; here and there a windmill gaunt against the sky, a sod house crouching in a hollow. But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its somber waste. It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy’s mouth had become so bitter; because he felt men were too weak to make any mark here, that the land wanted to be left alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness. (O Pioneers! 21)

Though Cather’s frontier is not the gritty, even malignant, place that Hamlin Garland’s hapless homesteaders confront, nonetheless the setting is harsh and the contest with the land is a stern one. Witness Alexandra’s father’s trials:

In eleven long years John Bergson had made but little impression upon the wild land that he had come to tame. It was still a wild thing that had its ugly moods; and no one knew when they were likely to come, or why. Mischance hung over it. Its Genius was unfriendly to man. . . . Bergson went over in his mind the things that held him back. One winter his cattle had perished in a blizzard. The next summer one of his plow horses broke its leg in a prairie-dog hole and had to be shot. Another summer he lost his hogs to cholera, and a valuable stallion died from a rattlesnake bite. Time and time again his crops had failed. He had lost two children, boys, that came between Lou and Emil, and there had been the cost of sickness and death. Now, when he had at last struggled out of debt, he was going to die himself. He was only forty-six, and had, of course, counted on more time. (O Pioneers! 26)
In *My Ántonia* those who “struggle with the soil” (116) and fail were ill-prepared (undercapitalized, we would now say), duped by land sharks and unscrupulous merchants, or were physically and temperamentally unsuited to homesteading, as was Mr. Shimerda. But those who are patient and hardworking, resilient and resourceful, can succeed. As Cather puts it in *O Pioneers!*, although “the land, in itself, is desirable,” it is “an enigma” (27). But once the key is found and the puzzle solved, the land submits to the human hand that develops, tames, subdues, orders, masters, controls, and improves (all Cather’s terms) it.

As William James puts it in *Pragmatism*, reality stands malleable for humans and tolerates, even welcomes, the humanizing touch. For Cather two points need to be emphasized: though it is “the wild land” (*O Pioneers!* 26), “a dark country” (24) with “wild soil” (49), and “a raw place” (59), after an initial struggle it readily tolerates the human imprint. Second, once humanized, the land becomes vastly more productive and fruitful, at least in so far as satisfying human desires. The natural world made to fit human designs is a recurring theme celebrated by Cather. Here are two of her accounts. In the first, it is sixteen years since John Bergson has died, and Alexandra, her brothers, and her mother have turned a homestead into an estate:

They drove westward toward Norway Creek, and toward a big white house that stood on a hill, several miles across the fields. There were so many sheds and outbuilding grouped about that the place looked not unlike a tiny village. A stranger, approaching it, could not help noticing the beauty and fruitfulness of the outlying fields. There was something individual about the great farm, a most unusual trimness and care for detail. . . . Any one thereabouts would have told you that this was one of the richest farms on the Divide. (*O Pioneers!* 80)

In the second account, Jim Burden, recently graduated from college and about to enter law school, has retraced his initial boyhood journey from Black Hawk to his grandfather’s homestead. As a ten-year-old he was surrounded by nature:
There seemed nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a county at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land. . . . I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man’s jurisdiction. (*My Ántonia* 7)

Ten years later the human had supplanted the natural:

The wheat harvest was over, and here and there along the horizon I could see black puffs of smoke from the steam threshing-machines. The old pasture land was now being broken up into wheatfields and cornfields, the red grass was disappearing, and the whole face of the country was changing. There were wooden houses where the old sod dwellings used to be, and little orchards, and big red barns; all this meant happy children, contented women, and men who saw their lives coming to a fortunate issue. The windy springs and blazing summers, one after another, had enriched and mellowed that flat tableland; all the human effort that had gone into it was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility. The changes seem beautiful and harmonious. (*My Ántonia* 298)

The “upshot” of this view, to use Leopold’s term, is that the world is considered a commodity—a valuable commodity—but still an instrument in the service of human prerogatives. For Cather, then, homocentric conservation is first and foremost translated into wise-use partnership practices with the soil. Her ecological liturgy rejoices at “the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting” (*My Ántonia* 342). There is little need to worry about wasteful, shortsighted, foolish or abusive farming. Nature, ever vigorous and resilient, quickly recovers. For example, the narrator of *O Pioneers!* explains that “that summer the rains had been so many and opportune that it was almost more than Shabata and his man could do to keep up with the corn; [so] the orchard . . . [became] a neglected wilderness” (*O Pioneers!* 138). Or much earlier, when it
appears that mother and children will have to struggle on without Mr. Bergson, Alexandra expresses her misgivings:

“I don’t know what is to become of us, Carl, if father has to die. I don’t dare think about it. I wish we could all go with him and let the grass grow back over everything.”

Carl made no reply. Just ahead of them was the Norwegian graveyard, where the grass had, indeed, grown back over everything, shaggy and red, hiding even the wire fence. (21–22)

Some of Cather’s characters, however, find wildness and naturalness the preferred state.

CATHER AS A HANDS-OFF PRESERVATIONIST

Though a biocentric metaphysics that refuses to rank species as higher or lower, or does not recognize some of them as having intrinsic versus instrumental value, is not a dominate stream in her philosophy, Cather gives preservationist ethics flowing from the biocentric view careful consideration. Interestingly she relies on non-Americanized characters to express her biocentric impulse: Ivar in O Pioneers! and the Navajos in Death Comes for the Archbishop. A hands-off preservation policy is for Cather, and the overwhelming majority of Americans, mostly a theoretical stance. This view is generally given the token status of a minority dissenting view, a fact Cather underscores by calling Ivar “Crazy” and by representing the Navajos, exiles in their own land, as exemplars of a life-centered ethic.

Crazy Ivar practices species egalitarianism at least down to the level of animals: he is a vegetarian, “he never ate meat, fresh or salt” (O Pioneers! 46), he won’t allow guns near his big pond, saying, “‘I have many strange birds stop with me here. They come from very far away and are great company. I hope you boys never shoot wild birds?’” (O Pioneers! 43); he communicates with horses and cattle, and he understands birds. Ivar’s regard
for the natural—“he preferred the cleanness and tidiness of the wild sod” (*O Pioneers!* 41)—and his ethic of noninterference are symbolized in his abode. He has made his home in the land without disturbing it. In his earth house:

[A] door and a single window were set into the hillside. You would not have seen them at all but for the reflection of the sunlight upon the four panes of window-glass. And that was all you saw. Not a shed, not a corral, not a well, not even a path broken in the curly grass. But for the piece of rusty stovepipe sticking up through the sod, you could have walked over the roof of Ivar’s dwelling without dreaming that you were near human habitation. Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before he had done. (39–40)

The key word is *defile*. Though wise-use conservationists celebrate humanizing as improving, empowering, and assisting nature, hands-off preservationists see the same conduct as deplorable. Cather continues her critique of homocentric imperialism in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

When Bishop Latour travels with Jacinto he is tutored in no-impact camping:

When they left the rock or tree or sand dune that had sheltered them for the night, the Navajo was careful to obliterate every trace of their temporary occupation. He buried the embers of the fire and the remnants of food, unpiled any stones he had piled together, filled up the holes he had scooped in the sand. Since this was exactly Jacinto’s procedure, Father Latour judged that, just as it was the white man’s way to assert himself in any landscape, to change it, to make it over a little . . . it was the Indian’s way to pass through a country without disturbing anything. (235–36)

The Navajos’ hands-off posture also extends to their permanent dwellings: “They seemed to have none of the European’s desire to ‘master’ nature, to arrange and re-create. They spent their ingenuity in the other direction; in accommodating themselves
to the scene in which they found themselves. This was not so much from indolence, the Bishop thought, as from an inherited caution and respect” (236–37). Recall Leopold’s preservationist imperative that realistically (though grudgingly) sanctions some use of resources, while still maintaining that soil, water, plants, and animals have “a right to continued existence, and at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state” (Sand County Almanac 204). Cather’s sense of the Southwest Native Americans’ preservationist posture is very Leopoldian. Note especially her last two remarkable phrases:

When they hunted, it was with the same discretion; an Indian hunt was never a slaughter. They ravaged neither the rivers nor the forest, and if they irrigated, they took as little water as would serve their needs. The land and all that it bore they treated with consideration; not attempting to improve it, they never desecrated it. (Death Comes for the Archbishop 237)

Cather’s willingness to endorse a biocentric world view, if only in the lives of two marginalized characters, is clear in her subtle and tellingly precise word to explain why Crazy Ivar has come to live with the Bergsons. “When Ivar lost his land through mismanagement a dozen years ago, Alexandra took him in, and he has been a member of her household ever since” (O Pioneers! 83, emphasis added). “Mismanagement” meant that Ivar failed to make the “improvements” that seemed obvious to conservationists and were required to prove up a homestead or tree claim. Instead, Ivar’s improvements were to construct a dam and plant green willow bushes to shelter birds. Preservationists would find that Ivar had made the proper sort of environmental impact, especially since humans would be only remotely, if at all, the beneficiaries of his actions.

However, even the biocentric ethic of Ivar and the Navajos is not a pure preservation. The obvious fact of the impossibility of a zero-impact human (or any other sort of) life is the practical Achilles heel of biocentrism. Theoretically and ethically, species egalitarianism is counterintuitive to the point of silliness. “[I]f a biocentric kinship... ethic flatly refuse[s] to discriminate among
life entities and refuse[s] to rank them,” as I note in “The Ambiguity of Environmental Ethics: Duty of Heroism,” “[then its] equating wild flowers, mosquitoes, and humans, generates patently absurd moral assessments. For example, if every living thing has an equal status, [committing] an insecticide, a germicide, and a homicide would have equivalent moral seriousness” (52).

A homocentric world-view has serious flaws, too. Cather’s critique of human-centeredness, however, is given curious expression. What are we to make of her celebration of first-generation pioneers and her worry about the indolence and spiritual lassitude of their children and grandchildren? While first-generation homesteaders are invigorated and enlivened by the challenge of humanizing the wild land, all that they have achieved—success and security, profit and comfort—seems to lead to a soft and lax character in their progeny. For example, near the end of O Pioneers! Cather has Alexandra Bergson take stock of her very successful farm management, which has made it possible for Emil to not have to farm!

Alexandra was well satisfied with her brother [Emil] . . . Yes, she told herself, it had been worth while; both Emil and the country had become what she had hoped. Out of her father’s children there was one who was fit to cope with the world, who had not been tied to the plow, and who had a personality apart from the soil. And that, she reflected, was what she had worked for. She felt well satisfied with her life. (190–91)

Perhaps it is the challenge and opportunity of humanizing the land that is worthwhile. Is it the process, not the product, which is desirable?

A homocentric view that treats the land as a commodity to be used for humans runs another risk: economic pressures can quickly and rudely shoulder aside any ethical imperatives dealing with wise use. Initially Cather’s vision of Nebraska’s fertility being used to feed the world is moral, striking, and positive: “The cornfields were far apart in those times, with miles of wild grazing land between. It took a clear, meditative eye like my grandfather [Mr. Burden] to foresee that they would enlarge and mul-
tiply until they would be, not the Shimerdas’ cornfields, or Mr. Bushy’s, but the world’s cornfields” (My Ántonia 132). However her prediction soon becomes ethically problematic as she concedes that economic interests can trump moral and environmental considerations: Nebraska’s fertile fields and “their yield would be one of the great economic facts, like the wheat crop of Russia, which underlie all the activities of men, in peace or war” (132). Note the economic neutrality of “in peace or war.” An economic framework assumes the preemptory validity of human interests and seeks only that they be satisfied, whatever they are. Accordingly biocentric preservationism has serious theoretical flaws, and homocentric conservation is vulnerable to economic pressures. Perhaps a third option, environmental theocentrism, can address some of the shortcomings of both views.

CATHER’S THEOCENTRIC STEWARDSHIP

Even Crazy Ivar is not a complete hands-off preservationist. He does, however, carry out Leopold’s ambiguous imperatives of both a moderate, benign use of resources along with leaving some resources with a “continued existence in a natural state” (Sand County Almanac 204). Ivar is able to manage this delicate balance because his fundamental commitment is religious. And, though he is a nature mystic, Cather takes care to establish the biblical basis of his faith. We first meet him when young Emil, Carl, and Alexandra, approaching his earth-home, find him reading his Norwegian Bible. Years later, now living at the Bergson home, Ivar deals with the news of the double murders of Maria and Emil by sitting inside his barn/home “repeating to himself the 101 Psalm” (O Pioneers! 245).

Ivar’s ethic of “harm no one,” even animals and birds, holds that all life is sacred, especially “wild things... [because they] are God’s” (O Pioneers! 43). He tells Alexandra, “Listen, mistress, it is right that you should take these things into account. You should know that my spells come from God, and that I would not harm any living creature” (88). Likewise the world view and moral
stance of the Navajos and Hopi is theocentric. In Leopold’s terms, these Native peoples see themselves as plain members and citizens of the land community. Accordingly they adapt themselves (not vice-versa) to their environment, accepting “chance and weather as the country did. . . it was the Indian’s way to pass through a county without disturbing anything, to pass and to leave no trace, like a fish through water, or birds through the air” (Death Comes for the Archbishop 235–36). Abstractly described, both Ivar and the Navajos measure their lives against a moral standard of stewardship.

An ecological ethic of stewardship implies that the current landholders are not the owners but only its latest tenants and that it is always with an eye to future generations that wise-use and preservation practices are to be evaluated. An important and persistent theme in Cather’s works is how, paradoxically, the future delimits the present and defines the past. These examples illustrate the point. First, a missionary’s work can only come to fruition in the future, a theme symbolically underscored by all the attention that Bishop Latour lavishes upon his orchards. Second, My Ántonia begins with a journey through the unbroken wild prairie following a barely discernable trail and the novel ends with Jim Burden stumbling upon the same trail: “I had a sense of coming home to myself and of having found out what a little circle man’s life experience is” (My Ántonia 360). Jim Burden leaves Ántonia surrounded by her children and bountiful farm amply provisioned to face the future and ready for the transfer to the next stewards of the land. Cather closes the book with the past-present-future circle: “Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, incommunicable past” (My Ántonia 360). Third, Cather could scarcely be more explicit about ownership, stewardship, and the future than in O Pioneers!

“You [Alexandra] belong to the land,” Carl murmured, “as you have always said. Now more than ever.”

“Lou and Oscar can’t see those things,” said Alexandra suddenly. “Suppose I do will my land to their children, what
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difference will that make? The land belongs to the future.” (272)

Cather’s religiosity is neither apologetic nor proselytizing; for her, religious faith is simply a given of human experience. She does not chafe at its demands and she is grateful for its consolations, both of which are future-orientated and geared to a gentle, live-and-let-live, appreciate-your-place lifestyle where humans pause and settle for a while but do not dominate.

To conclude, Grandma Burden is an apt spokesperson for Cather. On his first day in Nebraska, Jim and his grandmother dig potatoes in the garden. Jim wants to linger a little longer at the edge of the wilderness, so his grandmother explains about the snakes, mice, and badgers:

Well, if you see one [a snake], don’t have anything to do with him. The big yellow and brown ones won’t hurt you; they’re bull-snakes and help keep the gophers down. Don’t be scared if you see anything look out of that hole in the bank over there. That’s a badger hole. He’s about as big as a big ’possum, and his face is striped, black and white. He takes a chicken once in a while, but I won’t let the men harm him. In a new country a body feels friendly to the animals. I like to have him come out and watch me when I’m at work. (My Ántonia 16–17)

Jim Burden, in this new country where humans have not yet made homesteading improvements, finds God’s presence so obvious that prayers are redundant. On his first night, on the way to his grandparents’ farm, he looked around: “The wagon jolted on, carrying me I knew not whither. I don’t think I was homesick. If we never arrived anywhere, it did not matter. Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night; here, I felt, what would be would be” (My Ántonia 8).

W O R K S C I T E D


Environmental imagination is not a term that lends itself to precise definition, but most of us recognize it when we encounter its symptoms. It is there in Gary Snyder’s lifelong exploration of connections between the human soul and natural systems. If we were discussing Faulkner, we would consider his deep rootedness in the mountains of the rural South. We would find environmental imagination hard at work in the writings of John Muir or Henry David Thoreau, and in the rich naturalism of Loren Eiseley. What such writers share is a profound love of the natural world and an active curiosity about its complex processes. They generally feel that a person cannot know who they are without also knowing where they are and what dynamics govern the natural world around them. Characteristically, they see the natural world as possessing high integrity and value within itself that is not dependent upon people’s uses of it. They are also likely to see nature as a source of wisdom and understanding, and as a means through which the human soul can best fulfill itself. They love natural processes, they seek to know them intimately, and they find their best art and thought through immersion in places of natural power.

Clearly, there are many kinds of environmental imagination. The writers I have just mentioned are examples of authors for whom participation in their natural scene is a high priority. There are others who see nature as a challenge to be met, and from them we get novels of adventure and conquest. Still others perceive natural processes as the means for humans to fulfill themselves.
For these authors, the land is an instrument for the revelation of human character and purpose. As people change their land, they fulfill themselves.

The question before us is how, or whether, Willa Cather is at home among such writers. The best places to look for evidence are in her novels in a Nebraska setting, for there the land and its character clearly play a major role. These books include many vivid descriptions of prairie landscapes, complete with the seasonal changes that provide suffering and joy to their inhabitants, together with the chancy opportunity to earn a living. The prairie ecosystem is the setting upon which these stories unfold. The Nebraska prairie also acts as a character in these novels, interacting with all the human characters and influencing their lives in powerful and subtle ways. The land is often referred to as if it were a person. Although Willa Cather made many forays into distant times and geographic settings for her novels, the Nebraska prairie at the end of the nineteenth century seems to me to be the center of her artistic spirit.

The first section of *O Pioneers!* is titled “The Wild Land.” Here and there are homesteads and sod houses, “But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes... the land wanted to be let alone, to preserve its own fierce strength, its peculiar, savage kind of beauty, its uninterrupted mournfulness” (21). The wildness of the land, despite its savage beauty, is a negative quality to be overcome, not a positive attribute to be learned from. What is most noticed about the wild land is the lack of human influence: “Of all the bewildering things about a new country, the absence of human landmarks is one of the most depressing and disheartening” (25). Wildness in this context simply means, “not yet cultivated.”

The instrument of cultivation, and the symbol for human civilization, is the plow. In the early stages, “The record of the plow was insignificant, like the feeble scratches on stone left by prehistoric races, so indeterminate that they may, after all, be only the markings of glaciers, and not a record of human strivings” (25). In the course of the novel, it is the plow that converts the land into a source of wealth and status and becomes a central image of the
human spirit triumphant. The wild land is an impediment, “like a horse that no one knows how to break to harness, that runs wild and kicks things to pieces” (27). Wildness is “unfriendly to man,” and taming it for human benefit is the central story of the novel.

Only one character is shown to value wildness as a positive quality, and others regard him as slightly daft. Crazy Ivar loves the land the way it is, and makes no attempt to farm it. His home is dug into a clay bank, “without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done” (40). He lives beside a pond with his neighbors the ducks and geese. “He understands animals” (37), says Alexandra, and he earns his living by doctoring horses and cattle and hiring his labor to farmers. No guns or killing are allowed on his property. He sees his land from the perspective of the birds that migrate above it: “they have their roads up there, as we have down here” (45). It is from Ivar that Alexandra learns that “Hogs do not like to be filthy” (47), and she modifies her practices to help them keep clean. Although Ivar is an isolated oddball in this farming community, he proves to be durable and plays minor but significant roles throughout the novel. Ivar’s is the only voice that speaks for the wild environment, and it is a small voice that goes easily unnoticed.

The central story of the novel is Alexandra’s effort to tame the land and preside over “the last struggle of a wild soil against the encroaching plowshare” (49). Alexandra’s conquest of the land is more that of a lover than a warrior: “For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning” (64). Yet it is only through human effort that the land is capable of fulfillment: “The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or woman” (64). Alexandra’s love seems to be just what the land wants, for it repays her handsomely: “It pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right; and then, all at once, it worked itself, and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found that we were rich” (108). The image of land being awakened by a loving touch to make people wealthy is uncommon enough to draw raised eyebrows from other pioneers.
Cather does not supply many details about the process of taming the prairie and converting it into prosperous farmland. She skips over the years of hardship and toil, referring only vaguely to the failures and disasters that many must have suffered. Her narrative leaps over the miseries and resumes when the land is populated by many successful farmers, linked by good roads and connected to markets by railways. There are now churches and schools and an active social life where people compete and cooperate with one another. In Alexandra’s words, “the country had become what she had hoped,” (191) no longer wild, but a benign setting for the exploration of human character and relationships.

Human relationships dominate the latter stages of the novel, with greed and jealousy leading to murder and suffering. The land is no longer the focus of attention, except as an object to be possessed. When, at the close of the story, Carl says to Alexandra, “You belong to the land,” she responds with: “The land belongs to the future... We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while” (272–73). The natural world, here as elsewhere, is defined and given value by the people who inhabit it.

In The Song of the Lark, Cather shows how a woman can be transformed from a farm-town girl to a sophisticated musical artist. That journey is like the personal transformation that Cather saw in her own life. Thea, the transformed operatic singer, returns to her prairie home and feels “that she was coming back to her own land” (202).

This earth seemed to her young and fresh and kindly, a place where refugees from old, sad countries were given another chance. The mere absence of rocks gave the soil a kind of amiability and generosity, and the absence of natural boundaries gave the spirit a wider range. Wire fences might mark the end of a man’s pasture, but they could not shut in his thoughts as mountains and forests can. It was over flat lands like this, stretching out to drink the sun, that the larks sang—and one’s heart sang there, too. Thea was glad that this was her country, even if one did not learn to speak
elegantly there. It was, somehow, an honest country, and there was a new song in that blue air which had never been sung in the world before. . . . She had the sense of going back to a friendly soil, whose friendship was somehow going to strengthen her; a naïve, generous country that gave one its joyous force, its large-hearted, childlike power to love, just as it gave one its coarse, brilliant flowers. (202–03)

Like Thea, Cather seems to feel that the absence of dramatic landscape features bestows a freedom on the human spirit, permitting it to explore new and creative territories. This “friendly soil” is the foundation upon which Cather’s art rests as well. Yet neither Cather nor her heroine draw their inspiration from living on their land. Instead, they leave it at an early age for travels in large American and European cities. And it is not the prairie that unlocks Thea’s creative energy, but the spectacular scenery of Arizona cliff dwellings.

Thea’s visit to a ranch in northern Arizona becomes for her an epiphany of her career as an artist. There, amid forested mountains and canyons, she discovers her vocation. While bathing at a pool in a swift flowing stream, she reflects upon shards of pottery left by ancient Cliff Dwellers: “The stream and the broken pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself—life hurrying past us and running away, too strong to stop, too sweet to lose?” (279). From this point on, Thea knows that she is called to her art, and her strength grows rapidly. Now she has energy and ambitions that had been absent from her life on the prairie. Later, she watches an eagle sailing above her in the canyon and salutes it as a symbol of her newfound power: “O eagle of eagles! Endeavor, achievement, desire, glorious striving of human art!” (293). Near the end of the book, when her life as an operatic soprano is fulfilled, she reflects that her work as an artist has grown from the early experience in the mountains of Arizona: “Out of the rocks, out of the dead people . . . I don’t know if I’d ever have got anywhere without Panther Canyon” (408). The prairie context seems to provide a sense of freedom and expansiveness, as well as the comforts of a
well-loved homeland, but something more is needed to stimulate the creative imagination. This is found in the varied and colorful landscapes of northern Arizona and in reflections upon the ancient people who once lived there.

The ancient people appear briefly in My Ántonia also, but only as a fading image that goes without exploration or explanation. Narrator Jim Burden describes their traces: “Beyond the pond, on the slope that climbed to the cornfield, there was, faintly marked in the grass, a great circle where the Indians used to ride” (60). No surviving Indians appear in the novel to explain what the great circle might have meant to those who made it. It is a remnant of the prairie’s past with no discovered significance for the present. These marks from the past are echoed near the end of the novel when the narrator encounters old wagon tracks that can still be seen on the now-mechanized prairie: “On the level land the tracks had almost disappeared—were mere shadings in the grass, and a stranger would not have noticed them... They looked like gashes torn by grizzly’s claws, on the slopes where the farm wagons used to lurch up out of the hollows with a pull that brought curling muscles on the smooth hips of the horses” (359). The land bears reminders of the past, whether in the unknown traces of the native people, or in the vividly remembered images of childhood. This is a central theme of the novel, identified by the narrator as “the precious, the incommunicable past” (My Ántonia 238).

Jim Burden, the narrator whom Cather created to tell this tale, deserves some attention from a modern perspective. After his childhood in Nebraska, Burden left the prairie to live in New York, where he is “legal counsel for one of the great Western railways” (1). Although he has left Nebraska for city life, “he loves with a personal passion the great country through which his railway runs and branches. His faith in it and his knowledge of it have played an important part in its development” (Grumbach xi). From a farmer’s perspective, the railroad surely made the prairie economically successful, if that is what is meant by development. Jim Burden’s daily work is never described in the novel, but it is not hard to imagine what a lawyer for the railroad might have been occupied with during the last decades of the nineteenth
The Plow and the Pen

century. Among his tasks would have been the acquisition of as much land as possible for rights-of-way and for commercial and real estate development. Whatever his sentimental ties to the land might have been, they were surely tinged with a strong capacity for its exploitation.

It is through Jim Burden’s eyes that we learn about the prairie environment. His first views are not very encouraging: “There seemed to be nothing to see: no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. . . . Between that earth and that sky, I felt erased, blotted out” (7). This initial sense of emptiness soon becomes transformed into richer imagery as the land slowly reveals its living character:

As I looked about me I felt that the grass was the country, as the water is the sea. The red of the grass made all the great prairie the colour of wine-stains, or of certain sea-weeds when they are first washed up. And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running. . . . more than anything else I felt motion in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping . . . (14–15)

This vividly described sea of red grass reappears in the imagery of the novel often, although it is never named. Gradually in the course of the novel it disappears, presumably as it is replaced by cereal grains and corn. Near the end of the book, there remains only a remnant of it still growing at a protected gravesite. The passing of little and big bluestem, the native prairie grasses, leaves only faint traces, just as the Native people and the early pioneers had done.

Prairie wildlife also gets some attention. Jim and Ántonia visit a prairie-dog town and notice that it is a well-organized community where “an orderly and very sociable kind of life was going on” (42), rather like that of the human pioneers, many of whom also lived underground or in sod huts. It is there that Jim Burden performs his heroic feat of killing a large rattlesnake with a
shovel. The snake was “old and Lazy” and he was “sunning himself after a cold night.” Yet Burden does not merely move away from him, but attacks because “his abominable muscularity, his loathsome, fluid motion, somehow made me sick” (44). When he has crushed the “disgusting vitality” out of the snake, Burden reflects, “I had longed for this opportunity, and had hailed it with joy” (45). His act is celebrated by Ántonia and the other settlers because his adolescent heroism has triumphed over “the ancient, eldest Evil” (45–46).

The prairie wind and wildlife are mingled in Burden’s imagery:

The wind shook the doors and windows impatiently, then swept on again, singing through the big spaces. Each gust, as it bore down, rattled the panes, and swelled off like the others. They made me think of defeated armies, retreating; or of ghosts who were trying desperately to get in for shelter, and then went moaning on. Presently, in one of those sobbing intervals between the blasts, the coyotes tuned up with their whining howl; one, two, three, then all together—to tell us that winter was coming. (51)

Apocryphal wildlife stories also appear in the novel. A Russian settler tells of a wedding party in Ukraine, where several sleds full of celebrants were attacked and devoured by wolves, “hundreds of them” (55). The teller of the tale escaped by throwing the bride to the wolves in order to lighten his sled, and the disgrace that followed caused him to leave Russia and emigrate to Nebraska. The story terrifies the children and haunts their dreams, but it has nothing to do with wolves, who do not occur in hundreds to attack sled trains.

There are visions of the prairie that become deeply symbolic, and these provide references to other literary images. One in particular is worth recalling in some detail:

We sat looking off across the country, watching the sun go down. The curly grass about us was on fire now. The bark of the oaks turned red as copper. There was a shimmer of gold on the brown river. Out in the stream the sandbars glittered like glass, and the light trembled in the willow thickets as if
little flames were leaping among them. The breeze sank to stillness. In the ravine a ringdove mourned plaintively, and somewhere off in the bushes an owl hooted. The girls sat listless, leaning against each other. The long fingers of the sun touched their foreheads.

Presently we saw a curious thing: There were no clouds, the sun was going down in a limpid, gold-washed sky. Just as the lower edge of the red disk rested on the high fields against the horizon, a great black figure suddenly appeared on the face of the sun. We sprang to our feet, straining our eyes toward it. In a moment we realized what it was. On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun.

Even while we whispered about it, our vision disappeared; the ball dropped and dropped until the red tip went beneath the earth. The fields below us were dark, the sky was growing pale, and that forgotten plough had sunk back into its own littleness somewhere on the prairie. (236–37)

A few pages after this striking image appears, there is a discussion of Dante’s *Commedia* and of the poet Statius on the Mountain of Purgatory. Dante seems to have been on Cather’s mind at this point in the novel. It is easy to imagine that her image of the plow silhouetted by the setting sun is intended as a prairie version of Dante’s beatific vision of the relatedness of all things in canto 33 of his *Paradiso*:

\[...\]
\[I presumed\]
\[to set my eyes on the Eternal Light\]
\[so long that I spent all my sight on it!\]

\[In its profundity I saw—ingathered\]
\[And bound by love into one single volume—\]
\[What, in the universe, seems separate, scattered:\]
Substances, accidents, and dispositions
As if conjoined—in such a way that what
I tell is only rudimentary.

I think I saw the universal shape
Which that knot takes; for, speaking this, I feel
A joy that is more ample. (82–93)

It is hard to judge whether Cather’s agricultural image is a parody of Dante’s vision or an attempt to raise prairie imagery to the level of Dante’s spiritual symbol.

The case is complicated a few pages later where the conversation has turned to Virgil’s *Georgics*, a collection of pastoral musings from the first century. Cather quotes Virgil: “‘*Primus ego in patrium mecum . . . deducam Musas*’; ‘for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country’” (My Ántonia 256). Bringing the Muse into a pastoral setting may be a responsibility that Cather felt she shared with Virgil. As if to confirm this, Virgil is again referred to: “where the pen was fitted to the matter as the plough is to the furrow; and he must have said to himself, with the thankfulness of a good man, ‘I was the first to bring the Muse into my country’ ” (256). The pen and the plow are fused into the beatific image of the symbolic sunset, with Willa Cather bringing her Muse to Nebraska.

Questions still remain about the character of Willa Cather’s environmental imagination. It is worthwhile to consider the political and social context in which environmental consciousness was growing in America during her lifetime. Willa Cather was born in 1873, one year after the establishment of Yellowstone as the world’s first national park. Other national parks like Yosemite and the Grand Canyon were created in the next few decades. Serious conservation movements became active beginning in 1890. The administration of Theodore Roosevelt (1901–09) saw the establishment of federal agencies to conserve parks, forests, soils, water, and wildlife. The writings of John Muir were popular and widely read in the early 1900s. Even my own ancestor Ezra Meeker, who had crossed Nebraska with an ox team in 1852, was working hard to preserve sections of the Oregon Trail as an historical landmark. If Cather was aware of these contemporary
developments, little evidence of them appears in her Nebraska novels.

Cather herself appears to have had an ambiguous relationship with the prairie land she claimed to love. As soon as she could in her youth she left Nebraska and spent most of her life in large Eastern and European cities. She did not use her agricultural roots to develop an environmental art and philosophy, as we have seen Wendell Berry do from his small Kentucky farm in our own time. She lies buried in New England, far from her Nebraska ancestors.

Two major forces were at work to change the prairie environment during the period of Cather’s Nebraska novels, and she portrays them both in a positive light. Agriculture and the railroads combined to transform the prairie irreversibly. Jim Burden, the railroad lawyer, reflects at the end of My Ántonia on these changes:

The old pasture land was now being broken up into wheat fields and cornfields, the red grass was disappearing, and the whole face of the country was changing. There were wooden houses where the old sod dwellings used to be, and little orchards, and big red barns; all this meant happy children, contented women, and men who saw their lives coming to fortunate issue. The windy springs and the blazing summers, one after another, had enriched and mellowed that flat tableland; all the human effort that had gone into it was coming back in long, sweeping lines of fertility. The changes seemed beautiful and harmonious to me; it was like watching the growth of a great man or a great idea. I recognized every tree and sandbank and rugged draw. I found that I remembered the conformation of the land as one remembers the modeling of human faces. (298)

The environment that Willa Cather evokes does indeed have a human face. It appears as if it were a character in these novels, interacting with human characters and changing their lives. It is also the landscape and setting for human growth and development, and the source for experiences of beauty and transcendence.

It is unlikely that Willa Cather will find a place among the great literary examples of the environmental imagination. She
may have loved her prairie home, but her love was not strong enough to persuade her to live with it and learn its natural history. She shows little knowledge or curiosity about the natural processes surrounding her characters. One commentator speaks of Cather’s “hatred of modern science” (Grumbach xxviii), which may well account for her disinterest in her ecological context. There is no environmental ethic that emerges from her work, but rather an ethic of development that supposes that land fulfills its destiny when it is successfully farmed. The land provides a background for her stories of human growth and development, but it is not loved and studied to find its own integrity and value, let alone its own story. The land is raw material in the hands of Cather’s Muse, and it is the setting where the plow and the pen come together.

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Three years ago, my wife Jan and I were enjoying an autumn Sunday morning in The Mill, in Lincoln, when, as it seemed, Willa Cather walked slowly past our little table. Dressed for church as a good, still family-involved twelve-year-old ought to be, her figure square-built and still androgynous-seeming, her person quiet and unobtrusive, this girl circled slowly and attentively through the big room. Her mind was absorbed in the diverse mix of coffee-drinkers and paper-readers, whom she saw one by one, without staring. This intelligent young girl was gathering material. Sounds and images and the warm, bakery fragrance of the place, the whole ambience, were registering. You could see learning happening as clearly as watching India ink spread indelibly into soft paper.

I am going to argue that the real Willa Cather was also and above all a learner in this same way, and that her deepest-going books are about learning—that is, about sensitivity and vulnerability, and the extraordinary beauty of human consciousness when it is young and free.

This sensitivity is also, I believe, the basis of the ecological imagination. Cather’s capacity to see a man or a woman, to imagine their inward life, is at root the same as her ability to feel the “light reflecting, wind-loving trees in the desert” (*The Song of the Lark* 37) and to describe the living landscape of a redrock canyon, or the open prairie. It is all one sensibility. It is in terms of this awareness, this capacity to learn, that she understands life and the characters in it. What is the real, fundamental difference between Thea Kronborg and her sister Anna? Between Claude and Bayliss Wheeler? Between Alexandra on the one hand and
her brothers Lou and Oscar Bergson? I think the ruling question for Willa Cather was, has the freshness been kept? Is the person still alive at the quick, and learning?

We might also ask, historically, whether we, as a people immersed in machinery and our much-worshiped market, are losing the one fine thing we’ve got, the capacity to learn and in that openness to give sympathy?

The essential difference between Claude and Bayliss Wheeler is a matter of elasticity of consciousness. The crux of Godfrey St. Peter’s terrifying crisis is that the freshness of discovery and learning, renewed by his relationship with Tom Outland, and which he, Godfrey, had then somehow conveyed in his histories, is leaving him. The mysterious essence of the New Mexico morning for Archbishop Latour, the something “that whispered to the ear on the pillow,” revives youthful sensitivity and appetite. It keeps him a learning, young man.

To learn, in the sense I am outlining, is not at all to gather knowledge in the sense of discrete facts. Learning in the “Tom Outland” way, as we might call it, is not an intellectual process, but rather a continuing unsettlement and opening of consciousness as a whole. The power to relate, to see inside, to feel with another, transcends intellect and language.

By the same token, the power to understand ecosystems, to sense in one’s bones the relational glue that holds the natural world together, does not come about by accumulating data. You can hang dozens of radio collars on animals, and by satellite come to know where the animals spend their time, but this information hasn’t anything to do with a member’s insight.

The data-gathering kind of knowledge is in fact not entirely benign. It feeds into the philosophy of materialism and mechanism. Data-gathering, when dominant in the mind, leads toward coldness and arrogance. René Descartes, who described data-consciousness as clearly as anyone has, went so far as to argue that animals didn’t really suffer pain. They are machines, he wrote (37–38). A novelist, a great novelist, needs a consciousness much deeper, much more comprehensive.

I think it will shed light on Willa Cather’s achievement, in particular her ecological sensitivity, to look at the human mental
spectrum and try to say what most of us do with our evolutionary gift.

Picture, if you will, the range of our capabilities. At one side of the spectrum, is the power to distinguish this from that, to see things one at a time in linear sequence. Obviously, this sense for sequence is the seat of our straight-line conception of time. It is also where the simple naming aspect of language has its foundation.

This corner of consciousness also sponsors dualistic conceptions. “Upper” is distinguished from “lower”; “inner” from “outer”; “good” from “not good.” When dominant in one’s life, this dualistic consciousness supports hierarchies and invidious distinctions and underlies, eventually, the pathologies of racism and nationalism and the fury of religious violence.

The most generative of the entity-oriented and dualistic conceptions, undoubtedly, is “me,” “I,” “ego,” the sense of a separate, subjective inwardness. I say “generative” because “me” is not just one entity among many. It is the home base for certain habits of perception, a certain restricted kind of education and culture.

Its seemingly sharp focus, that small corner of consciousness, grants what seems to be sureness. But by creating a self as separate observer, it simultaneously creates incompleteness. This combination of precision and anxiety gives rise to a pathological, vicious circle of need and desire, in which more is never enough.

Now it will be objected that the “me” has an actual, empirical, indeed irrefutable reality. The self isn’t just a conception: I am not you, and you are not me.

At one level of perception, such realism is inarguable. Dr. Johnson can come and kick me in the shins, refuting idealism. But from an only slightly enlarged perspective, it is possible to unsettle the boundaries of biological identity. Where is this “I” in the absence of oxygen produced by the world of plants? Or in the absence of bacteria in the gut? As Gregory Bateson asked, when the blind man taps his white-tipped stick down the sidewalk, where exactly does this perceptual self begin? (LaChapelle 60). What makes Bateson’s question difficult for us is the extent of our historical rooting in entity-perception. We see things one at a time, mostly,
and as we do so, with each perception our separate selfhood is subtly reinforced. That reinforcement keeps us, half-satisfied, in one small region of the spectrum of consciousness.

Most of us then act out a somewhat defiant or assertive version of what the philosophers call “naïve realism.” “I think, therefore I am,” as Descartes put it. Personal identity is our rock, maintained by a strategic limiting of awareness, and becomes a project that occupies the vast majority of our hours, days, weeks, years, and lives. Let us call this activity the ego process. It is why so few of us are great novelists.

We become, instead, Lou and Oscar. While the distinction-seeing, entity-oriented kind of consciousness is our lens, we look out upon a separate-seeming world of objects and judge whether any particular one will be useful, beneficial, negative, or merely neutral. Following this course, we become permanently needy, somewhat dyspeptic judges. We try to secure a conceptually preferred world: the Bayliss Wheeler world, call it, or, in a darker way, the crafty realm of Ivy Peters and Wick Cutter.

A central, shared characteristic of the people I have just named is that they have ceased to learn, ceased to grow. They all repeat some sort of formula that has become their adjustment. They have bought into society’s authority.

And of course that is what we all do. Part of what makes Willa Cather a great novelist is that she sees the making of this adjustment as a deeply sad thing. The portrait of Anna Kronborg, for example, is particularly poignant. Her life has, essentially, stopped. Somehow, Cather has let us into the shared human and inward reality of Anna and ourselves. The tragedy of not learning any longer—choosing, or seeming to choose, to jell inside and to close the doors—this human incompleteness is one of the profound things not named in One of Ours, and O Pioneers! and The Song of the Lark and A Lost Lady and My Ántonia, and indeed, I would argue, throughout Willa Cather’s work.

But at the beginning, we are all “born interested,” like Mrs. Ringer in Sapphira and the Slave Girl (119). Or as Rousseau put it, we are “born free” (165). We still know that there is such a thing as a lyric connection with the world, the simple and trusting opening of self that is the gift of sympathy. Evolutionarily
speaking, we come with the full spectrum of consciousness. We read Cather, avidly, with a sense of return to completeness.

But society wants us to keep such experience in its place. Society prefers that we stay within the field of distinction-focused, linear thought. Things go according to the norm when each of us is predictably self-oriented. We are encouraged to have a rueful kind of lukewarm, nostalgic sentiment, broadly shared and agreed upon as the ineluctable “human condition.” Passion is allowed in moments, but is thought of as something you get over.

Society is all of us together, our collective consciousness. It is an agreement by which the individual self is corroborated as a distinct, personal identity—given weight and standing. In return for this peer support, we agree, more or less, to live within the predictable field. This quiet transaction is what Willa Cather’s near-contemporary, Mary Austin, called “the huge coil of social adjustment,” in her 1912 novel, A Woman of Genius (6). All her life, Austin railed against the adjustment, the conformity, the loss of creative power, the narrowing of consciousness.

When does this sad reconcilement happen, and who are its agents? I think you could say it begins virtually at birth, because the infant’s whole contact is with people who have already made the agreement, who are society. Certainly with the acquiring of language, especially the relishing of powerful words like me and mine, we reinforce from an early age the social understanding of existence. We learn the language of separate selfhood.

We also live within the aura of our parents. Mary Austin’s mother, at least according to Austin, disliked her from before her first breath, and seemed to take every opportunity to shame her. In Austin’s account, Susanna Hunter was simply not the sort of person who could understand her daughter’s mystical experiences—her occasional ranging beyond society’s mentality. When in 1892 Mary Austin gave birth to a not-quite-right child, her mother asked her what she had done, to receive such a judgement (Earth Horizon 257). It is a matter for wonder that in her writing, Mary Austin’s sense of life is not more combative than it is.

Virginia Boak Cather, fortunately, took a different tack. Strict and rather formal in her manners and interactions with her children, she nevertheless instinctively respected their individuality—
what we would call their *space*. They could be relied upon to become good people. This climate of spiritual regard, as I think of it, was of inestimable value for Willa Cather’s development. It probably stands behind her mature ability to have Alexandra Bergson go to the prison and talk with Frank Shabata and to honor what was fine, in the end, in Sapphira Colbert.

But those accomplishments come later, and what was crucial in Cather’s developing years was that there was no lid on discovery, no limit on the confidence one could feel in one’s own mind. I think learning, as a talent, may be fairly fragile in our young lives. We are being told and shown on all sides that life is to be lived guardedly. We are encouraged always to stay within the lines.

But learning is a boundary-crosser. When consciousness expands beyond the fences and begins to loosen out to its rightful, intuitive, relation-perceiving range, that, one might say, is the awakening of learning. This movement means the coming alive of insight and caring, that is, compassion. It is the recovery into new life of the wordless, musical ranges of consciousness. It is an emergence. It is inherently positive and happy. It impels Lucy Gayheart down the sidewalk. It is the almost-felt, mysterious something just ahead, for Claude Wheeler. Godfrey St. Peter catches a fugitive glimpse of it when, from the closing-down grayness of midlife, he comes again to look at the seven lakeside pine trees. It is what makes Alexandra Bergson’s face radiant, on the way back from the river to the Divide.

I think you could state as a kind of formula that the more confident and solidified the self is, the rarer learning will be. For a confirmed identity, there will be very few discoveries. The strategic perception that protects the self always looks ahead, radar-searching for what will be agreeable to it. In the world projected by the self, we only come upon what we plan to come upon, such as specific pleasures; and we avoid all negative items if possible. Living from this standpoint, there can be no real freshness. A Bayliss Wheeler world, in short.

We keep up a chatter, that there shall be no empty space in consciousness in which a contemplative, possibly unsettling, insight, or a genuine discovery, might happen. One could say that this stream of words and thoughts and judgments, almost totally oc-
cupying our days, makes up the furniture in the rooms of society, contributing to our astonishing, endless possession-gathering. To unfurnish this world, on the idea of the mind démeublé, would be to reestablish the possibility of simple quietness and direct touch.

Dorothy Canfield Fisher wrote to Mildred Bennett in 1949, “She [Cather] felt, and said in print several times, and often in conversation, that for her the only part of life which made a real impression on her imagination and emotion was what happened to her before the age of twenty” (Bennett 151). James Woodress tells us that Cather “also believed that most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen.” “That’s the important period, she said” (Woodress 40).

The world, or society, has pretty much got us by the end of adolescence. We have, most of us, begun to fit into the economic lines, the simplifications of dualistic sexual-identity, and the other pathways of expectation. No blame—this is just the reality. But most of us, accepting a restricted life, are not going to be great novelists.

At first look, if learning means having a genuine, present-tense awareness, alive to the world, it may seem anomalous that Cather went back to the past for her best subjects. But I think she didn’t go back in a linear, sentimental sense. Her use of nineteenth-century Nebraska and New Mexico and Virginia, and late-seventeenth-century Quebec, is not an act of nostalgia. It is a reinhabiting. William Faulkner’s famous saying that the past isn’t dead, it isn’t even past, is only true for those with a living imagination (92). The ordinary or self-bound person who dwells in the past, as the phrase has it, has a sentimental and self-pitying attitude. He or she is seeing through the lens of self, looking for praise or blame. This is us, with Lucy Gayheart’s well-meaning but limited friend Harry Gordon as our representative: “... it was a kind of mental near-sightedness, and kept him from seeing what didn’t immediately concern him” (Lucy Gayheart 98). Harry Gordon could not write a novel of the past; to do that requires the identity-crossing range of consciousness. But it is poignant that he cannot write that kind of book and cannot even talk to anyone about what is most important in his life. Sadly enough, we understand him.
The dominant collective mind, society, urges Willa and us toward success in New York, that is, toward peer recognition and a good, widely recognized bottom line. What could be more attractive, by the collective valuation, than to become the managing editor of the premier magazine in the country?

As selves, we don’t really want to be vulnerable to the world. But if we retain somehow, at some level, a cellular memory of the exhilaration and freedom that accompany learning, then there is conflict. We live day to day amidst what we have been taught to admire, that is, to aspire to, to bend our life to, to imitate. We can, on the other hand, experience some of what it takes to become a great novelist if we can leave off this admiring and begin to remember, that is, reenter the young state of open consciousness and learning.

The learning state is one of intense empathy, involving transcendence of the usual self. Therefore, I have to take issue with James Woodress’s judgment, that Cather’s “strongest impulse [was] the desire to preserve the inviolability of the self” (127). Woodress made this remark apropos of discussing sex in Cather’s writing. He continued, “Throughout her work there is fear of sex, as character after character is destroyed by it or survives by escaping it” (127). He concluded that Cather had a “yearning for the pre-puberty years of sexual innocence” (299). Sharon O’Brien says essentially the same thing, that Cather “feared ‘erasure of personality,’ whether by dying in a cornfield or by losing the self in romantic love” (138). But I think this judgement may give too much centrality to sex and too conclusive a characterization of sex as threatening. But most of all I think they are wrong about the erasure of self.

These are two formidable critics in agreement on a salient point of analysis. But I think that Cather’s strongest impulse was to preserve for herself the conditions in which learning can happen. I would call this hallowed state not the inviolability of the self but the sacredness of the empathic. Sex is only one of the tracks on which personal identity is regularized. In modern life, that is, under the conditions of distortion, it can be one of the factors actually hardening the self. We play sexual roles within gender assignments, surrounded with issues of possession and
jealousy, just as we play economic roles. It is the ego-self that falls into sentimental, romantic love—and soon enough falls out of it.

Let me name some names. It is Myra Henshawe and Enid Royce and Marian Forrester who model firmness of self most spectacularly. Cather gives a salute to their stubborn inviolability, but she doesn’t want to be them. She is much closer to Nellie Birdseye and Claude Wheeler and Niel Herbert. In their youthfulness, discovery shimmers just ahead of them.

When the full range of consciousness is awakened, our native sensitivity to relationship comes alive. This larger cognizance is inherently ecological, and lets us see and feel the environment in a participative, intimate way. Willa Cather is one of our greatest nature writers—without even being a nature writer—because she had this living sense of the biotic community. Her capacity to feel for places and for trees—for the cottonwoods being cut down by 1921’s modern Nebraska farmers, for example—came from the same well of consciousness as her novelist’s sympathy for character. The secret of free consciousness is that what it sees, it sees with love. Free consciousness is always learning, touching, absorbing—it interimpinges with the intensely meaningful blue sky and the light of sunset and the rustling cottonwood leaves.

For Cather the instinctive standard of excellence in human endeavor, the reference, is nature. Thea Kronborg’s voice, even when she was a youngster, “was a nature-voice, Wunsch told himself, breathed from the creature and apart from language, like the sound of the wind in the trees, or the murmur of water” (The Song of the Lark 77). When Thea herself is becoming aware of “something about her that was different,” and found that hunting for it sometimes didn’t work, merely stepping “out of doors” was one of the triggering moves that could bring the mystery close again. “And when it was there, everything was more interesting and beautiful, even people” (79). Transcendence is intimately associated with natural landscapes:

More than the mountain disappeared as the forest closed thus. Thea seemed to be taking very little through the wood with her. The personality of which she was so tired seemed
to let go of her. The high, sparkling air drank it up like blotting-paper. It was lost in the thrilling blue of the new sky and the song of the thin wind in the piñons. The old, fretted lines which marked one off, which defined her,—made her Thea Kronborg, Bower’s accompanist, a soprano with a faulty middle voice,—were all erased. (296)

This erasure opens the mind to the great source. It lets us see where the truly inviolable, renewing power comes from, where the voice comes from. Erasure of the little self marks emergence into creative consciousness. The analogies and similes for this life passage naturally come from nature, because it is this waiting world that one is reentering.

Another week passed. Thea did the same things as before, felt the same influences, “went over the same ideas; but there was a livelier movement in her thoughts, and a freshening of sensation, like the brightness which came over the underbrush after a shower. A persistent affirmation—or denial—was going on in her, like the tapping of the woodpecker in the one tall pine tree across the chasm” (307).

All outdoors is on the side of the greater. Sometimes Cather lets us directly into her own creative, environmental imagination. The opening paragraph of chapter 6, in The Song of the Lark, is a beautiful enactment of ecological consciousness.

Seen from a balloon, Moonstone would have looked like a Noah’s ark town set out in the sand and lightly shaded by gray-green tamarisks and cottonwoods. A few people were trying to make soft maples grow in their turfed lawns, but the fashion of planting incongruous trees from the North Atlantic States had not become general then, and the frail, brightly painted desert town was shaded by the light-reflecting, wind-loving trees of the desert, whose roots are always seeking water and whose leaves are always talking about it, making the sound of rain. The long, porous roots of the cottonwood are irrepressible. They break into the wells as rats do into granaries, and thieve the water. (37)

Cather’s awareness moves with the water and the roots and the
leaves, across categories, feeling the process. There is nothing linguistically extraordinary in this paragraph, perhaps, but if we recognize the importance of words—“light reflecting,” “wind-loving,” “seeking,” “talking”—we see an unmistakable orientation toward process. The dynamism of nature admits of only permeable borders; requires for its understanding a consciousness loose and free to move.

To my mind, there is no more sure evidence of Willa Cather’s having transcended the chatter of typical or conventional thought than her simplicity of prose. She seemed to recognize that what can be said, after all, is only the tiniest fragment of what is. The small corner of consciousness that I have been talking about in this essay is very much preoccupied with words, definitions, judgments, adjectives dramatizing our responses as selves. When we are firmly within the self, we think that when we say “maple,” we are saying what the tree before us is. The better-informed will say “red maple,” or even *acer rubrum*. But none of these descriptors touches the reality of the bark, the limbs, the presence on and in the ground. The more words we use, in fact, the further we move from the tree itself, from the primary meeting in which we share existence with it.

Her religiously *chaste* style, to use Glen Love’s wonderful insight (303), is evidence that Cather knew well the seductive power of words. She is skeptical about them. She would like her writing to convey the sense of the thing itself, in the first purity of response before description.

Only the relational consciousness can feel the aura of a tree, the thing not named—never named—about it. The relational consciousness is not oriented toward words, and uses as few as possible. By simplicity, the reader is urged toward apperception.

When Cather wants us to be inside a character, using their eyes, she most often, most movingly, has them seeing nature. She doesn’t “work up” scenery—she hated to have to “work up” something. Instead, at her best, she seems simply to inhabit the learning mind. She conveys the beauty and poignancy of Claude Wheeler’s situation, newly arrived in France and about to be sent to the front, by showing his attention to what is growing: “Claude didn’t want to go [with David Gerhardt, to a possi-
ble billet], didn’t want to accept favours,—nevertheless he went. They walked together along a dusty road that ran between half-ripe wheatfields, bordered with poplar trees. The wild morning-glories and Queen Anne’s lace that grew by the road-side were still shining with dew. A fresh breeze stirred the bearded grain, parting it in furrows and fanning out streaks of crimson poppies” (279).

From the voyage of the Anchises onward, Claude has been learning. Some, at least, of his former self has been erased, enough to open a certain door. And how do we know, have evidence, for this learning? We see nature through eyes that are opening.

The rain had dwindled to a steady patter, but the tall brakes growing up in the path splashed him to the middle, and his feet sank in spongy, mossy earth. The light about him, the very air, was green. The trunks of the trees were overgrown with a soft green moss, like mould. He was wondering whether this forest was not always a damp, gloomy place, when suddenly the sun broke through and shattered the whole wood with gold. He had never seen anything like the quivering emerald of the moss, the silky green of the dripping beech-tops. Everything woke up; rabbits ran across the path, birds began to sing, and all at once the brakes were full of whirring insects. (285)

Having entered holistic perception, we move companionably with Claude when he ventures to summarize, philosophically, where he stands: “Life was so short that it meant nothing at all unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows of individual existence came and went against a background that held together” (328).

This is pure Cather, of course; it says what it says because the forest, where she and Claude (and we) have been walking, is the literal ground of such insight about context and matrix. This forest, by the passive urging of its wholeness, has enlarged and clarified consciousness.

How sad that Claude, seeing so much more clearly now, shortly must die. How regrettable that the entire world, so Cather thought, broke in two about the time this book was published.
Almost eighty years later, with a lot of hindsight, we can perhaps see some of what she meant by “broke in two.” Certainly, the phrase has proved environmentally accurate. Where formerly there were contiguous, intact ecosystems, we live among fragments.

Among the shards, we scurry toward a global life given completely to possession, cunning, and short-term prudence. With wild nature in tatters, it seems inevitable we will have a diminished sense of the whole. We might all become experts in contracts, guarding above all the inviolability of the self, and know little or nothing of the great contract.

We are living, in short, in a further state of what shadowed Willa Cather’s last forty-five years. Thank goodness that she left us such a clear record of what it feels like, on the other hand, to be young, with the world and the mind in a loving partnership, opening together in the movement of learning. Thank goodness for the “shining eyes of youth” (O Pioneers! 274).

WORKS CITED


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Applied to literary studies, ecology’s principle of interconnection might be that reading a book in isolation is akin to reading a single chapter from a novel. It is a principle especially true for Willa Cather, who exhibited a lifelong attempt to see things whole, who understood wholeness to involve the fundamental biological pattern shared by all living things, and who recognized in the great dramatic form of comedy the artistic expression of that life rhythm. Indeed, Cather’s genius lay in giving voice to what philosopher Susanne K. Langer calls “the pure sense of life [which] is the underlying feeling of comedy” (327). The purpose of this essay is to trace the ways in which she did so.

To begin we might remember that ecology shaped Cather’s conception of the world as surely as the Bible did her sense of language. Within her family the young Willa had the model of a favorite aunt, Frances Smith Cather, an accomplished amateur botanist who with her husband emigrated from Virginia to Nebraska a decade before Willa’s own family did so. Coming into her own as a student at the University of Nebraska, Cather witnessed the creation of the science of ecology, which arose not (as writers today often assume) from the transcendental naturalism of Emerson and Thoreau, argues historian Ronald C. Tobey, but rather from the struggle of grassland ecologists in Nebraska “to understand and to preserve one of the great biological regions of the world” (2). At the core of that struggle were the scientists centering around Charles Bessey along with his students
and Cather’s classmates—Roscoe Pound, Frederic Clements, and Edith Schwartz Clements. In fundamental ways Cather shared their experience of having been “raised on the frontier and [having] entered botany just as the successive booms of settlement were breaking upon the virgin soil,” of looking to the prairies as “the heart, the enduring strength of the American continent,” and of struggling to preserve the region (Tobey 2). From this effort the grasslands ecologists “created the science of ecology . . . in the United States” (Tobey 2–3) and Willa Cather created a body of work reflecting an ecological aesthetics.

That shared experience is evident in Cather’s early fiction, where descriptions of nature that she knew firsthand are among the features that most clearly anticipate her mature art. In “On the Divide” (1896), for example, she described the effect of weather on crops in precise scientific detail: when “scorching dusty winds . . . blow up over the bluffs from Kansas,” they dry up the sap in the corn leaves and “the yellow scorch creeps down over the tender inside leaves about the ear” (495). And in “The Treasure of Far Island” (1902) she describes the ongoing life of a sandbar, with all the changes that come with alterations in the weather: “In the middle of the island, which is always above water except in flood time, grow thousands of yellow-green creek willows and cottonwood seedlings, brilliantly green, even when the hottest winds blow, by reason of the surrounding moisture” (265). Such moments are spots of place akin to Wordsworth’s spots of time.

By their very authenticity, however, such scenes often seem irrelevant to their stories’ plots about famous playwrights and failed immigrants. Critical convention has it that Cather was searching for her subject during these years: East or West, London or Red Cloud, artists or farmers? Seeking she was, but for something far deeper than mere subject matter; she needed to find what feeling she wanted to express in her art, and then to find the form for that feeling.¹ Cather’s search culminated in Alexander’s Bridge (1912) and O Pioneers! (1913), the books she joined in the essay she titled “My First Novels [There Were Two].” Together they explore attitudes toward nature in the alternative forms of
consciousness that lie behind the great dramatic forms of tragedy and comedy.

Cather wrote *Alexander’s Bridge* as a case study in feeling and form. She constructed her plot along a transparently familiar tragic pattern: it focuses exclusively upon an exceptional individual (the bridge-building engineer Bartley Alexander) who suffers greatly from a flaw in his nature, and whose suffering ends in catastrophe (his bridge collapses and he, going down with it, drowns). Yet Cather departed from convention in assigning her hero his flaw, which consists not of hubris but of youthful energy. The pride of achievement through individual endeavor versus the elemental, pagan energy of life—these are the terms of Bartley Alexander’s divided self, and herein lies the brilliance of *Alexander’s Bridge*. Cather inserted a comic feeling within a tragic form, then traced the consequences of the division. It was as if she imported scenes from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* into *The Master Builder*, then documented the helplessness of Ibsen’s hero against the pagan energy of Shakespeare’s comedy.

With two radically different principles at work, *Alexander’s Bridge* has a decidedly schizophrenic feel. Its form (the tragic plot) is like the fixed trajectory of the tracks along which the Canadian Express takes Cather’s engineer hero to Quebec, where his bridge will collapse and he will die. Struggling to break out of this trajectory is the youthful energy that quickens in him when he attends a comedy featuring a woman he had loved in his youth, and for whom the playwright wrote the part of a donkey girl. As Bartley Alexander realizes, this is no love story, however. The “seductive excitement in renewing old experiences in imagination” involved “not little Hilda Burgoyne, by any means, but . . . his own young self” (40–41). Despite Alexander’s best efforts to subdue it, the life spirit of youthful energy proves irresistible, gaining force until even as the plot is taking him to inspect his “incurably disabled” bridge, “the unquiet quicksilver in his breast told him that at midsummer he would be in London” (124, 118).

The theme of the divided self provided a way for Cather to explore the radical (and, therefore, structural) difference of these feelings. Alexander’s choruslike philosopher friend Lucius Wil-
son establishes the premise of division when he acknowledges Alexander’s great ability, then comments, “I always used to feel that there was a weak spot where some day strain would tell. . . . The more dazzling the front you presented, the higher your facade rose, the more I expected to see a big crack zigzagging from top to bottom . . . then a crash and clouds of dust” (12). This is the division Cather explores when, after having given her hero the flaw of youthful energy, she traces his suffering as he comes to realize that focused ambition and youthful energy are feelings so fundamentally different they demand different lives. “I am not a man who can live two lives,” he cries; “Each life spoils the other” (82).

Alexander describes well—albeit melodramatically—what was at stake for the tragic hero in the schism Cather was exploring. On the one hand the accomplishments that “gratified his pride” came because he directed his energies into building the great bridges that tamed rivers and won the beautiful Winifred for his wife. Such successes come only with the “power of concentrated thought” (39). On the other hand, the feeling quickening within Bartley has nothing whatsoever to do with the great man he had become and everything to do with “that original impulse, that internal heat” that all life has in common. As the “force . . . that is the thing we all live upon” (17) and “the one thing that had an absolute value for each individual” (39), it makes the pride of individual achievement absolutely irrelevant, for rather than distinguishing a hero from ordinary human beings, it distinguishes organic life from inorganic matter. And this feeling—this impulse, heat, force—gives rise to a loss of self antithetical to the ego-consciousness of a heroic individual. It is the feeling of being in a stream of life rather than of building a bridge.

In art, the dramatic forms of tragedy and comedy express these radically different conceptions of life. The end-directed tragic plot traces the life of an individual man or woman, which follows the rhythm of birth, growth, and death; the episodic, contingent form of comedy celebrates the multifaceted forms of life itself in a pattern of eternal renewal. Whereas the tragic spirit lies behind Alexander’s struggle against the consequences of his actions and the inevitability of his plot, the comic spirit lies behind his
enjoyment of the pauses that suspend that plot when he forgets where he is going and responds to the gray weather on a ship crossing, the smell of acacias on an evening walk, and the atmosphere of London during a carriage ride. When Bartley agonizes over his personal fate, he expresses the egocentrism of the tragic spirit’s consciousness of an end: “‘That this,’ he groaned, ‘that this should have happened to me!’” (69). When Hilda wonders how people can ever die, she expresses the comic spirit’s view that “Life seems the strongest and most indestructible thing in the world” (95).

Bartley Alexander’s tragedy is that the comic spirit is stronger than he, and that it will undo him. By tracing his suffering, Cather describes and eventually pays homage to its radically subversive nature. What lay ahead for Cather was finding a way to express this spirit that “wanted so much to live” (102). Before moving on, however, she had to finish off her tragic hero, and finish him off she did. Tragedy’s “crisis is always the turn toward an absolute close,” Langer observes, in that “[t]his form reflects the basic structure of personal life” (Langer 352). Bartley’s bridge collapses and he goes down with it, the workmen pulling him under in a last desperate attempt to hang onto the great man. In a coda Cather provides tragedy’s obligatory benediction by assuming a choruslike voice and reflecting, “For Alexander death was an easy creditor. Fortune, which had smiled upon him consistently all his life, did not desert him in the end. His harshest critics did not doubt that, had he lived, he would have retrieved himself” (131).

Bartley’s harshest critics may have forgiven him, but Cather herself disowned Alexander’s Bridge as uncongenial, and even her most sympathetic readers agreed. “I could not find in the story the author of strength and latent power I valued in life,” her friend Elizabeth Sergeant wrote; “When Bartley’s bridge went down, and he with it . . . the death was minor, the great chorus of tragedy failed to sound” (Sergeant 75–76). Cather must have realized, as Bartley Alexander did, “There was nothing to do but pull the whole structure down and begin over again” (122). But if not tragedy, what? The answer lay in the feeling of youth quickening within her character, so closely connected with the nature around Bartley and the country where he grew up. Released from
the incompatible form of *Alexander’s Bridge*, it found expression in apparently disparate writing that would come together as *O Pioneers!* “Soon after *Alexander’s Bridge* was published I went for six months to Arizona and New Mexico,” Cather later reflected of that period. It was as if she was fulfilling Bartley Alexander’s yearning for the Western places of his youth, and in the Southwest she found the balance she needed. “The longer I stayed in a country I really did care about, and among people who were a part of the country, the more unnecessary and superficial a book like *Alexander’s Bridge* seemed to me,” she reflected; “I did no writing down there, but I recovered from the conventional editorial point of view” (“My First Novels” 92). After she left the Southwest Cather returned to Nebraska, spending “five weeks in June and July in Red Cloud, where she visited with old neighbors and watched the wheat harvest for the first time in several years” (Stouck 285). While there she wrote a poem about youth that she titled “Prairie Spring”—the life instinct exemplified briefly in Bartley Alexander had found another form. “This is how the wheat country seemed to me . . . when I first came back from the Southwest,” she noted on the copy of “Prairie Spring” that she included with a letter to Elizabeth Sergeant. Then (the feeling quickening within herself taking yet another form) in that same letter she wrote that “on the edge of a wheat field she had the idea for another story—she was going to call it ‘The White Mulberry Tree’” (Stouck 286). And then—seeing “The White Mulberry Tree” and “Alexandra” together—she realized that she had a two-part pastoral on her hands (Sergeant 86). This time the form for her story was coming from the materials themselves; this time her subject was nature, which she now comprehended as life itself. “The country insisted on being the Hero and she did not interfere, for the story came out of the long grasses,” Cather wrote to Elizabeth Sergeant (qtd. by Sergeant 92), then added that she thought the people—Swedes and Bohemians—were rather interesting, too (to ES, 21 October 1912). She opened *O Pioneers!* with “Prairie Spring,” the poem at its genesis that celebrates the vital energy distinguishing organic life from inorganic matter. Its first half describes a lifeless landscape of flat land, miles of soil, empty
roads, and “eternal, unresponsive sky.” Then—by an explosion of vitality—the second half celebrates the life instinct:

Against all this, Youth,
Flaming like the wild roses,
Singing like the larks over the plowed fields,
Flashing like a star out of the twilight . . .

Whereas in tragedy an individual is the measure of all things, comedy celebrates instinctual energy and elementary purpose common to all organic life “to maintain the pattern of vitality” (Langer 328).

“Prairie Spring” is Cather’s song of youth, and it announces a narrative that, in the manner of Whitman, celebrates the ongoing pattern of life as a stream in which all living forms participate. *O Pioneers!* is about communal rather than individual history: its episodic structure reflects interconnectedness, and its theme of reiteration expresses continuity. Human stories—like the lark’s song—are those of youth repeated over and over for thousands of years, and allusive echoes of pastoral establish that reiteration. As numerous critics have pointed out, Virgil’s *Ecologues* lies behind Alexandra’s creation of a garden farm, and the biblical Garden of Eden lies behind Marie and Emil’s love and death in an orchard. Yet to focus upon literary allusions is to miss the larger pattern of *O Pioneers!*, which incorporates human stories into the rhythm of universal life connecting men and women to other life forms. Though Alexandra and Carl will marry, the greening of a new world in *O Pioneers!* does not concern their generativity (they marry as friends in middle age, presumably to remain childless). Instead, the new world of Cather’s comedy has to do with the interconnectedness of all of life by which atoms pass from one life form to another in ongoing, everlasting renewal. “Fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra’s into its bosom, to give them out again, in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth” (274). The final words of the narrative return to the opening poem’s celebration of youth in the cyclic manner of comedy.

In *Alexander’s Bridge* Cather had tried her hand at tragedy;
in *O Pioneers!* she “hit the home pasture” with comedy. *O Pioneers!* is Cather’s breakthrough expression of a feeling that was so pure she was already confronting issues of the pastoral as its vehicle. The pastoral’s fault line lay in its separation of art from life, most obviously seen in its artificial contrast of rural simplicity versus urban complexity. Cather suggested cracks in that fault line by noting the incongruities of Alexandra’s house (where she is more comfortable in the kitchen than in the dining room) and by placing a threshing machine on the cultivated Nebraska landscape and sacrificing Amadee to it (an action anticipating Leo Marx’s machine in the garden). She identified the fault line itself, however, when she acknowledged the cloying unreality of the pastoral. Upon seeing the splendor of Alexandra’s farm, Carl remarks, “I . . . think I liked the old country better. This is all very splendid in its way, but there was something about this country when it was a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years. Now, when I come back to all this milk and honey, I feel like the old German song, ‘Wo bist du, wo bist du, mein geliebtest Land.’ Do you ever feel like that, I wonder?” Carl asks (110).

“Where are you, where are you, my beloved country?” Carl’s question haunts *O Pioneers!* as a lament for reality beneath pastoral’s milk and honey. Though Cather had celebrated the feeling fundamental to comedy (the pure sense of life) with the literary form classically adapted to that feeling (pastoral), the form had taken her away from life’s specificity and complexity, and she must have been still “starving for reality” (Preface viii). Here I draw upon research for the Cather Scholarly Edition, where we’ve realized that though Cather celebrated Nebraska in *O Pioneers!*, she didn’t do so by the level of engagement with place that would distinguish her subsequent writing. That is, though the actual Divide between the Republican and Little Blue rivers figures (generally) behind the fictional Divide of *O Pioneers!*, and though most readers (incorrectly) equate Hanover with Red Cloud, I suspect we wouldn’t make those connections were we not trained by Cather’s later writing to look for specificity of place. Similarly, her characters in *O Pioneers!* seem to spring directly from myth unleavened by life. Whereas Alexandra is a reincarnation of the corn goddess and Emil and Marie a retelling of Pyramis and Thisbe,
there is no comparable lived experience behind these characters, nobody like Annie Sadilek Pavelka behind Ántonia. If, as Joseph Meeker writes, “biology is the study of life itself, and esthetics is the study of the illusions of life created symbolically by man” (127), *O Pioneers!* calls for questions of aesthetics. That was to change, however.

Deep mapping began with *The Song of the Lark* (1915), Cather’s *Kunstleroman*, in which she not only grounded but rooted herself in the world. She opened her story in Moonstone, Colorado, a small town so closely based on Red Cloud, Nebraska, that a map drawn from the fiction might guide a visitor through the actual town even today. Importantly for this essay, in writing of nature Cather resembles a biologist who is studying life itself, adopting the manner—as Douglas J. Colglazier has argued—of a field guide. A detailed description of Thea’s walk out of town past patches of sunflowers, over a washout and a deep sand gully, and past a grove of cottonwood trees begins with a micro environment of place when Cather describes Moonstone,

set out in the sand and lightly shaded by gray-green tamarisks and cottonwoods. A few people were trying to make soft maples grow in their turfed lawns, but the fashion of planting incongruous trees from the North Atlantic States had not become general then, and the frail, brightly painted desert town was shaded by the light-reflecting, wind-loving trees of the desert, whose roots are always seeking water and whose leaves are always talking about it, making the sound of rain. The long, porous roots of the cottonwood are irrepressible. They break into the well as rats do into granaries, and thieve the water. (37)

For her story about youth’s awakening to something beautiful, Cather traces Thea’s relationship with nature as directly as she traces species of trees along the boardwalk out of town. Thea passes her childhood in a botanist’s version of Noah’s Ark, the small town of Moonstone, “set out in the sand and lightly shaded by grey-green tamarisks and cottonwoods.” She suffers when in Chicago she is cut off from the country, and she is restored to creative vitality by entering into the earth in Panther Canyon. There
she awakens to a feeling about nature as an everlasting stream, a feeling that she carries within herself until, when on stage at the Met singing Sieglinde, “that deep-rooted vitality flowered in her voice, her face, in her very finger-tips” (410).

The conception of life as a stream is critical to Thea’s development, and Cather structured her novel to give Thea her idea in substance. As she was to reflect in Death Comes for the Archbishop, “There was an element of exaggeration in anything so simple!” (103). She moved Thea deep within the earth to a canyon with a stream at its heart, where she would experience the presymbolic feelings that give rise to all life forms. There “certain feelings were transmitted to her” (272) of yearning and desire, and they are as radical as it is possible to be. That is, they have to do with the impulse that distinguishes organic life from inorganic matter. “Down here at the beginning, that painful thing was already stirring,” which is “desire of the dust,” Cather writes, then explains that stirring as “the shining, elusive element which is life itself” (275–76, emphasis added). As Thea comprehends, this element—this life spirit—is what all life forms have in common. It animated the ancient women who had once climbed the water-trail as well as the nest-building swallows flying around her and the dwarf cedars giving off an aromatic smell in the sun. This is the life instinct that quickened in Bartley Alexander, then broke into the song of youth in “Prairie Spring” that heralded O Pioneers! In human beings this same life spirit gives rise to art, as Thea realizes in an epiphany while bathing in the stream at the canyon’s heart: life is an everlastingly full and continuing stream, art is form given briefly to life, and the artist is a vessel. It is an audaciously direct exposition of a feeling that had long been teasing Cather’s mind. That feeling—that conception of life and, therefore, of art—is comedic.

However, the larger form of The Song of the Lark follows the career of a young artist fulfilling her personal destiny, and, as such, it is at odds with any feeling of nature as an ongoing stream of life. The narrative builds toward the diva Kronborg’s performance of Sieglinde, the crowning achievement of Thea’s trajectory toward success (like a rifle shot, her lover Fred Ottenburg told her), rather akin to hitting a home run. On the one hand,
the pure sense of life itself reappears in the description of Thea feeling “like a tree bursting into bloom” (478); on the other, the linearity of its plot driven by the ambition of its hero contradicts that feeling.

Though Cather came to believe she had taken the wrong turn in *The Song of the Lark*, her full-blooded plot perfectly accommodated her longstanding hunger for reality. Sated, she returned to the pastoral in *My Ántonia* (1918), this time to make it her own. When Jim Burden (the sensitive aristocrat) escapes from the city (New York) to the country (Nebraska) to restore himself, the pastoral pattern is so transparent that Cather could expect her readers to recognize it as such and thus to recognize her innovations upon it. *My Ántonia* is an antipastoral pastoral in that Jim’s fantasy of escaping to unblemished nature is contradicted by the complexities of Antonia’s life and the place she inhabits. *My Ántonia* is also the pastoral reinvented in that Cather celebrates the comic impulse of rebirth in Ántonia as an Earth Mother while—at the same time—she pays tribute to the complex authenticity of actual people and places with an ongoing life in the real world. In other words, Cather integrated the literary and the biological, the constructed work of art and life itself when in creating her Earth Mother she was faithful to a particular geography and the circumstances of its time. There was an actual girl, Annie Sadilek, who actually lived in a dugout when she was a child, and who eventually married and as Annie Sadilek Pavelka actually had a fruit cave that she actually showed to Willa Cather, and that visitors to Webster County can actually enter today.

As I have argued elsewhere, *My Ántonia* is America’s most fully realized birth myth. In it Cather achieved what she had been struggling toward in *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*—a marriage of form and feeling, art and life. It is not surprising, perhaps, that *My Ántonia* would be the last time Cather treated regeneration as a given. Having affirmed a living world, Cather began to fear for its survival. When a character says, “It’s always been my notion that the land was made for man, just as it’s old Dawson’s that man was created to work the land” (*One of Ours* 67), he acts as spokesman for the tragic plots of man against na-
ture that appear in *One of Ours* (1922) and *A Lost Lady* (1923). Both involve “the question of property” (*One of Ours* 80) that arises when the American West, having been charted and settled, falls to the mercy of men like the land-hog Nat Wheeler and the unscrupulous lawyer Ivy Peters. These are the characters who commit acts of indiscriminate violence against nature so powerful they explode throughout the texts, affecting the meaning of everything else. In Nebraska, mutilation takes the form of a cherry tree lying beside its bleeding stump, a blinded woodpecker wildly seeking to regain her perch, and a silvery marsh that, drained, vanishes from the story. And in France, violence against nature assumes the massive scale of war that leaves “long lines of gaunt, dead trees, charred and torn; big holes gashed out in fields and hillsides . . . winding depressions in the earth, bodies of wrecked motor-trucks and automobiles lying along the road, and everywhere endless straggling lines of rusty barbed-wire, that seemed to have been put there by chance,—with no purpose at all” (*One of Ours* 358).

The pure sense of life fundamental to comedy “is the realization in direct feeling of what sets organic nature apart from inorganic: self-preservation, self-restoration,” Langer reflects (327–28). Seen in both communal and individual biography, the struggle to regain equilibrium when threatened by disruption is a principle common to all life forms, and one articulated by Cather. “The world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts” (Preface, *Not Under Forty*), she famously reflected of the year that Mussolini formed a Fascist government, the New Ku Klux Klan gained political power in the United States, and T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” was published, along with *One of Ours*. When the next year she received a Pulitzer Prize for *One of Ours*, disruption became personal. “The struggle to preserve the integrity of her life as an artist, its necessary detachment and freedom, cost her something,” Lewis recalled; “But . . . it was self-preservation” (Lewis 136–37). She began writing *The Professor’s House*, the “most personal” of all Cather’s novels, according to Lewis. Lewis was not referring to autobiographical details, of course, but rather to the novel’s concern with self-preservation and self-restoration. Maintaining “the pattern of vitality . . . is the most elementary in-
stinctual purpose” of life, and when it is disturbed, an organism seeks to regain equilibrium in order to maintain that biological pattern, Langer writes (328; see Meeker 39). She is describing the fundamental rhythm of comedy, but she could have been describing The Professor’s House.

For her exploration of feelings about living and dying, Cather tried “two experiments in form” (“On The Professor’s House” 30). One involved inserting a story into a novel, the second came from Dutch paintings of an interior with a square window opening onto the sea, and—the important point—both concerned how form influences feeling. To translate these forms into her narrative, Cather wrote her novel as three books, each of which presents a distinctive structure and language; together, they trace the relation between the forms humans construct (building houses and writing books) and the feelings they experience. Book 1, “The Family,” in its single-minded preoccupation with house building and decorating, is a postmodern experience of being out of place (outland), confined within overcrowded interiors, until—feeling stifled—St. Peter responds by recalling his former student, Tom Outland. Book 2, “Tom Outland’s Story,” is the narrative equivalent of an open window with its uncluttered, spare account of “carving out place” (as Glen Love has written) on the Blue Mesa. And finally, at the novel’s core, book 3, “The Professor,” is St. Peter’s meditation upon the earth itself as the resting place—the home—of the life force expressing itself in the everlasting pattern of renewal. “He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water. Wherever sun sunned and rain rained and snow snowed, wherever life sprouted and decayed, places were alike to him. He was not nearly so cultivated as Tom’s old cliff-dwellers must have been—and yet he was terribly wise. He seemed to be at the root of the matter; Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths. He seemed to know, among other things, that he was solitary and must always be so; he had never been married, never been a father. He was earth, and would return to earth” (241).

The comic rhythm is the loss and recovery of equilibrium, which is the life rhythm shared by all living things. When an organism has been disturbed, it seeks to regain the vitality of
dynamic form by overcoming or removing obstacles, by slight variations, or by opportunistic adaptations (see Langer 327–28). That is precisely the rhythm of The Professor’s House, which is narrative seeking equilibrium.3 The narrative’s opening line (“the moving was over and done”) establishes disruption as the premise to which the following three books respond with its organism-cum-character, Godfrey St. Peter, and as important, with the opportunistic adaptations of its radical narrative shifts. Through these adaptations the narrative retrieves the vitality of first principles by moving Godfrey St. Peter from a family narrative of individual personalities (book 1), to recover an ideal narrative of adaptation to place (book 2), and—finally—to retrieve the instinct to survive that is fundamental to all life forms (book 3).

Whereas The Professor’s House was an experiment in form, Cather’s next novel was an experiment in feeling. “How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it, . . . all the tiresome old patterns, and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre . . . leave the scene bare for the play of emotions, great and small” (42–43), she had written in “The Novel Démeublé,” and My Mortal Enemy tested her idea in substance. Its opening pages recall the night when its heroine, Myra Driscoll, walked out the front door of her uncle’s house with only the clothes she was wearing, though her friends threw some articles out a back window in an ironic reenactment of throwing furniture out the window. The story that follows presents “the play of emotions, great and small” as Myra Henshawe steps out of her role as the heroine of a love story and realizes that she is a victim of feeling.

The important point for any ecocritical reading is how radically Cather strips the world away in this most severe rendering of the novel démeublé. Separation from place appears in multiple forms of dispossession: in disinheriting her, Myra’s uncle severs her from the place of her childhood, a stone mansion in a ten-acre park; in falling upon increasingly hard times, her marriage takes her to the placelessness of a New York apartment, then to rented rooms in an unnamed sprawling western city; and in telling her story, her author casts her upon a bare stage.

The bare stage provides a structural principle in that My Mor-
tal Enemy resembles drama being performed rather than fiction being read. Its putative narrator, young Nellie Birdseye, isn’t so much a teller of a story as the spectator of scenes that unfurnish the stage and narrow the focus, until, as if lit by a single spotlight on a bare stage, there is only the empty bed from which Myra has fled. It is here—with Myra vanished from her own play—that we confront how severely Cather has eliminated the world from her story. Look for nature and one finds only remnants and artifacts—topaz mounted in sleeve buttons, sprays of white hyacinth ornamenting a coat, opals flashing in a bracelet, and plum curtains lined with the cream-color lying beneath the blue skin of ripe figs. Windows, when they appear, are frames for curtains or backdrops for characters posed before them rather than openings onto the world.

Its central character gone, this performance is over, it would seem. But of course that is not how My Mortal Enemy ends. Nellie remains. I imagine her as disembodied voice speaking to the darkened theatre, reflecting that “[a] yearning strong enough to lift that ailing body and drag it out into the world again should have its way” (99). As Tom Outland’s story lets in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa, so Nellie’s description of Myra meeting death on a bare headland lets in the fresh air that blows off the ocean. “That is always such a forgiving time,” Myra says about seeing dawn from that place: “When that first cold, bright streak comes over the water, it’s as if all our sins were pardoned; as if the sky leaned over the earth and kissed it and gave it absolution” (73). Lest we fail to recognize the basic biological (rather than specifically religious) pattern in Myra’s death, Cather distinguishes between forms of absolution in a coda. Though Myra had returned to the Church, she didn’t change her will requesting “that her body should be cremated and her ashes buried ‘in some lonely and unfrequented place in the mountains, or in the sea’” (102), and Cather ends the book with Nellie’s voice recalling sometimes hearing Myra’s “strange complaint breathed by a dying woman into the stillness of night, like a confession of the soul: ‘Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy!’ ” (102–03). It is the soul without disguise giving voice to insight into the essence of things. Freed from misdirected love, the life
force that had gathered strength in Bartley Alexander and burst into voice in “Prairie Spring” remains strong, the life force by which the death of an individual is “a phase of the life pattern itself” (Langer 329).

When Nellie reflects, “A yearning strong enough to lift that ailing body and drag it out into the world again should have its way” (99), we may recall other easyful deaths in Cather’s fiction where characters relinquish individual identity and rejoin the ongoing process of nature. The country receives Alexandra Bergson’s heart to give it forth again in new life, the imprisoned spirit of Bishop Latour is released into the desert air, and Anton Rosicky returns in death to the open country he had always longed for. As Jim Burden realized in his grandmother’s garden, “that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great” (*My Ántonia* 18). It is the quotation on the headstone marking Cather’s grave.

Whereas Cather recorded the tension between feeling and form in *The Professor’s House* and *My Mortal Enemy*, she celebrated their union in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Cather returned to the Southwest, this time not as preparation for writing about Nebraska but instead to write about the feeling of that desert country. Indeed, her account of writing the *Archbishop* is all about feeling. She found in the Southwest mission churches “a direct expression of some very real and lively human feeling” (“On Death” 5) and in Father Machebeuf’s letters “the mood, the spirit in which they [the two priests Fathers Machebeuf and Lamy] accepted the accidents and hardships of a desert country, the joyful energy that kept them going” (10). She turned to legend as the form for this feeling because “In this kind of writing the mood is the thing—all the little figures and stories are mere improvisations that come out of it” (10). She did not start writing “until the feeling of it had so teased me that I could not get on with other things” (10). And so on.

The picaresque provided a form perfectly adapted to the feeling of joyful energy. With its loosely connected episodes, realistic details, and sequential (rather than consequential) action, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is Cather’s most fully realized comedy in the sense that Joseph Meeker uses for *The Comedy of Survival*: “[I]t is an image of human adaptation to the world and accep-
tance of its given conditions without escape, rebellion, or egotistic insistence upon human centrality” (182). Cather’s narrative has the structural diversity of the picaresque in representing life as it occurs, the ease of language that is the antithesis of tragedy’s elevated style, and—most fundamentally—a cosmic vision by which all things are related.

Though a narrative without accent would scarcely have a climax, Cather included a meditative core—a heart, as it were—for *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. By contrasting two manners of relating to nature, it presents her most explicit statement of environmental ethics.

When they left the rock or tree or sand dune that had sheltered them for the night, the Navajo was careful to obliterate every trace of their temporary occupation. . . . [J]ust as it was the white man’s way to assert himself in any landscape, to change it, make it over a little (at least some mark or memorial of his sojourn), it was the Indian’s way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through water, or birds through the air.

It was the Indian manner to vanish into the landscape, not to stand out against it. . . . They seemed to have none of the European’s desire to “master” nature, to arrange and re-create. They spent their ingenuity in the other direction; in accommodating themselves to the scene in which they found themselves. This was . . . from an inherited caution and respect. It was as if the great country were asleep, and they wished to carry on their lives without awakening it; or as if the spirits of earth and air and water were things not to antagonize and arouse. . . . They ravaged neither the rivers nor the forest, and if they irrigated, they took as little water as would serve their needs. The land and all that it bore they treated with consideration; not attempting to improve it, they never desecrated it. (246–47)

The word *desecrate*, toward which the passage builds, makes explicit the sacred relation of human inhabitant to nature fundamental to the mood throughout the narrative. Cather contrasts
two manners of relating to the world: mastering nature versus vanishing into it and leaving no trace. Nowhere is this distinction more evident than in the Archbishop’s decision to spend his closing years in New Mexico because of a quality of air. The aging Father Latour “always awoke a young man” in New Mexico, where “his first consciousness was a sense of the light dry wind blowing in through the windows” (287), “on the bright edges of the world” (288).

Critics customarily have treated Death Comes for the Archbishop as the other side of a divide, with the increasingly dark novels beginning with One of Ours on one side and the sunny Archbishop on the other. But in terms of issues Cather was addressing about the relation of feeling to form, The Professor’s House, My Mortal Enemy, and the Archbishop belong together. Appearing in three consecutive years (1925, 1926, 1927), they are the astonishing output from a single sustained burst of creative energy, the most intense and productive period of Cather’s life. Together they explore the fundamental relation of human to the world. The three novels are three iterations of an overall movement from ego to eco—the terms of today are precisely appropriate. By “letting go of the Ego,” Godfrey St Peter regains “the ground beneath his feet”; after serving penance for the egoistic idolatries of her youth, Myra Henshawe dies overlooking the ocean; and Bishop Latour’s decision to die in the Southwest reflects his understanding that life was “an experience of the Ego, in no sense the Ego itself” (304). It was a conviction apart from his religious life, Cather explains, “an enlightenment that came to him as a man, a human creature” (304, emphasis added).

This movement toward an eikos (the Greek word for “habitation”) of ecology involved questions about forms of consciousness. The House of Fiction has many rooms, Henry James had written. I imagine that Cather might have muttered “of course,” then retorted that the important point concerned the relation of the House of Fiction to Life. As if replying to James, Cather maps the movement from ego to eikos by the various habitations that appear on the pages of The Professor’s House, My Mortal Enemy, and the Archbishop: an empty three-story frame house with narrow stairs leading to an attic study, a new house featuring a
bathroom, a Norwegian manor house being built on the shores of Lake Michigan, a New York apartment and boardinghouse rooms somewhere in a sprawling West Coast city, a sleeping cliff city nestled in a Southwestern canyon, one solitary hogan through which desert winds blow and another where “one seemed to be sitting in the heart of a world made of dusty earth and moving air” (Archbishop 242)—and the earth itself, which is our final home.

The movement from ego to eikos appears in each of the three novels individually and also—more expansively—in the novels read together. That is, by 1927 the stifling interiors opening The Professor’s House have given way to the cosmic view of Death Comes for the Archbishop, where “Elsewhere the sky is the roof of the world; but here the earth was the floor of the sky. The landscape one longed for when one was far away, the thing all about one, the world one actually lived in, was the sky, the sky!” (245).

Cather extended her vacation from life by writing the novel most distant to her in time and place. Shadows on the Rock (1931) concerned “the curious endurance of a kind of culture,” she wrote, describing its principle of equilibrium in a system. Cather further described her book as about “a feeling about life,” and she drew upon biology to explain its aesthetics. She compared the Quebec community to a colony of ants that—when their colony is kicked in—rebuilds, and she likened the ships returning each year to sea birds returning every year to “certain naked islands . . . mere ledges of rock standing up a little out of the sea, where the sea birds came every year to lay their eggs and rear their young in the caves and hollows” (225).

Writing Shadows established the equilibrium Cather needed to return to the places of her youth and the early memories they held. Obscure Destinies (1932), Lucy Gayheart (1935), and Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940) continued the cyclic pattern that Cather announced in O Pioneers! and maintained throughout her literary life. The three stories of Obscure Destinies provide widening perspectives of the little rural neighborhood in Nebraska she had written of so often, this time reiterating themes in the language of the country itself. “Neighbour Rosicky” is the pastoral revisited, but with neither the fantasy of O Pioneers! nor the escapism of
My Ántonia. Rather than an Amazonian pioneer cultivating a mighty farm or an Earth Mother generating a New World, the Rosickys are ordinary farmers facing a drought. “The pastoral landscape does not permit thistles,” Meeker comments (90); yet Russian thistles are invading the Rosickys’ fields. Continuities take similarly ordinary forms of life as it is lived: Rosicky suffers a heart attack, learns that his son and daughter-in-law will remain on the land, and that she is with child. A coda presents his death within the continuity of the family and the everlasting pattern of nature when Doctor Burleigh pauses beside the graveyard where Neighbor Rosicky is buried, and reflects “[e]verything here seemed strangely moving and significant, though signifying what, he did not know” (60). The implicit question—what does this place signify?—prepares for the description of the graveyard where the life spirit of nature expresses itself in the simple acts of Rosicky’s son cutting hay, moonlight silvering the grass, neighbors passing, horses working in summer, and cattle eating fodder as winter approaches.

Nothing could be more undeathlike than this place; nothing could be more right for a man who had helped to do with work of great cities and had always longed for the open country and had got to it at last. Rosicky’s life seemed to him complete and beautiful. (61)

Whereas “Neighbour Rosicky” affirms the pattern of renewal of life in nature, “Old Mrs. Harris” concerns the specifically human feeling of this pattern. Cather drew again upon memories of her childhood in Red Cloud to write a technical tour de force in that multiple points of view coexist as individuals and—simultaneously—as a family and a community. Vickie Templeton prepares to leave her family to attend the university, Victoria Templeton learns she is again pregnant, Grandmother Harris dies, and Victoria and Vickie will go on to “come closer and closer to Grandma Harris. They will think a great deal about her, and remember things they never noticed; and their lot will be more or less like hers” (156–57). Each character is a stage of life endlessly repeating itself; simultaneously, each is intensely individual and particular. Whereas Cather had celebrated the life force of
youth in “Prairie Spring,” the poem with which she began *O Pioneers!* so many years ago, she now acknowledges the feeling of a whole life fully lived: Victoria and Vickie “will look into the eager, unseeing eyes of young people and feel themselves alone. They will say to themselves: ‘I was heartless, because I was young and strong and wanted things so much. But now I know’ ” (157).

For “Two Friends,” Cather drew again upon the Red Cloud of her childhood, this time with the cosmic consciousness of the *Archbishop*. This simple story of a friendship that was senselessly broken contains at its heart a description of an event followed by a meditation on place. The description is of an occultation of Venus, or two planets in their rotation; the meditation is upon a dusty road in a Nebraska village, a precise spot of this planet drinking up the light from another planet:

The road, just in front of the sidewalk where I sat and played jacks, would be ankle-deep in dust, and seemed to drink up the moonlight like folds of velvet. It drank up sound, too; muffled the wagon-wheels and hoof-beats; lay soft and meek like the last residuum of material things,—the soft bottom resting place. Nothing in the world, not snow mountains or blue seas, is so beautiful in moonlight as the soft, dry summer roads in a farming country, roads where the white dust falls back from the slow wagon-wheel. (176)

As did *The Professor’s House*, so “Two Friends” addresses the loss of equilibrium. “Things were out of true, the equilibrium was gone,” Cather writes about the rupture in the friendship of men who, “when they used to sit in their old places on the sidewalk, . . . seemed like two bodies held steady by some law of balance, an unconscious relation like that between the earth and the moon” (188).

A large perspective of the world’s smallness had been fundamental to Cather’s writing from the time of *O Pioneers!*, with its opening description of the little town of Hanover perched on a windy tableland, trying not to be blown away. Nowhere, however, does she present relationship more forcefully than in *Obscure Destinies*, where the stories concern the relation of a family to the seasons of nature, of individuals to generations of a
family, and of this world to rotations of the planets. The pattern of connection is aesthetic as well as biological: the stories Cather included in Obscure Destinies reiterate the patterns of her oeuvre with exceptional directness and clarity. In “Neighbour Rosicky” Cather recalls My Ántonia by returning to the family of Annie Sadelik Pavelka for her models, and in “Old Mrs. Harris” she recalls The Song of the Lark by returning to her own family. In a like manner, scenes ask to be read alongside one another. For example, Doctor Burleigh’s reflection on the graveyard where Rosicky was buried echoes Jim Burden’s reflection in his grandmother’s garden: each describes the happiness of becoming part of nature, yet the phrase “complete and great” (My Ántonia 18) has modulated into “complete and beautiful” (“Neighbour Rosicky” 61).

Sapphira and the Slave Girl completes the return. Set inside the rural Back Creek community of Cather’s birthplace in Virginia, it testifies to continuity in the most personal and direct of terms. Whereas in writing O Pioneers! Cather had imagined herself forging a new path in art, she concluded her last novel with an epilogue in which she recalled herself as a child for whom life lay ahead, unexpected and various. The genetic instructions and the historical forces for the works to follow are stored within the moment, as the oak is stored within the acorn. Her family would emigrate to Nebraska, taking her with them; there she would meet a hired girl, see her cousin struggle to find his way, and enjoy picnics in a neighbor’s grove, and from these experiences My Ántonia, One of Ours, and A Lost Lady would spring. It is a profoundly comic perspective according to which the world seems neither pastoral nor tragic, but picaresque.

Cather’s Virginia novel proved to be the final book published in her life, and it is fitting that with it she drew upon the earliest memories of her family. One recalls the recurring image in Cather’s stories of a road becoming a circle: what youth sees as an intensely individual career, age understands is “the road of Destiny” circling back and repeating itself (My Ántonia 360). Represented by that circle are the themes of comedy—the ongoing rhythm of the life spirit in birth, growth, and death, as well as the comic rhythm of disruption and recovery of equilibrium. They provide the themes of Cather’s stories that, when read together,
give form to a whole life completely lived. They account for their mood as well. As Cather reflected in the conclusion of “Old Mrs. Harris,” these are the great concerns that startle us out of our intense self-absorption, for acknowledging that we are subject to natural laws engenders humility before the processes of life on this earth.

NOTES

I am grateful to Josh Dolezal, Kyoko Matsunaga, and Mark Robison for reading and commenting on this essay.

1. During her undergraduate years Cather began using these terms to measure art. She praised Camille, for example, for its ability to combine “those two affinities so seldom mated, measureless feeling and perfect form” (Nebraska State Journal, 27 January 1895; in Cather, The World and the Parish 223).

2. See “Pro/Creativity and a Kinship Aesthetic.”

3. As is evident in other stories, Cather used the concept of equilibrium in the comic sense of a life force seeking to maintain balance, or to restore it when it is lost. In One of Ours, when Claude begins to regain strength after he was injured, Enid’s “actual presence restored his equilibrium—almost” (144–45), she writes. In “Two Friends” Cather describes the “rupture” in the friendship of Dillon and Trueman as “the equilibrium was gone,” whereby “they seemed like two bodies held steady by some law of balance, an unconscious relation like that between the earth and the moon” (“Two Friends” 188).

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The Comic Form of Willa Cather’s Art


In early 1919 Willa Cather wrote to her friend from childhood, Carrie Miner Sherwood, inquiring whether Carrie had received the gift she had sent her for Christmas, a print of Albrecht Dürer’s watercolor of a hare. The painting shows a single animal on an empty white ground. It is rendered with such clarity that one can distinguish individual hairs in the animal’s coat (see fig. 1). Cather’s choice of this particular painting for her gift was, it seems to me, entirely characteristic of her way of seeing the world, which was also her way of rendering the world in her fiction. Like Dürer’s painting, her writing was focused, finely but selectively detailed, and freed of background clutter. As Eudora Welty discerningly pointed out a number of years ago, Cather’s fiction typically occupies either far panoramas or a clear foreground, while tending to be vacant in the middle distance. Again like the hare in Dürer’s watercolor (with opaque white touches), her selected details are characteristically surrounded by blankness, the unsaid or the disregarded. Throwing the bulk of the furniture out the window, as she proclaimed a desire to do in “The Novel Démeublé” (42), she allows the reader’s eye along with her own to focus on the few selected pieces that are kept in the room. It is largely this isolation of individual details against an uncluttered middle ground—perhaps like the microscopic views she would have experienced as a budding scientist in her adolescent years—that accounts for the effect of visual acuity in Cather’s writing.
As Welty’s remark about the locus of Cather’s vision, either in the far perspective or in close focus, implies, she does not so much amass details as focus on a few specific details one at a time. For example:

- In *Ántonia*, out of what must have been a prairieful of grasshoppers, we see one specific grasshopper up close as Ántonia cups it in her hand, then slips it into her hair for safekeeping (40).
- In *A Lost Lady*, we see the “pointed tip” of the last poplar in a row—just that last one, and not the whole poplar but only its tip, with the “hollow, silver winter moon” poised above it (40).
- In *Lucy Gayheart*, the “point of silver light” of the evening’s one first star (10).

There are many other examples that could be cited. Critics have often noted that these specific, isolated presences gain a luminous significance. They also gain visual clarity from being set alone against a blankness. When Cather wished to convey to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant the sense of her new heroine as she

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*Fig. 1. Dürer’s hare. Courtesy Albertina, Wien, Austria*
was beginning *My Ántonia*, she reached for a single glazed jar and placed it by itself on the clear space of Elsie’s desk (149). In this anecdote illustrating the visual nature of Cather’s thought processes, the concrete image of the jar established in the reader’s mind becomes emblematic of the abstract idea of the heroine’s centrality in the novel. It makes the idea real.

Cather’s own association of reality with visual experience is evident in letters that she wrote to Dorothy Canfield in 1902 during her first trip to England. Writing from Ludlow, in Shropshire, she said that she had been tracking A. E. Housman through the scenes of his poetry and had seen with her own eyes the Severn River reflecting nearby steeples, the “lads” playing football, the nearness of the jail to the railroad switchyard in Shrewsbury, precisely as these details are reported in “Is my team ploughing” and “On moonlit heath and lonesome bank.” Having seen these things, she said, she now realized that Housman’s poetry was even truer than she had previously thought. Truth is linked with seeing. What made Housman’s poetry truer for her was visual verification. She had seen the specific details recorded in his poems, verified poem against sight, and on that basis judged the poems true. Visual accuracy makes truth. What this means for the *writing* of poetry is that the poet must be able to evoke clear visual images in language. But before that can happen the poet must possess the power of observation, the ability to see clearly. If Housman had lacked that power, he would not have been able to carry these details into his poetry, and it would presumably have been less true.

Cather seems to have seen the world very much as Housman saw it—very clearly indeed. She seems to have possessed, as he did, close powers of observation that are translated into clear visual images conveying, as such images do in Housman’s poetry, rich resonance. Recognition of the visual quality of her style is, of course, one of the staples of Cather criticism. Whether we think in terms of powerful symbolizing pictures like the plow against the setting sun or in terms of small visual details like the ring of dirt around the sink in the opening chapter of *One of Ours* (3) or the “thread of green liquid” oozing from the crushed head of the snake in *My Ántonia* (45), we recognize that her writing has
the power to make us see. It also has the power to convince us of the keenness with which Cather herself saw.

More direct evidence of the sharpness of Cather’s powers of observation is provided by a small treasure found at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, her personal copy of F. Schuyler Mathews’s *Field Book of American Wild Flowers* (1902). Looking through this book that bears the evidence of Cather’s observation of her natural surroundings is an enlightening experience—and moreover a very moving one; between the pages is a tiny clover, threadlike stem, tiny root ball, and all still intact, that she must have placed there. This is the field guide to wildflowers that she carried on her nature walks for over twenty years, from 1917 to 1938. It is heavily annotated in her distinctive hand with checkmarks or lines in the margin beside entries (for some 156 distinct varieties) and comments in the margin beside others. These annotations provide abundant demonstration that Cather was a remarkably close observer of plant life.

A number of entries in the *Field Book* record the dates and places where she saw particular plants. Mostly these indicate Jaffrey, New Hampshire, the rustic resort town at the foot of Mount Monadnock where she spent her autumns for many years, or Grand Manan, the island off the coast of New Brunswick where she and Edith Lewis had a cabin. Three times she records having seen certain plants—the calamus or sweet fig, the flowering dogwood, and the pinxter flower or wild honeysuckle—in Virginia during her visit in 1938, during the writing of *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Several times, as if Mathews’s descriptions had jogged her memory, she notes that she had seen such-and-such a plant in Nebraska. But the most striking entries are those in which she actually adds details to the book’s already detailed descriptions. These are astonishingly precise. When Mathews describes the “small dense clusters” of flowers on the arrow-leaved tearthumb (108), Cather adds that the clusters are club-shaped. When Mathews describes the “generally smooth stem” of the Canada hawkweed (526), she insists that the branches and stem were joined in sharp angles. When he describes the leaves of the white woodland aster as “smooth,” she notes that on the un-
derside they are bristly along the veins (484). On the back of one of the plates she wrote a long description of the habitat and characteristics of the exignous, with its sawtooth-edged, sessile leaves (486)—sessile meaning attached to the main stem at the base rather than with an intermediate stem.

We see in these annotations Cather’s effort to observe the natural world as closely as she could and to describe it as minutely, in as accurate language, as she could. This practice of close observation that she brought to her experience of her various natural environments as she walked, hiked, and climbed translates itself, through the medium of her lucid prose, into precision of rendered details. Her descriptions evince a remarkable eye-hand coordination: a linkage of visual experience and verbal virtuosity.

A similar clarity and focus, as well as another kind of linkage of the visual and the verbal, characterize the illustrations of the first edition and (until recently) most subsequent editions of My Ántonia. It is these illustrations and, even more, the process of their conception and development for the text that I am primarily interested in here. We know that it was Cather herself who conceived the idea for the eight spare pen-and-ink drawings and selected the artist to do them, after having tried to make suitable drawings herself. My central questions are: Why did she choose W. T. Benda and why did she want illustrations of precisely this kind, which are actually quite different from Benda’s usual work?

In the textual commentary to the Scholarly Edition of My Ántonia Charles Mignon states that Cather wanted Benda “because he knew both Europe and the American West” (512). That is indeed the reason she indicated on 24 November 1917, in a letter to Ferris Greenslet, her editor at Houghton Mifflin. W. T. Benda was in fact an immigrant from Bohemia (the national group primarily emphasized in My Ántonia) who had lived in the West and painted Western subjects. Cather was aware of his work from her days as editor at McClure’s; Benda illustrations appeared in a dozen or more issues of the magazine between 1906 and 1912. The letter to Greenslet of 24 November 1917 goes on to say that another reason she wants Benda, besides his familiarity with both Europe and the American West, is that he
has imagination and has been willing to work with her to get precisely the effects she wanted. My conjecture, which I will go into below, is that there was still another reason, which she doesn’t mention.

What Cather wanted was very different from what Houghton Mifflin initially wanted. The publisher proposed illustrating the book with a frontispiece (wc to Greenslet, 24 November 1917). Cather was determined not to have so conventional a decoration and one that would necessarily have generalized. Not only did she prefer that the drawings be attached narratively to specific moments or ideas in the text, as the Benda drawings are, but she was intent on having a series of drawings that would give the impression of the minimalist line techniques of woodcuts. Her correspondence with editors Greenslet and Scaife is striking in its revelation of just how emphatic her determination was and the extent to which visual design was a part of her creative act of authorship. She conceived the appearance of the book while she was still conceiving, or at any rate executing, the verbal text. Mignon comments that as early as 13 March 1917, “even before she had completed a first draft” of the novel, Cather was “thinking as a designer might about how to present her work” (483). In Jean Schwind’s words, she “acted as artistic director of the project” (53). At various points in the correspondence she specified the kind of paper that should be used for the illustrations, their sizing, their placement in the text, and even their placement on the page (wc to Miss [Helen] Bishop, Secretary to F. Greenslet, “Saturday,” 2 February 1918).

Cather justified her determination not to have a conventional frontispiece in conjunction with explaining why she wanted Benda (wc to R. L. Scaife, 1 December 1917). She had seen his pen-and-ink drawings in Jacob Riis’s 1909 book The Old Town. (We might note that The Old Town is a book that evokes a lost but nostalgically remembered European setting—a congenial theme as Cather thought about My Antonia.) It is significant that in referring to Benda’s work in the Riis book Cather specified the drawings. She did not use the more general term “illustrations” because in fact most of the illustrations (both a frontispiece and full-page glossies scattered through the volume) are not pen-and-
ink drawings at all, but charcoal halftones. These were Benda’s usual kind of work. But Cather indicated explicitly that they were what she did not want. She told Scaife that she considered Benda’s halftones stilted (wc to R. L. Scaife, 7 April 1917). In addition to the full-page illustrations for Riis’s book, however, Benda had done a number of simpler, more open pen-and-ink head-and-tail pieces. Even these are more filled up with details than the drawings he would do for Ántonia, as we can see from his headpiece to chapter 4, “Christmas Sheaf” (78, see fig. 2) and his mid-chapter ornament from chapter 2, “Fanø Women”
(21, see fig. 3). Yet we can see how she might have discerned in such drawings the potential for achieving what she had in mind, through simplifying and “un-cluttering” them even further.

Benda in fact captured in these spare drawings much of the essence of Cather’s spare style. They have the visual equivalence of her selective focus on a few details set against a far prospect with an emptied middle ground—that quality of isolated detail that Welty designated as the elimination of the middle ground. Benda captured these qualities not only because he read the text in typescript, and as a capable professional was able to vary his style accordingly, but because Cather worked closely with him on his conceptualization of the drawings. Indeed, as I have pointed out, she established for him the kind of illustrations she wanted by first trying to draw them herself. Having tried to make her own head-and-tail pieces, she told Greenslet, she wanted an artist who would emulate her efforts (wc to Greenslet, 18 October 1917). She was in control. A little over a month later she reported that Benda was indeed seeking to capture her precise intentions (wc to Greenslet, 24 November 1917).
There are eight drawings in all. Originally there were to have been twelve, but Houghton Mifflin’s skimpy production budget would not pay for more (WC to Greenslet, 24 November 1917). This would seem to account for their concentration in the early parts of the text.

The illustrations are familiar to most readers of *My Ántonia*, but will bear reviewing in order to emphasize certain features. As Cather herself said, they capture the tone of the novel admirably.

Drawing 1 comes in the first chapter, Jim Burden’s narration of his train trip to Nebraska. We see, much as Jim would have seen, an immigrant family waiting among their bundles on what we assume, from the textual context, to be a train platform (see fig. 4). These are, of course, the Shimerdas arriving in Nebraska. The man’s downward gaze and the darkness of the drawing, quite unlike the others in the series, speak of discouragement. The girl whose bright eyes will be celebrated gazes out beyond the reader. Central emphasis is on the woman’s cradling grasp of a treasured possession. Benda’s practiced technique is greatly in evidence here both in mood and in composition.
Drawing 2 shows Mr. Shimerda again, tall and lanky, still with bowed head suggestive of discouragement. Ántonia and Jim have spied her father out hunting, and Ántonia has confided to Jim that he is unhappy in the new country (see fig. 5). Despite conveying discouragement, this picture strikes the outdoor note that will characterize all the rest. For the first time we gain a visual impression of the vastness of the prairie and especially the spaciousness of its sky. Scattered curving lines indicate the prairie grass, and the sinking sun sends its long beams up into the sky, disappearing into blank page.

Drawing 3 is equally narrative in import, echoing the incident of the dried mushrooms given to Grandmother Burden by Mrs. Shimerda. It hints at far-off places, with a woman gathering mushrooms in the old country (see fig. 6). The woman’s figure is generalized, with perhaps the clearest details being her rolled-
up sleeve, conveying the idea of physical work, and a cluster of mushrooms clearly seen in the foreground. There seems to be quiet and isolation all around.

Drawing 4 shows the hired man bringing home the Christmas tree (see fig. 7). With notable minimalism, the drawing indicates
the empty countryside, the narrow trail, and a few weeds. The big, absolutely empty sky is indicated by blank paper.

Drawing 5 shows another big sky, an effect Cather sought to emphasize by having the illustrations lowered on the page so as to create a sense of sunlight and air at the top (w[c to Miss
Bishop, “Saturday,” 2 February 1918, see fig. 8). This time summer thunderheads are indicated. Once again there is emptiness all around, with a strong central focus on Ántonia herself, the plow, the horses, and the heavy horse collar.

Drawing 6 is reminiscent of drawing 2, with its sunrays (see fig. 9). In this case, it is the sinking sun that will magnify the plow on the horizon. We see companionable young people, a head scarf implying immigrant identity, one sunflower plant, and empty prairie all around. This drawing demonstrates particularly well the idea of the vacant middle distance, with nothing intervening between its depictions of horizon and close-up details.

Drawing 7 shows another big summer sky with the merest
The rows of Lena’s knitting are clearly seen, along with her two knitting needles, her bare feet, and the line of a nipple inside her tight bodice—clear focus indeed! Cather gloated over this drawing that Lena was fairly bursting out of her clothes (wc to Greenslet, 7 March 1918).

Drawing 8, the last in the series, starkly shows Ántonia struggling through the snow into the wind (see fig. 11). The dark tones of coat, hat, and boots, and the bent position of her head, are reminiscent of the first picture, of the Shimerdas waiting on the train platform. A single line outlines the top of the cloud, closing in the top of the picture in contrast to those in which either the clear sky or the hinted shape of cumuli opens the top. Again Benda captures the emptiness of the prairie, which he emphasizes by isolating a few strong details: snow in the air, tracks, the whip in the hand. It is another masterful example of minimalist design executed with line techniques reminiscent of woodcuts.
We have accounted for Cather’s selection of W. T. Benda as her illustrator by citing several factors: his familiarity with both the Old World and the West, her prior acquaintance with him (i.e., a reason of convenience), her admiration of some (but not all) of his work in Jacob Riis’s *The Old Town*, and the fact that he was willing to work with her to catch her conception of the drawings. But where did she get that conception? Here my essay becomes frankly conjectural—offering, however, a conjecture supported by both biographical evidence and visual comparison. I believe that Cather was seeking to emulate the illustrations to Mary Austin’s *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), done by E. Boyd Smith.

The Austin-Cather connection has been recognized for some time. It is well documented that they knew each other personally, and connections between their work have been demonstrated by several critics. For the most part, it is *The Song of the Lark* and Austin’s *A Woman of Genius* that have been linked, though in fact the connections extend much further, reaching both forward and considerably backward. To my knowledge, no one has suggested any connection of Cather’s work to *The Land of Little Rain*, or even any indication that she was aware of the book. Yet it is quite clear that Cather was familiar with Austin and her writings long before she wrote *My Ántonia*. David Stouck has identified a likely borrowing by Cather even before 1900, in the 1893 story “A Son of the Celestial.” The two were personally acquainted by at least 1910, and in 1917 specifically, the year when Cather was corresponding with Greenslet and Scaife about the Benda illustrations, her awareness of Austin remained sufficiently keen to prompt a brief comment on Austin’s newly published novel *The Ford* in a letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant.

Considering the mass of evidence that Cather was aware of Austin as early as the 1890s and that she remained both personally and professionally conversant with her up until Austin’s death in 1934, it seems overwhelmingly likely that she knew *The Land of Little Rain*, the book that launched Austin’s career and is usually regarded as her finest work. Probably she would have been aware of its serialization in *Atlantic Monthly*. Cather was keenly aware of periodical literature and more than once during
her years as editor at McClure’s advised correspondents to send their manuscripts to Atlantic Monthly. When she did, her clearly specified reasons show that she had more than a reputational acquaintance with that prestigious magazine. The publisher of Austin’s series of sketches in book form, in 1903, was Houghton Mifflin, which in less than a decade would also be Cather’s publisher and whose acquisitions editor, Ferris Greenslet, would be an acquaintance even sooner. The archive of correspondence between Cather and Greenslet reveals that they at times discussed Austin. There was ample and varied opportunity, then, for her to be acquainted with Austin’s book and perhaps with behind-the-scenes information about its production history.

Perhaps when Cather looked through Riis’s The Old Town—which we know she had seen at least by December 1917 but probably much earlier, perhaps even drawing on it early in the work on My Ántonia for the atmosphere of remembered European origins—Benda’s pen-and-ink drawings there reminded her of Smith’s in The Land of Little Rain. As we have noted, these were only the head-and-tail pieces and a few small inserts; the full-page illustrations in Riis’s book were the halftones she disliked. And in fact Benda’s drawings in My Ántonia more closely resemble Smith’s pen-and-ink drawings in Austin’s book than they do Benda’s own earlier work.

Design is a significant element in The Land of Little Rain. Visual elements, by which I mean primarily the illustrations but also layout, might well be called, as Schwind calls the Benda illustrations of My Ántonia, a “silent supplement” to the text. Unlike its magazine version, the book was set with abundant white space and was adorned with pen-and-ink drawings, most but not all of them narrative in nature, that is, directly linked to the text. E. Boyd Smith, the artist who did the drawings, was a well-established and prolific illustrator and would later do the illustrations for Austin’s The Flock and The Ford as well.7

We recall that Cather initially meant to have head-and-tail pieces and emphatically did not want a frontispiece (wc to Greenslet, 18 October 1917). The Smith illustrations of The Land of Little Rain are of two sorts, full-page line drawings and head-and-tail pieces. Choosing just one of many possible examples of
the latter (from p. 15), we might note how it shows the operation of a precise eye, an eye having keen powers of observation (see fig. 12). In its precision, this drawing, like the other small drawings in *The Land of Little Rain*, stands as a correlative for Austin’s prose in this book (though not all of her writing): precise, warm, and personal, tending to address the reader directly in the second person. It is a style that may remind us of Cather’s in *Ántonia*.

It is Smith’s full-page and most-of-page drawings, however, that are most strikingly comparable to the Benda illustrations of *My Ántonia*. The first is one of a single crow or raven sitting on a cow skull with empty desert space all around, a few wisps of dust devils, and a distant horizon indicated simply by a couple of lines (4, see fig. 13). Like the Benda drawings, this one is placed
Fig. 13. Crow on skull

relatively low on the page, allowing it to open up into white space above—an indication of a big sky. A big sky characterizes, indeed, all of the larger drawings in *Little Rain*. Another good example is one of a vanishing row of fence posts with one bird in the sky and one bird catching a little shade in the foreground (10, see fig. 14). Notice, as well, the drawing showing the litter left in the land by people, a smoking campfire or perhaps cigarette, and a single disgusted-looking bird (38, see fig. 15). Here and in the one that follows, showing a “pocket hunter” camping for the night, with his campfire, two cooking implements, and two burros (53), there is no horizon line at all (see fig. 16). This is true bareness, a
true minimalist style. I would stress, again, the big sky that is so evident in the Benda illustrations of *My Ántonia*.

In 1926, when she and Greenslet were contemplating a new edition of *Ántonia* (the edition in which the preface was reduced), Cather said that the Benda illustrations were one of the few instances she could think of in which pictures materially assisted the narrative (WC to Greenslet, 15 February 1926). That is, they were essentially a part of the text. Here, again from *The Land of Little Rain*, is a remarkable instance in which the line drawing is actually interwoven with the text (21), so that the two, picture and text, demonstrably assist each other (see fig. 17). The words printed on the page become a part of the landscape separating
the coyote from the rising moon that he looks at apprehensively over his shoulder.

My conjecture that the original source of Cather’s conception for the visual “‘silent’ supplement” to My Ántonia lay in the illustrations of Austin’s The Land of Little Rain is based entirely on readerly and visual comparison, though bolstered by biographical evidence and a considerable archive establishing her intentions. Demonstrably, Cather and Austin experienced the natural world in much the same sorts of ways. They shared habits of hiking, close observation of plant life, and the use of notebooks to record
their field observations. For all their differences as novelists, if we compare Cather’s writing with Austin’s in *The Land of Little Rain*, we see a similar minimalism of prose style at work, a style keenly focused on selected details, rendered in terse descriptive language. The two books are similar in their employment of illustrations of a precise, minimalist kind: pen-and-ink line drawings making notable use of empty space to isolate details and to suggest the West’s big sky.

If my conjecture about the impact of Smith’s drawings on Cather’s vision for the illustrations of her own book is correct, the
critical judgment of at least one art historian that Smith “had few followers and made no major impact on American illustration” (Best 28) may merit revision. Another implication is a further expansion of our understanding of the aesthetic sisterhood between Cather and Austin, as well as perhaps an increased estimate of the importance to Cather of visual experience itself. And perhaps, too, it would evoke a more thorough study of the Harold von Schmidt illustrations for the second edition of Death Comes for the Archbishop, which, as Mignon has established (520), were also developed with active involvement by Cather. It is a linkage, then, of considerable significance and one that I hope may yet be conclusively established through archival records not presently
known. Not only does Smith’s beautiful work in the drawings for *The Land of Little Rain* extend beyond itself into the work of Benda—transformed, for this project, from his usual heavily shaded style—but the combination of Smith’s drawings and Austin’s style is carried forward into the minimalist aesthetic that would characterize much of Cather’s fiction and which she would formulate in “The Novel Démeublé.” It was an aesthetic that, as the notes in her field guide to wildflowers demonstrate, derived in large measure from her own visual acuity, plus what might be called a highly developed eye-hand coordination: a precise writerly hand working in perfect coordination with a precise eye for detail.

**NOTES**

I want to express my gratitude to Molly McBride Lasco for her assistance in locating information about W. T. Benda and E. Boyd Smith.

1. wc to Carrie Miner Sherwood, 11 February [prob. 1919], Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial, Red Cloud, Nebraska.

2. wc to Dorothy Canfield, 6 July 1902, Bailey-Howe Library, University of Vermont.

3. See Schwind, especially n. 4; also Samuels and Samuels, cited by Schwind. The letters to Ferris Greenslet and Roger L. Scaife on which I am drawing for the production history of *My Ántonia* are at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, bMS Am 1925 (341).

4. Benda’s illustrations had also appeared in *Century*, *Scribner’s*, and *Cosmopolitan*, as well as in books.

5. Archival evidence of Cather’s and Austin’s personal acquaintance is to be found at the Houghton Library and at the Huntington Library. T. M. Pearce’s edition of selected letters of Austin, *Literary America*, prints a short letter to Austin from Cather. See McNall; Porter; and Stout, “Willa Cather and Mary Austin.” Regarding biographical parallels, see Gelfant; also Stout, *Through the Window, Out the Door*.

6. wc to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, 23 June [1917?], Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

7. Surprisingly, in a letter written in 1907, when Austin was making arrangements for publication of *Lost Borders*, she wrote, “I sincerely hope you will not insist upon illustrating it. I am strongly prejudiced against illustrated fiction except for children”; ma to W. I. Booth, 27 April 1907, Houghton Library, Harvard, bMS Am 1925 (83).
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My Ántonia is above all else a story of stories. It is a story of how we tell stories, and it is also a story of reading, of how we read the stories before us. On a grand scale, it tells the story of America’s immigrants, the story of their settlement, their assimilation, their adaptation of colonial notions of the new frontier. More locally, My Ántonia tells the story of Midwest farming. Exploring agriculture both realistically and metaphorically, the novel tells the story of how certain kinds of “crops”—both vegetable and human—moved from east to west. In the novel’s exploration of the interaction between the Midwestern landscape and the migrant and immigrant farmers who attempted to transplant their crops, it tells the story of how the land receives what is put into it and what harvests it yields to those attempting to work it. In its exploration of the interaction between the social landscape and those attempting to settle into it, the novel tells the story of how Americans received the tide of immigrants that characterized the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in this country.

In telling both stories, the novel suggests the possibility of a radical reconfiguration of the constructs of community characteristic of the time. Those constructs reflected a growing distrust of importation, a distrust represented in political nativism, and which culminated in the National Origins Act of 1924, which halted immigration from the Orient and restricted immigration from southern and eastern Europe. In its complex pattern of stories set within small farming communities, Cather’s novel argues
against such social and political constructs by subverting and ultimately deconstructing the entire notion of nativism, thereby reshaping the reader’s understanding of what constitutes a community.

Because the term *nativism* has necessarily social and political connotations, and because its parallel use in recent ecological restoration debates has gradually become just as politically charged, I want to look at this restructuring of the way we understand social communities in the way that ecologists look at paradigm shifts in plant community theory. In a dramatic example of the slippage between political and ecological nativism, Albert Seifert, a prominent German landscape architect, proposed in 1933 that Germany forbid the use of all non-native plants. In “Garden-Variety Xenophobia,” a 1997 excerpt from his chapter “The Mania for Native Plants in Nazi Germany,” published in the book *Concrete Jungle*, Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn points to Seifert’s 1933 proposal to “ban all that until now has pleased the heart of a gardener: everything high-bred, overfed, conspicuous, foreign,” as indication that the “native-plants ideology is highly political: its advocates sometimes connect the call for native plants with nationalistic and racist ideas about society.”

Pointing to legal attempts to “purify” the landscapes that were made into the ’40s, Wolschke-Bulmahn traces German landscape architects’ insistent identification of invasive plants with invaders, strangers, and competitors. German botanists used overt social analogies, comparing the fight against invasive plants to “the fight against Bolshevism,” arguing that with one, “our entire occidental culture is at stake,” while with the other, “the beauty of our home forest, is at stake” (21–22).

In such arguments, we need to recognize not simply the metaphorical possibilities of plants and the societies for which they might somehow “stand in,” but, more significantly, native versus exotic growth as it represents individual and national ways of thinking about what constitutes community. We see, as well, that ideas such as “natural” versus “artificial” and “introduced” factor into our construction of community and are often used interchangeably with terms such as “native” and “exotic.” In ecological theory, Nebraska ecologist Frederic Clements’s long-
standing view of plant communities as naturally organized and integrated units, a theory that emphasized the “individualistic concept” of vegetation association units, gave way to Henry Gleason’s understanding of plant communities as constructs of human thought. In exploring Cather’s texts in light of these theories, I do not suggest that Cather had any expertise in ecological theory beyond her open admiration for Edith Clements’s botanical guides, *Flowers of Mountain and Plain* and *Rocky Mountain Wildflowers* (the latter written in collaboration with her husband), nor do I suggest that she studied Frederic Clements’s theories, or those of Gleason. Instead, I suggest that the urge to conflate plants with humans is not a simple exercise in anthropomorphism; instead, it represents significant ways of thinking about how humans exist in their environment. Specifically, in Cather’s *My Ántonia*, with its deeply layered analysis of the way a “native” like Jim Burden can tell the story of an “exotic” like Ántonia Shimerda, the potentially pejorative link made between exotic plants and peoples opens the possibility of a new way to view a problem with which many readers have grappled for a long time and which feminist criticism has yet to comfortably resolve: that is, why did Cather insist on constructing Ántonia through a male narrator, one who seems to use her for his own nostalgic purposes? Understanding the paradigm shift in community that Gleason articulated is at the heart of the reader’s ability to see Ántonia as more than the sentimentalized Earth Mother figure of Jim Burden’s account.

We must first look at Jim as both a storyteller and reader, for his is perhaps the most important story contained in the novel. Discussions of *My Ántonia* often center on the novel’s difficult narrative structure, difficult in that the novel’s male narrator “owns” Ántonia’s narrative, constructing her in what seem to be highly “masculinist” terms. The novel opens with a three-page introductory section in which the narrator describes a summer day when she ended up crossing Iowa with her childhood friend, Jim Burden, now in a clearly unhappy marriage. Jim mentions to the narrator that he has been writing a book about Ántonia, a girl whom they both knew, and months after the train ride, at the narrator’s request, Jim brings her the completed manuscript. Jim’s gesture upon handing the portfolio to her, the way he takes back
his manuscript, frowns at it for a moment and then changes the title from Ántonia to My Ántonia, an act, the narrator observes, that “seemed to satisfy him,” suggests exactly how we might interpret the subsequent novel, told in Jim’s words, as no more than a now unhappy man’s vision of the Bohemian girl with whom he shared his happy childhood. Such male-centered construction echoes, for many critics, the problem with much of America’s literature about land. The American pastoral, as Annette Kolodny defined it, constructs the pioneer territory as “Eden, Paradise, the Golden Age, and the idyllic garden” all rolled into one. In literature, Kolodny argued, R. W. B. Lewis’s American Adam was able to achieve “a resurrection of the lost state of innocence that the adult abandons when he joins the world of competitive self-assertion” because “at the deepest psychological level, the move to America was experienced as the daily reality of what has become its single dominating metaphor: regression from the cares of adult life and a return to the primal warmth of womb or breast in a feminine landscape” (6).

Thus, Cather’s narrator, Jim Burden, who meets Ántonia when she is a young, non-English-speaking immigrant, teaches her to speak and read English, and explains to her how to behave like a lady, is seen by many as simply another American Adam, one whose name appropriately suggests his role. He sees not Ántonia herself, but simply a feminine territory, one which he occasionally perceives as enough of a wilderness to need taming, but which eventually becomes an idyllic, pastoral, Golden Age, the “primal warmth” of a feminine landscape.

Jim’s construction of Ántonia is a relevant part of the novel, but not because of what it says about her. It is significant because of what it says about him, and the way he “reads” Ántonia, and because of what such a singularly constructed narrative says about storytelling as the art of constructing. Cather’s own art of storytelling is important here, as Susan Rosowski has already successfully argued. Reading Cather’s consistent subversions of storytelling traditions, Rosowski demonstrates in “Willa Cather’s Subverted Endings and Gendered Time” that Cather’s plots reject conventional ideas “of progress and mastery” thereby empowering “qualities traditionally restricted to women—feeling
and, particularly, the capacity for love” (73). Cather’s particular methodology—subverting the conventional romance plot while at the same time including familiar ingredients of it—allows her to free those very conventions from culturally imposed restrictions. Rosowski points to Niel Herbert, who, in A Lost Lady, continually attempts to impose his fictions upon Marian Forrester. His final abandonment of that attempt, a gesture he “tells” as one of resignation, is “another way in which Cather presented alternatives, [when] a character gives up the attempt to tell a story, or to order experience by linear time” (Rosowski 76). Rosowski thus allows readers to understand Niel’s failure to maintain his rigid construction of Marian as a way to understand Marian’s own resistance to the rigid cultural impositions that bound women.

Niel’s failure and the subversive role it plays in the novel serve as significant clues to understanding his predecessor, Jim Burden. Along with his desire to construct stories in traditionally masculine, linear time, Jim shares with Niel Herbert a superficial desire to master the classics and an inability to either accept or wholly reject women who break the boundaries of conventional feminine construction. Both men represent a kind of limited thinking that Cather’s novels suggest was prevalent in her own social order. In both, we see that the traditionally masculinist ordering of society simply will not fully encompass the complexities of the real world. Read in this light, Jim Burden’s construction of Ántonia must be seen as both unacceptable and unavoidable. That is, as a young man trained to accept the masculinist ideology of his day, Jim would, even as he was in the process of growing up with her, “tell the story” of Ántonia in conventional terms. We, as readers, must be able to see that his story is too confining. His straining to make Ántonia fit into the story with which he is most familiar must be read in larger terms, then, as the conservative social attempt to “tell the story” of how women and minorities should behave in the new world.

The best way to accomplish such a reading is to begin with Jim, the frustrated Latin scholar who, alone in his room one night, believes he has found the answer to life when he is taught, by one of his professors, the third book of Virgil’s The Georgics. “Optima dies . . . prima fugit,” Jim sighs, believing at that moment that
Virgil has explained it all. But Jim does not fully understand the Latin he is reading in college. To see the extent of his miscomprehension, we must see *My Ántonia* not simply as a novel that includes a reference or makes an allusion to some Roman farming poetry by Virgil. For many years, critics noted Cather’s familiarity with classical literature and brought in biographical material indicating Cather’s early exposure to classical mythology and her later study of Latin at the Lincoln Latin School and the University of Nebraska. But not until quite recently have studies of Cather’s work begun to indicate that there exists more than allusions or even mythological themes, especially in *My Ántonia*. “The single novel by Cather in which Virgil clearly informs the whole,” Theodore Ziolkowski writes in *Virgil and the Moderns*, “is the one usually regarded as her masterpiece, *My Ántonia*” (150). Ziolkowski goes on to argue that in the novel, Cather makes an “elegiac *laudes Americae* and a Virgilian appeal for the preservation of agrarian values in the face of the encroaching industrialization that was everywhere evident in the United States” (150).

Ziolkowski’s analysis of the role of *The Georgics* in *My Ántonia* points to the seasonal movement of both texts and the novel’s evocation of Virgil’s thesis in book 1, “*labor omnia vicit / imporbus et duris urgens in rebus egestas*” (Toil conquered all / obdurate toil, and unrelenting need). But, somehow, Ziolkowski can acknowledge that “Cather wants us to understand Virgil’s works, and especially *The Georgics*, as the lens through which Burden organizes the material of his own experience into recognizable patterns” (152) without acknowledging the difficulty that lens poses for readers seeking an autonomous identity for Ántonia herself. Indeed, Ziolkowski never seems to see a difference between Ántonia and Jim’s Ántonia, concluding his section on Cather with the claim that “For Cather, in sum, Ántonia represents the agrarian values that she imposed romantically on the Nebraskan landscape of her youth and whose loss she began to lament in the years following World War I, when modernization, with the ills accompanying its benefits, swept across America. And Virgil is the poet whose works epitomize the values of that idealized, traditional America” (112).

But it is not Cather reading Virgil. It is Jim Burden who, in or-
ganizing the material of his boyhood into his own opus, uses Virgil as a lens. One of the most significant and often overlooked factors in Jim’s reading of Virgil is the fact that it is filtered through his instructor, Gaston Cleric, who by Jim’s admission “narrowly missed being a great poet,” because “his bursts of imaginative talk were fatal to his poetic gift. He squandered too much in the heat of personal communication” (260). Cleric has introduced Jim to the traditional and masculine “world of ideas,” and Jim’s willingness to let “everything else [fade] for a time,” indicates the extent to which Cleric leads him and reads for him. Indeed, one of Jim’s most vivid memories is of Cleric’s explanation of “Dante’s veneration for Virgil.”

Cleric went through canto after canto of the “Comedia,” repeating the discourse between Dante and his “sweet teacher,” while his cigarette burned itself out unheeded between his long fingers. I can hear him now, speaking the lines of the poet Statius, who spoke for Dante: “I was famous on earth with the name which endures longest and honours most. The seeds of my ardour were the sparks from that divine flame whereby more than a thousand have kindled; I speak of the ‘Aeneid,’ mother to me and nurse to me in poetry.” (261–62)

It is through this multilayered approach that Jim Burden comes to Virgil: Cleric, translating Dante, who is at that point speaking through Statius.1 Released from centuries of purgation to complete his climb toward heaven, Statius acts as a guide for Dante, whose heaven is Beatrice. Thus, in the passage above, we find all the elements in place for Jim’s misreading of Virgil—and Antonia; he associates fame on earth with the epic poetic tradition, particularly with a poetics of feminine idealization, the conversion of a woman into a divine property. Given Jim’s instruction, it’s not surprising that he reads Virgil similarly and that he would, ultimately, attempt to do the same with Antonia.

In the next chapter, Jim is reading the third book of The Georgics, focusing on line 66, “optima dies . . . prima fugit,” or what he terms Virgil’s “melancholy reflection that, in the lives of mortals, the best days are the first to flee” (263). Significantly, Jim
reads this line out of context and links it immediately with the opening lines of book 3. In doing so, he literally reads over the contextual meaning and superimposes onto Virgil’s lines his own understanding of melancholy, one that is strikingly similar to Cleric’s own story. In the 56 lines that separate the quote about the brief span of mortals’ lives and Virgil’s claims that he will be the first to bring the muse into his country, Virgil makes several poetic shifts, from his opening rumination on the state of Roman poetry, to his prediction that Caesar will be the greatest of all rulers, to his acknowledgment that the subject at hand is, after all, animal husbandry. It is at that point, while he is explaining the most appropriate age at which to mate a heifer, that he suddenly and without preparation makes the observation that for wretched mortals the best days of life are the first to flee; diseases come on, and sad old age, and the harshness of implacable death. The suddenness of the shift is further enhanced by the phrase *miseris mortalibus*, a construction alternately read as a dative case or ablative absolute. In either case, the grammar allows the meaning to “hang” there, provided with only a suggestive context by the sentence before it. That sentence claims that the farmer can provide himself with generation upon generation by breeding his stock carefully, making sure that the female is the right age and stature, and that the bulls are young and lusty. But in the sentence after, Virgil moves on to the bland observation that the farmer will always have some beasts he needs to exchange and encourages him to do it swiftly. The bookended observations—the young, lusty breeders, which promise generations of cattle, juxtaposed against those who need to be replaced—may be ironic, or may, more seriously, emphasize the brevity not of existence as a universal, poetic concept, but of *useful* existence—usefulness that Virgil has defined through metaphors of marriage, through an invocation of Lucina, the goddess of childbirth, and through his detailed description of the best years in a cow’s life for breeding.

Jim sees none of this, ironically, for despite his upbringing on a farm, he knows nothing of what Hamlet called “country matters.” Jim’s grandparents left the realities of farm life to the hired hands, just as the townspeople leave the sexual realities of courtship to “The Hired Girls,” not the town girls. Jim is one of
the vanishing breed of American men that characterizes so much of modernist literature. Like Quentin and Benjy Compson, like Jake Barnes, Jim has no procreative powers but words. Thus, he reads Virgil’s line as homage to the immortalizing potential of poetry, the only generation he will ever breed.

Turning back to the early line, “Primus ego in patriam mecum . . . deducam Musas,” Jim remembers that Cleric had translated the context of patria to mean “the little rural neighborhood on the Mincio where the poet was born. This was not a boast, but a hope, at once bold and devoutly humble, that he might bring the Muse (but lately come to Italy from her cloudy Grecian mountains), not to the capital, the palatia Romana, but to his own little ‘country’ ” (264). Jim goes on to reflect on Cleric’s idea that when Virgil was dying, facing the “bitter fact that he was to leave the ‘Aeneid’ unfinished . . . then his mind must have gone back to the perfect utterance of the ‘Georgic,’ where the pen was fitted to the matter as the plough is to the furrow; and he must have said to himself, with the thankfulness of a good man, ‘I was the first to bring the Muse into my country’” (264).

Ignoring for the moment that Cleric reinvents Virgil’s meaning for the sake of romance, a romance that leaves his young students “conscious that we had been brushed by the wing of a great feeling,” we need to look at Cleric’s claim that Virgil was not boasting, for by all accounts he was, but probably not in a way that Jim Burden would understand. Jim has been thoroughly taken up by Cleric’s Byronic vision of Virgil, a dying man humbly grateful that he will be immortalized by his singular act of bringing poetry home, in the same way that Jim Burden believes that his “creation” of Ántonia, his construction of her as an idealized, idyllic, and isolated example of how beautiful the prairie once was, will immortalize him. His biased reading reflects not only his instructor’s melancholy interpretation but Jim’s own hope of immortalizing himself, in misconceived Virgilian terms, through his homage to patria, the text titled Ántonia, which he hands over to his traveling companion, takes back, changes, appropriately, to My Ántonia, and then, ostensibly “with the thankfulness of a good man,” thinks to himself, “‘I was the first to bring the Muse into my country’” (264).
But *The Georgics* are not generally read as a single poet’s swan song. They are a political conversation. The poem moves from book 1, which presents the problem of colonization and argues that the energy and ambition of an expanding nation threatens, potentially, to spread chaos, to book 2, which explores momentarily the idea that such energy might be contained in the rustic life, which represents contemplation, to book 3, which acknowledges that the very Golden Age quality that characterizes book 2 indicates the impossibility of that solution and that then goes on to suggest that the Romans will move beyond their own frontiers. In that movement, Gary Miles suggests, Virgil is claiming that “now rather than spreading chaos, they will reduce the entire world to order by bringing it under the single coherent command of their own nation and its unequaled leaders” (166). Finally, book 4, in its exploration of bees and retelling of the Orphic myth, confirms book 3 by acknowledging that the essential nature of a colony is to expand. Thus, the poem ends with an admonishment to keep one’s eyes forward at the same time that it acknowledges the mistake of not learning from the past.

In such a detailed explication of Jim’s reading of Virgil, I have hoped to show that the issue is not, as many have argued, whether or not Jim is an unreliable narrator. The novel insists on him as such, emphasizing his uninformed and superficial reading of a text on which he bases his vision of writing; and he is a writer. We are made to see he is unable to read correctly either Virgil or Ántonia. The issue, then, is what we are to make of Jim’s patently biased reading, why it has been constructed into our understanding of the novel.

Certainly, the notion of a constructed identity is central to this novel. Biographical links to what we now call social constructionism suggest that Cather was acutely aware of the problems for the individual when social categories served as a means for others to perceive an individual’s identity.

Cather’s own experiment with transcending social identity began in 1888, when, according to Sharon O’Brien, “the fourteen-year-old Cather decided to become the hero of her own life story when she created the masculine persona she sustained for the next four years. Employing the transforming power of dress and
disguise, she distinguished herself from other Red Cloud girls by cropping her hair, donning boyish clothes, and naming herself ‘William Cather, Jr’” (96). O’Brien’s description of Cather’s experiment with identity comes in a chapter titled “Enter William Cather,” with the appropriate epigraph, “I like to be like a man,” from My Ántonia. The quote indicates the limitations Cather understood in gender constructions. The notion of being “like a man” is, for Ántonia, the notion of being meaningful in the world. When her father’s suicide leaves her family facing potential economic ruin, Ántonia, who previously indicated some concern over how pleasing she was to Jim, can no longer be bothered with his opinion of her. “I can work like mans now,” she tells him when he suggests she enroll in school with him. “School all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm” (123). And, the following season, when she has gone to work for Jim’s grandmother, she indicates her preference for outdoor work, telling Jim “I not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man. I like to be like a man” (138).

Inherent to the construction in both Cather’s performance as William and Ántonia’s appropriation of masculinity is the admission that men and women are defined by social attitudes. As O’Brien suggests in the following passage, appropriating the male standard is, essentially, accepting it as well:

In adopting a male persona Cather was being rebellious, theatrical, and bold, but she was not being particularly creative. To construct this alternate self she could only tap a cultural inventory of roles and selves; understandably, she was trapped by her contemporaries’ polarization of gender traits and roles, the same dichotomy that [Louisa May] Alcott evinces when she referred to her adventurous self as her “boy’s spirit.” Other nineteenth-century women who donned male dress similarly were unable to transcend Victorian sex roles. Desiring the autonomy and freedom that it seemed only men possessed, such women decided to cross rather than to blur gender boundaries. (100)

But Cather did differ from writers such as George Sand. O’Brien locates the difference in small “feminine” touches of apparel,
which she reads as signs of gender transformation in the photographs Cather posed for during her years as William. “The ribbon, the ruffled blouse, and the scarf suggest the girl’s desire to redefine rather than to reject female identity, to find a way to express the human possibilities her society divided between male and female” (O’Brien 101).

Nowhere are those possibilities more thoroughly opened to redefinition than in the prairie women of Cather’s novel. In Alexandra Bergson and in Ántonia Shimerda, Cather created the literary equivalent of the ribbons and scarves in her portraits. In the harsh environment of a Nebraska farm, new definitions of meaningful work posed the opportunity for new definitions of meaningfulness, definitions that transcended the limitations of gender imposed by society. After exploring such possibilities in the life of Alexandra Bergson, Cather seems to have decided that she could most fully realize the complexities of social constraints in the story of Ántonia Shimerda, whose cultural ties, appearance, and accented English give her the kind of “exotic” status that allowed Cather to explore constructions of gender, class, and ethnicity, and to pose the possibility for transcendence of all three. In Ántonia, Cather analyzed on the grandest scale the issue of identity. Arguing openly against the notion of a natural system by which people might be grouped, Cather subverted the American notion of community by refusing to acknowledge identity as defined by one’s gender, one’s nationality, or one’s social position. In doing so, she shifted the paradigm by which Americans knew community, for, in effect, she robbed them of their means of identifying it. Instead, Cather opens the possibility that one constructs one’s own identity through the community into which one plants oneself. In My Ántonia, the practice of agriculture serves as the literal and metaphorical means by which one can establish oneself at a place and begin to construct a community-based identity.

My Ántonia opens in “summer, [the] season of intense heat,” when the narrator is “crossing Iowa on the same train” as Jim Burden. “While the train flashed through never-ending miles of ripe wheat, by country towns and bright-flowered pastures and oak groves wilting in the sun, we sat in the observation car, where the woodwork was hot to the touch and red dust lay deep over
everything. The dust and heat, the burning wind, reminded us of many things.”

The passage goes on to indicate that the narrator and Jim share the experience of a childhood lived heavily in response to agriculture:

We were talking about what it is like to spend one’s childhood in little towns like these, buried in wheat and corn, under stimulating extremes of climate: burning summers when the world lies green and billowy beneath a brilliant sky, when one is fairly stifled in vegetation, in the colour and smell of strong weeds and heavy harvests; blustery winters with little snow, when the whole country is stripped bare and grey as a sheet-iron. We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it. It was a kind of freemasonry.

The “freemasonry” to which the narrator refers at the end of the passage suggests both the general definition of the word, “a natural sympathy and understanding among persons with like experiences,” and the practices associated with the guild of Freemasons, a society founded to recognize the skilled itinerant mason who was free to move from town to town without restraint by local guilds. Thus, the opening passage is critical. It works to establish the heavy influence of the land on those who live in response to it, an influence that associates them in a way that others, who do not share the experience, cannot understand, and it suggests the possibility that an identity constructed in that way functions beyond the place at which it is established. The itinerant nature of the Freemason, and Cather’s insistence on using the term, argues for membership in a community whose boundaries are not rigidly defined by place, but whose identity comes from place. This flexible notion of place-based community is the central principle of My Ántonia, for it explains how immigrants and migrants, the two protagonists of the novel, as represented by Jim and Ántonia, are able to establish a sense of identity. The novel refuses to accept the principle of a closed community system, one which is inherent to the place; instead, it acknowledges the ongoing reconfiguration of community in a country where
all the inhabitants were at one point immigrants and where, as Joseph Urgo argues in *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration*, “migration is paradoxically the keystone of American existence, and migrants gather paradoxes as they move from one ‘permanent’ residence to the next” (13).

Cather’s understanding that “those who have not moved are the exceptional ones” (12) informs her understanding of community boundaries as shifting. Subsequently, the ability to “switch behavior according to context,” is, in Cather, “a habit of mind crucial for anyone who possessed the culture Cather projects” (Urgo 68). Keeping out the “exotics” is impossible because American communities are made up of different levels of exotics. Political nativism, a popular response to the influx of immigrants at the time, is also impossible in this paradigm, for all communities become constructed. Thus, while it is obvious that some people settled in America before others, the notion that any people inherently “belong” to a place—the notion that we use to construct meaningful communities—no longer exists. The biotic equivalent of this argument comes at the novel’s end, when Jim has returned to Black Hawk after visiting Ántonia and her family. He finds himself disappointed with town and left at loose ends. He takes “a long walk north of the town, out into the pastures where the land was so rough that it had never been ploughed up, and the long red grass of early times still grew shaggy over the draws and hillocks” (370). Out there, he feels “at home again.” But the land he sees is not as it was in “early times,” for Jim’s view encompasses both native and exotic plants, the weeds and agricultural crops that make the place seem home to him. “To the south I could see the dun-shaded river bluffs that used to look so big to me, and all about stretched drying cornfields, of the pale-gold colour, I remembered so well. Russian thistles were blowing across the uplands and piling against the wire fences like barricades. Along the cattle-paths the plumes of goldenrod were already fading into sun-warmed velvet, grey with gold threads in it” (370).

In the plant world, the edges have blurred. As Michael Barbour writes in “Ecological Fragmentation in the Fifties,” “prior
to the 1950s nature was simplistic and deterministic; after the 1950s nature became complex, fuzzy edged, and probabilistic” (233). Barbour’s essay explains the paradigm shift that occurred in ecological thinking when Henry Gleason challenged Frederick Clements’s definition of biotic interdependency: “Clements argued that groups of species living together in a given habitat were highly organized into natural, integrated units called communities. Gleason countered that such communities were only constructs of human thought and that in reality the distribution and behavior of every species were unbounded by imagined holistic bonds to all the surrounding species” (234). In terms which could so easily apply to Cather’s own view of human communities as constructed, rather than inherent, Barbour explains the major shift in thinking that occurred. Describing the Clementsian landscape as one that looks like a “simple, harmonious patchwork pattern,” Barbour explains that “the central tenet of the association-unit paradigm is that plant communities are objective reality. That is, plant species are organized into natural, recognizable units of vegetation called formations, association, or communities, and these entities are steady-state balance points in nature that exhibit stability and constancy over time” (236).

Gleason’s theory of vegetation, which he published in 1917 and again in 1926 and 1939, argues that “formations and associations are not real, natural units; they are merely artifacts and human constructs or abstractions” (237). Instead of groups of species that “rise and fall in abundance synchronously across the landscape,” Gleason theorized that “each species spreads out as an independent entity, individualistically distributed according to its own genetic, physiological, and life-cycle characteristics and according to its way of relating both to the physical environment and to other species” (237).

The “revolution” that Barbour cites as occurring by 1960, when “the majority of ecologists had shifted their opinion of the community from Clements’s view to Gleason’s” (234) was already underway in My Ántonia. Gleason’s argument that plants group according to their way “of relating both to the physical environment and to other species” is Cather’s argument about
people. The novel’s many stories tell us that one’s perspective—the means by which we perceive what is before us—changes with each teller of the same story, just as each person reading the story will read something new or different in that story with each reading. Jim’s closing reading of the land and its diversity of plants argues for an acknowledgment that configuration, and reconfiguration, of community lies in the eye, so to speak, of the beholder. At the core of that perspective is “the stretched drying cornfield,” the crop so much a part of both Cather’s agricultural novels, *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*. Farming, which requires the farmer to read a landscape and visualize a story on it, serves for Cather as a literal means to establish identity while at the same time it serves, as it did in Virgil’s *Georgics*, as a metaphor for a new vision of the land, a vision that relies on new formations of community, formations based on transplanting and cross-breeding. Farming serves as the perfect metaphor to explain how the intersection of people and place contains both stasis and change, past and future. The farmer’s understanding of the land includes an awareness of what the land has “traditionally” been able to grow and a vision of what it will grow in the future. Thus, the farmer must see the land as it was, is, and may be.

Cather’s successful farmers have that vision. Alexandra Bergson, the successful farmer of *O Pioneers!* whose father bequeaths the management of the farm not to her brothers, but to her, understands that her life is “all made up of weather and crops and cows” (131). She tells Carl Linstrum that “the land did it... it worked itself. It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself, and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still” (116); but Alexandra has aggressively pursued innovative planting methods, planted new types of crops, and bought new land. “A pioneer should have an imagination,” she knows, “should be able to enjoy the idea of things more than the things themselves” (48). Even Jim Burden’s grandfather has a forward-looking vision that marks him as a successful farmer: Jim notes that “it took a clear, meditative eye like my grandfather’s to foresee that they would enlarge and multiply until they would be, not the Shimerdas’ cornfields, or Mr. Bushy’s, but the world’s cornfields; that their yield would be one of the great eco-
nomic facts, like the wheat crop of Russia, which underlie all the activities of men, in peace or war” (137). The difference between Alexandra’s vision and Jim’s grandfather’s is the difference between *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia*; his vision represents an understanding that farming is a process of changing the way we look at, and understand, the land. The new understanding of agri-political boundaries, the enlargement of the local cornfields into “the world’s cornfields,” is parallel to the new understanding of social boundaries for which *My Ántonia* argues. Nebraska’s “crop” of dwellers is also the world’s, and its “yield” provides us with a way to read and understand Ántonia herself. Her life as a farmer has established her ability to produce and to reproduce. If her agricultural crops represent a new understanding of farming, her children, American citizens who speak the “mother tongue” of two mother countries, will challenge the notion of community even more than she was able to do.

The argument in *My Ántonia* that one’s identity is constructed by the community into which one plants oneself, comes to fruition in Ántonia herself, the character who does the best “job” of establishing herself at a place and beginning to construct identity in relation to that place. Throughout the novel, Ántonia has been learning to farm successfully. The fact that Jim, who cares little for farming, does not emphasize or admire her skills, does not mean she is without them. When Jim asks Ántonia if she would like to go to school with him, she tells him, “School all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm” (123). In a later conversation with Jim about the pregnant and unwed Ántonia’s return home, Widow Steavens says, “The next time I saw Ántonia [she] was out in the fields ploughing corn” (314). According to the widow, even while pregnant, Ántonia harvested, threshed, and herded cattle so well that her family did not hire a man to help out on the farm. Barely twenty-four when Jim first returns to see her, Ántonia already knows her identity. She tells Jim that in the city, “I’d die of lonesomeness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly.” And twenty years later, when Jim returns, the facts of Ántonia’s abilities speak for themselves. Her farmhouse is “set back on a swell of land,” next to which is a barn and “an ash grove, and cattle
yards in front that sloped down to the highroad.” (329). Teeming with life—ducks, cats, but mostly with children—Ántonia’s farm is thriving because she is a successful farmer, a woman who has spent her whole life learning the process of agriculture and can now successfully grow and farm. Although Jim frequently wanted what he would define as “more” for Ántonia, her “special mission” is fulfilled in Nebraska. At the novel’s end, Ántonia tells Jim, “I belong on a farm. I’m never lonesome here like I used to be in town. You remember what sad spells I used to have, when I didn’t know what was the matter with me? I’ve never had them out here” (343). Significantly, Ántonia, the “exotic” who has come from another country, has more successfully established herself than any of the Burdens.

Ántonia is certainly a fertile woman, but that fertility does not constrict her to the kind of representative “Earth Mother” so much of American Western literature constructs—that is, not unless we allow our reading of her to be limited to Jim Burden’s reading of her. As an American hero, he is ambivalent about much of what is “American” in his life, and strong arguments have been made for reading his interpretation of Antonia in exactly the kind of worrisome terms that feminist criticism outlines when it suggests the psychoanalytic process by which pioneers came to terms with their need to conquer and colonize a wilderness they wanted to be nurtured by while simultaneously raping.

Jim’s is indeed a masculinist reading of Ántonia. He is throughout the novel unable to see her fertility as a strength or her strength as an asset. As a boy he was nearly obsessed with delimiting her; in town, her insistence on an open sensuality, evidenced by her love of dancing, rankles him in the way that Marian Forrester’s open sexuality and refusal to stay within the limits of ladylike behavior grates at Niel Herbert. Both men spend years trying to fit either woman into the context of the manuscript of their own lives. And it is precisely their inability to do that that makes it such a huge mistake for readers to see Ántonia only as Jim does (or Marian only as Niel does), for such a reading ignores, in Jim’s case, the novel’s clear indications that we are to understand the limitations of Jim’s reading of Ántonia. Readers are meant to
see how poorly skilled Jim is as a reader of literature, of people, and also of the time in which he lives, a time marked by shifting social boundaries and new means of constructing identity. Understanding Ántonia through our understanding of Jim Burden’s limitations is the only way to fully appreciate the complexity of My Ántonia, a novel rich with social analysis and optimism for a new understanding of the term American.

NOTE

1. Even here, Jim’s understanding of the material is suspect. Cleric has in his explication approached the poet and the speaker of the poem as one and the same, a conflating already under question by the time of Cather’s writing. The separation of poet from speaker was suggested in Ezra Pound’s 1909 Personae and would become a formally articulated theory only a year after My Ántonia, in Eliot’s 1919 “Tradition and the Individual Talent.”

WORKS CITED

The organization of space represents the meeting point between the writer and her environment. One of the things that Cather’s writing teaches us is that space, especially “natural” space, is always mediated, always shaped. Even if humankind has not yet worked on the landscape (in terms of agriculture or landscaping or settlement), the imagination has already shaped that environment by means of the symbolic language brought to that space. Indeed, as we have understood since Henry Nash Smith published *Virgin Land* in 1950, the discovery and making of America represents perhaps the most extreme example of this process, as Europeans projected an interlocked array of Utopian concepts and constructs onto the “empty” space of the New World.

Cather’s own framing of nature was informed by some very specific, historically particular ideas. These ideas constituted a distinctive, American theory of space, and the human being in its environment, emergent at the start of the last century. Here, Cather takes her place alongside figures such as Gertrude Stein, William James, and Frank Lloyd Wright. My intention is to position Cather in this context, a context forged out of a comparison with other American modernists and, specifically, with the pragmatism of James. Ronald Berman’s 1997 book, *The Great Gatsby and Fitzgerald’s World of Ideas*, suggested a context for
Fitzgerald in the “public philosophy” of William James and his followers (Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, Randolph Bourne, John Dewey). If we want to think about Cather and the “ecopoetics” of her writing, we need to position her alongside some of these thinkers in order to understand what was specific to her culture and its historical moment. For Cather’s fiction is often concerned with the representation of the psychological processes of the self as it connects with and interacts with environment; Cather emerges as a kind of Midwestern pragmatist, and a distant sister of Gertrude Stein.

The modernity of Cather’s environmental imagination is illustrated by a comparison between her fictionalization of American spaces and Frank Lloyd Wright’s architectural formation of space. Wright, above all other modernists, is the major artist in the rearticulation of American space at the turn of the century. He was also, of course, a Midwesterner with a similar background to Cather: born a little earlier (1867), into a family who had moved west, and also educated (though not with anything like Cather’s success) at a land grant college, the University of Wisconsin. There are, I believe, some striking analogies and affinities between Wright and Cather: although literary historians have not always noted the connection between the two, architectural historians certainly have. Robert Twombly, for one, cites Wright’s attack on turn-of-the-century Chicago houses—“they lied about everything,” Wright spat—and backs up this quotation with comments from Ole Rolvaag, Sinclair Lewis, and Cather. He notes the mockery of the Forrester house in *A Lost Lady* (Twombly 60–61): “It was encircled by porches, too narrow for modern notions of comfort,” Cather writes, “supported by the fussy, fragile pillars of that time, when every honest stick of timber was tortured by the turning-lathe into something hideous” (8). Put the Forrester house alongside the Marsellus house in *The Professor’s House* and you have a very Wright-like attack on the importation of fussy, pseudo-European houses into the Midwestern environment. Take, also, Father Latour’s comment on the ruin of Santa Fe, a comment underpinned by a sense of regionalist architecture:

In the old days it had an individuality, a style of its own; a
tawny adobe town with a few green trees, set in a half-circle of carnelian-coloured hills; that and no more. But the year 1880 had begun a period of incongruous American building. Now, half the plaza square was still adobe, and half was flimsy wooden buildings with double porches, scroll-work and jack-straw posts and banisters painted white. Father Latoursaidthewoodenhouseswhichhadso distressed him in Ohio, had followed him. All this was quite wrong for the Cathedral he had been so many years in building. (270–71)

Is there another novelist who has characters suffer aesthetic “distress” in the face of unpleasant architecture? Cather’s satire on domestic style seems to emerge from a position very close to Wright’s. For both Cather and Wright, “fit” (a kind of spatial symbiosis between the man-made and the natural) constitutes the regionalist style. What one takes away from Wright’s theoretical writing is a recurrent emphasis on the interdependence of the built and the natural, the human-made and the found. Thus, in a section from The Living City, “Architecture and Acreage Together Are Landscape” (a wonderful phrase that could stand as an epigraph to Cather’s Western novels), Wright states:

Architectural features of any democratic ground plan for human freedom rise naturally by, and from, topography. This means that buildings would all take on, in endless variety, the nature and character of the ground on which they would stand and, thus inspired, become component parts. Wherever possible all buildings would be integral parts—organic features of the ground—according to place and purpose. (143)

And in his Autobiography Wright extends this argument to a more general defence of the “indigenous”: “Indigenous growth is the essential province of all true Culture” (336).

Where, in Cather’s work, do we find the representation of Wright’s organic architecture? One place would be in the Native American settlements of the Southwest (also admired by Wright). Cather represents these dwellings as architecturally at one with their surroundings, as “organic features of the ground.”
Intriguingly, Tom Outland first praises the Cliff City precisely on grounds of design: “I felt that only a strong and aspiring people would have built it, and a people with a feeling for design” (203–04). Another form of favored dwelling is the human-made space with an apparently ramshackle, deliberately “primitive” organism that keeps it closely integrated into the landscape: Ivar’s sod hut in *O Pioneers!* the Shimerdas’ dugout, Ántonia’s fruit cave, Tom’s shelter on the mesa (where the grass grows right up to the door, creating a seamless connection with the terrain). All of these dwellings accept the constraints of the environment and find an aesthetic emerging from the necessities of the landscape. As Father Duchene tells Tom, in a phrase that could come from a Wright essay, “Convenience often dictates very sound design” (219).

These places represent an anticipation of Wright’s maxim, “Architecture and acreage together are landscape”; and they also mark Cather’s integration into a tradition of American environmental writing—the Thoreauvian tradition with its emphasis on frugality, simplicity, and ecology. In fact, in the case of Ivar’s hut, the correspondence with Thoreau seems explicit when Cather positions the hut next to a pond. One might read the passage as, effectively, a description of Walden Pond transplanted West and then stamped with an organic sense of space derived from Frank Lloyd Wright. Cather celebrates total symbiosis between the human and the natural: “But for the piece of rusty stovepipe sticking up through the sod, you could have walked over the roof of Ivar’s dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation. Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done” (39–40). The fusion of Alexandra’s body with the soil at the end of the novel has been prefigured here, with Ivar’s house. Both passages celebrate an ecstatic intermingling between self and nature, an interpenetration that quite obviously has its roots in transcendentalism but here finds a home far from New England.

A taxonomy of Cather’s prairie dwellings illustrates the affinities with Frank Lloyd Wright: the writer or architect creates regionalist spaces and places harmonized with local environments.
Modernist Space

Wright’s *The Living City* called for houses, “each sympathetically built out of materials native to the Time, the Place, and the Man” (132). It is in this sense that an architectural polemicist such as Reyner Banham writes of “Frank Lloyd Wright as Environmentalist.” The human spaces of Cather’s prairie novels tend to be low-lying if not subterranean. They merge or fuse with the land. They make radical use of natural resources: wood or the earth itself. They are very much of their own kind and not overly indebted to European models. Outside the Cather house there tends to be a space where the natural and the human-made overlap and coalesce. A further important correspondence is that when Wright thought favorably about tall buildings (he usually fulminated against the skyscraper urbanism of New York), he called for them to be set in “small green-parks of their own, in the countryside” (*The Living City* 133). In other words, he advocated a kind of rural skyscraper or ecological megastructure—the great structure positioned in a pastoral setting. Cather also tried to “green” such colossal buildings by blending them into the landscape: hence the Cliff City of *The Professor’s House* or the cathedral at the end of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. These vast constructions merge and blend with their setting. As Latour’s architect says, in a phrase one can imagine Frank Lloyd Wright using, “Either a building is a part of a place, or it is not. Once the kinship is there, time will only make it stronger” (272).

A typical example of Cather’s space making occurs when Jim Burden visits Ántonia’s farm at the end of the novel. Her house is steeply roofed but low-lying: “The roof was so steep that the eaves were not much above the forest of tall hollyhocks, now brown and in seed. Through July, Ántonia said, the house was buried in them” (328). This whole passage is filled with images of verdant, overgrowing foliage, and of human spaces that seem to be within or underneath this growth. Three of the children creep through a hole in the hedge “known only to themselves and hid under the low-branching mulberry bushes” (329). Then Ántonia and Jim settle down in the orchard: “It was surrounded by a triple enclosure; the wire fence, then the hedge of thorny locusts, then the mulberry hedge which kept out the hot winds of summer and held fast to the protecting snows of winter. The hedges were
so tall that we could see nothing but the blue sky above them, neither the barn roof nor the windmill” (330–31). For a writer with a noted antipathy to Freud, Cather seems to have created some astonishingly symbolic spaces—as critics from Leon Edel to Ellen Moers have noted. Here, the womblike space emphasizes that sense of “return to beginnings” that dominates the end of the novel. Jim’s unconscious reiteration of one of Ántonia’s first English phrases, “blue sky” (25), confirms a sense of return, of cycles, of closure.

But what is also important is the emphasis on privacy; an organic architecture creates enclosed and intensely turned-in spaces amidst the vastness of the prairies. As with other Cather protagonists, most notably St. Peter, the need to create an environment of privacy is a fundamental dynamic for Ántonia. Why, indeed, does Ántonia take Jim into a space with a “triple enclosure,” if they are in the middle of nowhere? The answer is that, as for many Cather characters, Ántonia’s sense of environment is strongly linked to a need for sheltered privacy. The novel began with a very private, enclosed space—the train compartment where Burden and the narrator first talk. It ends with a similar kind of exchange between Burden and Ántonia, as they talk in an enclosed space fashioned from natural materials. In both cases, the openness of the prairie landscape produces an equal and opposite human reaction, as characters seek out inward-looking, private, womblike places.

A common reaction to Wright’s houses is to find them unexpectedly low, enclosed, and sometimes even claustrophobic; his houses were designed to offer a great deal of privacy. Robert Twombly suggests that the prairie house “appealed to an apprehensive upper middle class by emphasizing in literal and symbolic ways the security, shelter, privacy, family, mutuality and other values it found increasingly important” (Twombly, “Saving the Family” 59). Those houses designed for the suburbs, such as the Robie house, were fashioned so that those inside could find space where they would not be seen from the street. Wright, acutely conscious of the extremes of the Midwestern weather, created houses resistant to the harshness of winter snow or summer heat; but in so doing, the Wright house, though harmonized with the outer environment, also fostered an intense domesticity. Cather’s
houses are not as class-specific as Wright’s, but they share a sense of the inward and the sheltered. For Cather and Wright, the connection between environment and privacy seems to have had the force of an equation: in creating an organic space, in Wright’s words, “native to the Time, the Place,” one also fashioned an intensely private realm.

A significant strand in Cather’s critical writing privileged the “natural,” as she drew comparisons between her work’s compositional strategy and the open landscapes of the prairies. Cather’s letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant (22 April 1913) answered complaints about the novel’s shape: “She agreed with Sergeant’s one criticism that the book had no skeleton but defended it on grounds that the country she was writing about had no skeleton either. There were no rocks or ridges; its black soil ran through one’s fingers. It was all soft, and somehow that influenced the mood and the very structure of the novel” (Woodress 155).

When Cather compared *O Pioneers!* to the “all soft” landscape of the prairies, she articulated a form of organic modernism. This organic theory privileges the natural and the apparently shapeless over the clearer forms and narrative shapes championed by one of her masters, Henry James. Cather’s 1913 letter might be read as a revision of James’s 1907 preface to the New York edition of *The Portrait of a Lady*. There, James had also used the image of soil nurturing the work of fiction. But for James, “soil” correlated with the novelist’s individual creativity: “the kind and the degree of the artist’s prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs” (7). James then went on to his celebrated discussion of the “house of fiction,” with its million windows looking down on the “human scene” (8). James uses the “house of fiction” as a trope to emphasize form, shape, and architectural structure; he was impatient with the apparent formlessness of the English novel and wanted to forge an Anglo-American aesthetic with the French novel’s exactitude. Nowhere does Cather reveal more her struggle with James’s influence and her final overthrow of “the master” than here. For James, “soil” had a very solipsistic connotation; it corresponded with the artist’s “sensibility.” But Cather uses “soil” in a folk-cultural, regionalist sense (I cannot dare to think what James would have made of the analogy with
the prairies). Although the late James was moving toward greater narrative fluidity, he would surely have rejected the environmental determinism and proud provincialism of Cather’s argument—her sense that regional geography generates literary form.

Cather’s reasoning might be termed “organic modernism.” The environment of Nebraska is used as an analog for novelistic form; landscape might even create form. I have argued elsewhere that Cather, for a writer of westward settlement, had a remarkably non-anthropocentric model of the interconnections between the human and the natural: she could envisage landscape acting upon the human, rather than the more familiar model, which tended to reverse this process (Reynolds 52–54). Cather emphasizes, too, a kind of formlessness: “It was all soft.” In an interview with John Chapin Mosher, Cather had said of the immigrant and pluralist communities of Nebraska that the “hard molds of American provincialism” might be broken up in the Midwest (94); we might extend this argument to the “hard molds” of narrative architecture. For Cather and Wright both believed that in the Midwest the “hard molds” of received form (architectural and narrative) would be broken up and remade. And so, using this environmental logic, a new language of flow, organicism, and flexibility entered their aesthetic lexicon.

The popular image of Cather tends to see her as a rather homely writer; and much recent criticism has sought to accept homeliness or domesticity by seeing these features as inherently marked by a distinctive female culture. Critics then read Cather as a sophisticated modifier of an American female tradition of the home and the domestic. In this respect, Judith Fryer’s work on Cather and space deepens the approach of 1970s feminists by means of a critical reading that redeems the female cultures of the late nineteenth century. This Cather emerges out of the late Victorian female, spatial culture of Sarah Orne Jewett. There is the same emphasis on the domestic, and particularly on a womanly domesticity at the center of a rich sentimental culture.

This is a powerful argument about Cather’s spaces. But what if Cather’s work also marked out a radically new, modernistic conception of space? What if her Midwestern environments, rather than being rooted in a familiar cultural site (homemaking, pio-
neering, the female world of American space making), were in fact more akin to the spatializing tactics of radical modernists—artists working in literature but also in architecture and painting? We have already seen affinities between Cather and Wright; and it is clear that Cather’s narrative experimentation used the example of the prairie space to move away from received notions of realism. Pursuing this line a little further, one notes how Cather uses the environments of the West and Southwest to move toward a kind of abstraction in her work.

Most contemporary travelers first see the American prairies from the air, and from this perspective the landscape has a curiously abstract pattern: huge blocks of colour, arranged as if by some gigantic artist obsessed by geometry. The clean edges and abstract forms of the fields, seen from the air, make the telling point that this is in many ways one of the most unnatural landscapes in the world. The settlement of the prairies quickly turned an unshaped landscape into a place so sculpted and formed by the processes of modern agriculture that it attained a strange disembodiment. The Midwest is akin to the Dutch landscapes celebrated by the abstract painter Piet Mondrian (an artist who eventually moved to New York and immersed himself in American modernity). Mondrian’s jazzy, colorful abstracts are often seen as being “produced” by the landscape of Holland—a flat, essentially man-made, intensively farmed landscape of grids and lines and squares. Similarly, Cather found in the shaping of the Western environment a form of abstraction that became part of her modernistic space making. So the most triumphant passages in Cather’s prairie novels are not just about the interaction of the human and the earthly (as at the end of *O Pioneers!*), but are also about the creation of these strangely abstract, painterly shapes within the land. When Alexandra Bergson begins to create her farmstead, the space around the house has a formalistic, neatly symmetrical pattern. Settlement is the creation of “order,” expressed through symmetry: “When you go out of the house into the flower garden, there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds, planted with scrub willows to give shade to the cattle in
fly-time. There is even a white row of beehives in the orchard, under the walnut trees” (81).

One senses Cather’s eye picking out the geometry latent within the landscape, the patterns of fencing and hedging, the lines and rows of the garden. Such patterns are both created and natural; and if fashioned by Alexandra, they quickly seem to become part of an established landscape. This is one reason why the Divide is so central a term in Cather’s reading of environment: the Divide is both latent within the land, but it also becomes part of the way in which we use land. It is natural and man-made. And a “divide” is also a line or a boundary. Reading Cather’s descriptions of landscape one constantly senses this interest in lines, grids, boundaries: lines inherent in the land or imposed by man, but all tending toward abstract geometry. Thus Cather maps the prairie in terms of lines emerging out of plains; and she envisages the Washington of *The Professor’s House* as a place of stifling boundaries and divisions.

If this is one way in which Cather’s picturing of landscape seems modernist, then another way is the contrasting technique whereby landscape is dissolved into color, losing shape and determinacy. This is the abstraction that marks her descriptions of the Southwest in *The Professor’s House*. Tom’s ecstatic encounter with the mesa is exactly of this kind: the detail of landscape merges into a wash of different shades:

The grey sage-brush and the blue-grey rock around me were already in shadow, but high above me the canyon walls were dyed flame-color with the sunset, and the Cliff City lay in a gold haze against its dark cavern. In a few minutes it, too, was grey, and only the rim rock at the top held the red light. When that was gone, I could still see the copper glow in the piñons along the edge of the top ledges. The arc of sky over the canyon was silvery blue, with its pale yellow moon, and presently stars shivered into it, like crystals dropped into perfectly clear water. (250)

On first reading, the paragraph seems to be a rare case of poor writing by Cather. Why does every object have to carry an epithet? Isn’t the passage overinsistent, repetitive, overwritten? But
we know that she revised exhaustively, and the reader has to trust her as she creates a very strange effect in this passage. Cather, it seems to me, tries to achieve an impressionism by dissolving detail into color. Actual objects within the landscape are simply overwhelmed by this colorful cascade. And color itself eventually stands for a whole way of being: “Troubles enough came afterward, but there was that summer, high and blue, a life in itself.” (253). The passage is, of course, painterly, a word-picture, but it is painterly in a contemporary way, as environment is registered in terms of dominant color as much as by shape. Cather almost becomes a writerly counterpart to Cézanne or even, in her most fervent synthesis of mood and color, Mark Rothko’s prose forebear. Note, too, the lovely effect at the end of the paragraph, where the textures are simply washed away into clearness, as golds and reds and blues give way to reflected stars, “like crystals dropped into perfectly clear water”: a form of metaphysical conceit, where clearness drops into clearness.

Daniel Singal, in a suggestive essay on American modernism, has sought to give a specific picture of this cultural formation by emphasising the national rather than the international features of modernism in the United States. He stresses its philosophical roots in the pragmatism of John Dewey and William James. In particular, he contends that James brought forward a concern with psychological process and with varied emotional and mental states of being. Singal isolates modernism’s “Jamesian stream” which “centers its interest on the individual consciousness, celebrates spontaneity, authenticity, and the probing of new realms of personal experience” (17–18). Jamesian modernism bears on Cather, especially in the “new realms of personal experience” that feature so heavily in passages about the interplay of consciousness and environment. She had read William James as a young woman, and one commentator has described her as a “devoted disciple” of his work in the 1890s (Seibel 202). Scholars have noted specific connections between Cather’s work and James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*; her interest in James’s friend and mentor Henri Bergson has also been charted by Tom Quirk. But the broader relevance of Jamesian psychology to Willa Cather remains unremarked.
What, then, would Cather have found in the William James she read in the 1890s, and how did this encounter affect the way her environmental imagination was formed? James, when he broke through to national prominence, popularized the “new psychology.” Cather would have found a fascination with the interplay between body and sensation; an interest in the subconscious or preconscious mind; speculation about the “will” and how we marshal the will to forge an active moral life. James was famously obsessed by energy and how we command or focus our energies. Ronald Berman, writing about his influence on Fitzgerald, summarizes these theories as “contemporary ideas of nervous energy, anxiety, and their moral effects” (142). What particularly interests me about Cather as an environmental writer is how often the self that interacts with the environment is very much the new self emerging from James’s writings about psychology. She might have come across these ideas in the essays that brought James to a wider readership, for instance the essays he wrote for Scribner’s Magazine in the 1880s and 1890s. “What the Will Effects” (1888) and “The Hidden Self” (1890) seem uncannily close, in their analysis of consciousness, to Cather’s explorations of selfhood. These essays analyzed the interplay between consciousness and unconsciousness, and the opposition between voluntary and involuntary action. For the apprentice writer at the turn of a new century, Jamesian psychology now offered a bracing, radical introduction to wholly new ways of configuring personality. In particular (and here the influence of James on Cather’s creation of figures such as Tom Outland or Thea Kronborg is evident), he rooted psychological process in the body and its reactions. He argued that “all our activity belongs at bottom to the type of reflex action, and that all our consciousness accompanies a chain of events of which the first was an incoming current in some sensory nerve, and of which the last will be a discharge into some muscle, blood-vessel, or gland” (“What the Will Effects” 217). Psychology as bodily process.

William James’s followers explored this dynamic in the fields of psychology and moral philosophy. James’s emphasis on the will led to his disciples using “will,” and a supposed failure of will, as tools to examine contemporary culture. Walter Lippmann’s
popular 1914 study, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest*, called for a restitution of will to the American character. At the same time as Lippmann was developing James’s ideas along the lines of a cultural critique, Cather embarked on a series of novels that fictionalized the Jamesian dialectic between “drift and mastery.” The rhythm of life, as seen in her fiction, is that adumbrated in James’s essays. Characters move from cycles of torpor, daydream, reverie, and anxiety into a kind of energized, determined action. A typical Cather character commits himself or herself to mastery. Thus, the mastery of engineering skill and scholarship in *The Professor’s House*; mastery of the voice and art in *The Song of the Lark*; mastery of the land and the making of a farm (*My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!*). Protagonists from Alexandra Bergson through to Latour master their subject, finally. But the foreground of these texts is often taken up with a characteristically Catheresque meditation on “drift”: on nervous anxiety, loss of control, reverie, dream, or nostalgia. Cather’s defense of *My Ántonia* was that it was a means to explore the “other side of the rug, the pattern that is supposed not to count in a story” (Interview with Flora Merrill 77). This comment is a defense of novelistic form. But for Cather, the “other side” also had a general, metaphoric significance, and when she wrote about the self and its response to nature, the “other side” seems to correspond to a Jamesian or Lippmann-like idea of “drift.” Cather was fascinated by the ordinary, moment-by-moment experience of *being* in the Western landscape. Although the novels explore, on one level, mastery over landscape (a suggestion given most notably in the invocation of Whitman in *O Pioneers!*), line by line and paragraph by paragraph Cather is fascinated by a quotidian, anti-heroic interplay between self and environment. Gertrude Stein says in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* that, “the normal is so much more simply complicated and interesting” than the abnormal (92). One way to link Cather and Stein is to think of them as female writers who defended the ordinary and “normal” experiences of everyday life as being “complicated and interesting.” For Cather, this meant a poeticizing of the everyday experiences of simply being in the West and the Southwest (a maneuver absolutely in accord
with pragmatism’s desire to enrich and poeticize everyday experience).

At its most heightened, indeed ecstatic, Cather’s nature writing envisages a harmony between drift and mastery. The ancient landscapes of the Southwest produce, above all, states of consciousness that balance the drive to master the environment and the desire to drift through the natural world. The Cather protagonist achieves self-mastery, even as (s)he is acted upon and shaped by environment; action is both transitive and intransitive, switching ceaselessly between meditation and mastery. One such moment occurs in *The Song of the Lark*, in the Panther Cañon episode, where Thea moves from doing nothing to violent activity: “She was thinking of nothing at all. Her mind, like her body, was full of warmth, lassitude, physical content” gives way to “Thea sprang to her feet as if she had been thrown up from the rock by volcanic action” (398–99). Cather figures her protagonist as if she were molten rock. And the climax of Tom Outland’s time on the mesa is all to do with this sense of synthesis, of yoking together opposites as one moves through landscape. Outland is curiously passive (he lies down on a rock and spends much of his time contemplating in almost Buddhist quietness), but he is also very active (he studies and creates a liveable space in the wilderness). He alternates between being an actor or a “doer,” and being a recipient (a creature acted upon by environment). Human activity and the natural scene achieve a state of perfect balance, as when Outland imagines the page of the book superimposed on the landscape behind: “I can always see two pictures: the one on the page, and another behind that” (252). This image echoes the image of the plowshare against the sun in *My Ántonia*: the man-made object caught iconically against a natural scene, with both the human and the natural brought into a spectacular synchronicity.

Outland finally represents an idealized dissolution of the boundaries between the physical and the mental, and between the spiritual and instrumental. Connections between Cather’s fictional exploration of the self-in-environment and William James’s work are absolutely explicit at such points, since the resolution of the Cartesian split between mind and body also obsessed the philosopher. “Tom Outland’s Story” almost reads like a prose-
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poem written in reply to “What the Will Effects” or “The Hidden Self,” as Cather creates a supple idiom to entwine landscape description with analysis of those elusive, barely conscious states of mind described by James:

I remember those things, because, in a sense, that was the first night I was ever really on the mesa at all—the first night that all of me was there. This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole. It all came together in my understanding, as a series of experiments do when you begin to see where they are leading. Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. It was possession. The excitement of my first discovery was a very pale feeling compared to this one. (250–51)

The central sentence of this passage (“It was possession.”) rests at the heart of Cather’s environmental imagination, precisely because it is so perfect and crystalline in its ambiguity. Who is doing the possessing? Outland or the environment? Both, in a sense, “possess” the other. Outland sees the landscape “whole,” and as a descendant of a whole array of romantic viewers of the sublime, from Wordsworth to Thoreau, he takes possession of landscape by seeing it. But at the same time, Outland is possessed himself by landscape, as he imagines himself as a vessel filled by light (a curiously feminine image to apply to the American male pioneer): “I was full to the brim, and needed dark and sleep” (251–52). The ambiguity here encapsulates the paradox of an “environmental imagination,” since an “environmental imagination” is at once an imagination of the environment and an imagination formed or created by the environment. Cather worked repeatedly toward this doubled state, finding a heightened, mystical state-of-being when we are both formed by and in mastery of the environment.

NOTE

1. A brief survey of key works charting the intertextual connections between Cather, on one hand, and William James and Henri Bergson on the other would include Quirk, Wassermann, and Curtin.


——. *The Professor’s House*. New York: Knopf, 1925.


In 1925 Willa Cather honored Gertrude Hall, the author of an unexceptional and occasionally florid layman’s guide to the operas of Richard Wagner, by contributing a brief introduction to the re-publication of Hall’s book, The Wagnerian Romances. In this essay, Cather briefly describes the difficulty of capturing the power of an operatic scene in narrative form. “I had to attempt it once, in the course of a novel, and I paid Miss Hall the highest compliment one writer can pay another; I stole from her (Preface 64–65).

This is a rather cryptic remark, though it has not always been read as such. Cather never tells us which novel contains her act of theft from Miss Hall, though the usual assumption is that it must be from The Song of the Lark. It is, perhaps, the performance of Lohengrin in which Thea Kronborg is revealed as the prairie girl once and forever transfigured by art, or the capstone scene in which she sings the role of Sieglinde from Die Walküre. Indeed, in his biography of Cather, James Woodress paraphrases the essay in a way that simply assumes this passage refers to The Song of the Lark, although Cather never mentions the novel in her introduction, nor does she say that she was translating a particular operatic scene as a scene within a novel (Woodress 358). She says instead that she had to translate “the feeling of an operatic scene . . . in the course of the novel” (Preface 64), which leaves open several possibilities, including the enticing one that she may
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have crafted whole novels that are imaginative translations of operatic material. Given the date of Cather's introduction to The Wagnerian Romances—1925—it’s not a given that she’s referring to the ten-year-old The Song of the Lark, the novel in which she makes the most extensive reference to Wagner’s music dramas. No less Wagnerian in its inspiration is the Pulitzer Prize-winning One of Ours (1922), a book that would have been fresh in her mind when she wrote her preface to Hall’s book.

Cather’s brief essay on Wagner says nothing about how her characters hear Wagner, or what Wagner’s music represents in her fiction. But it offers insight into how she herself may have heard Wagner and, perhaps, enough evidence to speculate that, outside of the musical performances depicted in her fiction, she had an encounter with aspects of Wagnerism—worked out in a novel—that would influence her writing and world-view at a profound level.

Cather’s access to the music of Wagner was extraordinary, especially given that through much of her lifetime, recording was inadequate to the acoustic demands of the composer’s scores. The years at the very end of the nineteenth century were a boom period for Wagner’s music in America. In February 1898, when Cather spent a week in New York City attending the opera and theater, the Metropolitan Opera had productions of Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde, Das Rheingold, Die Walküre, Siegfried, Tannhäuser and Lohengrin, all running the same month (Annals 82–83). These productions were star-studded: Ernestine Schumann-Heink, Lillian Nordica, Jean and Edouard de Reszke, and Anton Von Rooy all sang in New York that February, all legendary singers even at the time. The company performed in Pittsburgh during Cather’s years there. Her reviews suggest an immediate and total capitulation to the music.

Wagner’s music is rather idiosyncratically linked in Cather’s mind to geographies of open space. Cather says of Hall’s book, “I first came upon this book when I was staying in a thinly peopled part of the Southwest, far enough from the Metropolitan Opera House” (Preface 61). In the course of listening to music over a lifetime, strange and entirely personal associations are inevitable. That she came upon Hall’s book in the Southwest is of course an
accident of biography; but the connection of Wagner to landscape in the introduction to Hall’s book is not exceptional for Cather. In her 1913 profile of the Wagnerian soprano Olive Fremstad, she describes what seems almost a rupture in the confined, artificial space of the opera house, a fissure created by Fremstad’s singing that returns the listener to a wild and natural space: “She is not praying or looking into herself; she is looking off at the mountains and the springtime. From the audience one seems to see the ranges of the Pyrenees, to feel suddenly and sharply the beauty of the physical world (“Singers” 47). Even when Cather drops a casual reference to Wagner, as she does when describing Carlyle as full of “Wagnerian flashes and thunders and tempests,” it is in expansively, even violently naturalistic terms (Kingdom 222).

The music of Wagner, which broke with traditional phrase lengths, neatly limited repetitive structures, and many of the precedents of classical tonality, suggested boundlessness to many listeners besides Cather. Wagner’s music was embraced, or assailed, for its “endless” melody and for an engulfing chromaticism that was widely considered sexually provocative. But this boundlessness is philosophical, or emotional; for Cather, Wagnerian boundlessness isn’t just metaphorical but articulated in both geographical and architectural terms of place. The most notable example is the short story, “A Wagner Matinee,” in which the composer’s music paradoxically converts the confined space of the opera house into a place of infinite emotional possibility and renders the open space of Nebraska a place of claustrophobic confinement (Stories 495–96).

It’s a mistake to assume that Cather listened exactly as her characters, or contemporaries, did. Thea Kronborg’s first experience of Wagner’s music is a lesson in mishearing. At a concert in Chicago, Wagner’s music is preceded by Dvořák’s New World symphony, a symphony true Wagnerites would have shunned for its stolid central European musical structure and its debt to the music of Brahms. Yet this is the music that Thea hears in scenic terms: “the grass-grown wagon trails, the far-away peaks of the snowy range, the wind and the eagles, that old man and the first telegraph message.” Music from Wagner’s Rheingold, to which she listens with a “dull, almost listless ear,” however, leaves her
“sunk in twilight; it was all going on in another world” (Song of the Lark 160). Thea is still a naïve listener; she hears the sublime in the wrong place. And to drive home the point, Cather has Thea get her Wagnerian operas slightly confused. Rheingold is not, as Thea believes, about “the strife between gods and men”; indeed, men do not appear in Wagner’s mythological tetralogy until the second installment, Die Walküre.

The opera house is a very strange place to go if one is looking for an experience of the sublime in nature. Part of the charm of Hall’s book for Cather may well be that it frees her from the opera house, from what would have been a rather flat, poorly lighted, and stylized depiction of place. But even if the appeal of Hall’s book is that it allows Cather to respond to Wagner in terms of purely imagined spaces or spaces of her own choosing, this is still an uncommon and quirky way to hear Wagner, especially at the time. It definitely sets Cather apart from the wider body of Wagnerian appreciation and from contemporaneous authors who take Wagnerian themes as inspiration for literary treatment. European writers who take up Wagner as a subject for fictional treatment—Thomas Mann most prominent among them—are concerned with the composer as a political figure, or a sociological problem, even as a psychological illness. For Mann, Wagner is an inspiring problem, a mix of primitive and premodern ideology with powerful music; in his fictional treatment of Wagnerian themes, especially the short story “Blood of the Volsungs,” one senses the author wrestling primarily with Wagner’s most unsavory sexual and racial ideas.¹

And then we have Cather, who responds viscerally to something that seems at first glance almost irrelevant to Wagner: the place where his dramas transpire. Yet there are real insights into Wagner’s operas to be had from serious engagement with the composer’s depiction of natural spaces. Never mind the rafts of Jungian and Freudian analyses; if we want to understand the motivations of Wagner’s characters, we have to get them out-of-doors. Parsifal’s understanding of Christian charity and forgiveness is, in large part, an epiphany from the natural world, depicted in the Good Friday music; Siegfried’s intimation that there is more to his life and destiny than confinement with an
avaricious dwarf is an epiphany from the forest. Cather is the rare Wagner listener to be particularly alert to the power of these encounters.

In the same year that Cather wrote her introduction to Hall—and praised Hall for capturing the power of “particular rivers, particular mountains, even” (Preface 62)—the avant-garde German director and designer Adolph Appia produced the first two installments of the Ring cycle for the opera company of Basel: the stage design consisted entirely of platforms, steps, and curtains, all reference to an actual landscape entirely abstracted (Muller 516).

This was the direction of the Wagnerian Zeitgeist in 1925, toward a complete suppression of the scenic in favor of the intellectual and internal landscape; Cather is definitely heading against the wind. Indeed, the introduction to Hall’s book also makes Cather seem naïvely unaware of the political and philosophical debates that surrounded Wagner’s music. This certainly isn’t true. From her criticism of the 1890s, it’s clear that Cather had read, and apparently much disliked, Max Nordau’s Degeneration, which contained some of the strongest and most cogent anti-Wagnerian pages since Nietzsche’s The Case of Wagner. She also says, in the Wagner essay, that Hall’s book is one “of only two books in English on the Wagnerian operas that are worthy of their subject” (60). The other book is George Bernard Shaw’s The Perfect Wagnerite.

The bulk of Shaw’s book elaborates a vast allegory of the Ring cycle, a socialist allegory so compelling that it continues to influence productions of the cycle to this day. One might imagine that its overt politicization of the cycle would have been anathema to Cather, but Shaw’s commentary can be read not just in political and economic terms, but as a kind of meritocratic class struggle. And in those terms, it begins to seem almost Catheresque, especially given the Cather of 1922, the author who wrote One of Ours.

Shaw describes the characters in Wagner’s Ring cycle, an elaborate epic depicting a mythological world in its final era, this way: “Really, of course, the dwarfs, giants, and gods are dramatizations of the three main orders of men: to wit, the instinctive,
predatory, lustful, greedy people; the patient, toiling, stupid, respectful, money-worshiping people; and the intellectual, more talented people who devise and administer states and churches” (Shaw 29). Among the supernumerary characters in Cather’s novels, there’s hardly one that doesn’t fall neatly into or another of these categories.

There is also a fourth category in the Shavian analysis. “History,” he writes, “shows us only one order higher than the highest of these: namely, the order of Heroes” (Shaw 29). Cather’s attempt to explore this particular order in the creation of Claude Wheeler yielded what is often regarded as the weakest of her mature novels. If *One of Ours* is read only as a war novel, it’s easy to dismiss. But if taken as an effort to “translate” her own experience of Wagner “in the course of a novel,” we can turn away from chiding her, as Louis Auchincloss does, for not getting the battle scenes quite as right as Erich Maria Remarque did, and consider instead what role the war plays in her mélange of Wagnerian imagery (Auchincloss 107).

The connection of the novel to Wagner has been remarked on before, especially the link to the composer’s final opera (Woodress 328; *Song of the Lark* xii). There are compelling reasons for this comparison: Like Wagner’s Parsifal, Claude Wheeler is a holy fool, uncomprehending, inarticulate, only vaguely aware of his role as a redemptive hero. Auchincloss asks, “Why must she make Claude so sluggish, inert, dead?” (108). It’s tempting to answer, because that’s the way Wagner made him. Cather also flirted with overtly connecting the novel to *Parsifal* and considered naming the last section of the novel, “The Blameless Fool by Pity Enlightened,” a reference to the Parsifal of act 3, the Parsifal who has already had his epiphany (Lee 178).

But there is far more than a Parsifal motif at play in this novel. Cather is cagey about making explicit reference to Wagner or his characters, and when she does, they seem deliberately overetermined: A character named Tannhäuser dies on the voyage to Europe, muttering a snatch of German that might be something Siegfried or Parsifal once said, “Meine arme mutter” (My poor mother). But through an accumulation of subtle references, some of them mediated by references to Shaw’s interpretation of the
Ring, Claude emerges more a Siegfried than a Parsifal, and his death becomes the central emotional effect that she is trying to translate into narrative form.

And at least one of her references seems almost comically inflected to avoid the obvious problem of writing a Wagnerian novel about the First World War: Wagner was German and aggressively contemptuous of Cather’s beloved France. And so Claude’s first glimmer that there is a larger, more heroic world of action beyond the confines of Nebraska comes to him through the character of Joan of Arc: a French woman who dies just as Wagner’s Brunnhilde dies, by immolation (One of Ours 53–54).

The creation of Claude is also carefully controlled to mute the worst aspects of Wagner’s Siegfried—his impetuous amorality—into something more American and curiously nurturing, but no less driven to heroic action. This is, perhaps, the source of some of the odd and distracting contradictions in Claude’s character. He is able to cast off some yokes—his mother’s religion, for instance—but remains strangely passive in the face of his father’s demands, no matter how senseless and humiliating. But Siegfried’s emergence as a heroic figure comes only with the forging of a sword, to which Claude’s enlistment is the obvious analog. And if Claude at his most revolutionary seems pallid in comparison to Siegfried, who directly and brutally attacks the powers that confine him, it’s because Claude’s revolutionary sentiments are expressed with Shavian decorum: “It was strange that in all the centuries the world had been going, the question of property had not been better adjusted. The people who had it were slaves to it, and the people who didn’t have it were slaves to them” (68). This is the essence of Shaw’s allegory of Wagner’s Ring.

But it is in his death that Claude’s life most diverges from the Parsifal motif, and it is his death for which Wagner’s Ring cycle offers the most compelling explanatory power. Parsifal doesn’t die, and he does, in fact, succeed in redeeming the community of Grail knights; Siegfried and Claude, however, both die and neither of them redeems a thing. The strange hollowness of Claude’s death, usually accounted a failing on Cather’s part, reflects closely the strange and pessimistic twist that Wagner’s Ring cycle takes in
its final installment, *Gotterdämmerung*. That twist—in which the vigorous young hero is literally knifed in the back and the Gods who once controlled the world will their own destruction—is typically attributed to Wagner’s soured political beliefs, his rejection of youthful revolutionary ideals, and perhaps his growing interest in Schopenhauer’s idea of the renunciation of will.

The year that *One of Ours* was published, 1922, is a watershed year for Cather, the year that the world seemed to break in two. Despite the Pulitzer Prize, the poor critical reception of the novel may contribute to her increasing pessimism; but *One of Ours* was already a deeply pessimistic novel, even before it met its fate with the critics.² “One by one,” Cather tells us of the returning veterans, “they die quietly by their own hand” (370). Cather’s encounter with Wagner’s pessimism, his almost casual dispatch of a hero he had spent three operas, and decades, gestating, seems to affect her own treatment of Claude. Through Shaw and Wagner, Cather may also be grappling with the ideas of Schopenhauer, in particular, his pessimism and the notion of the renunciation of will; like Wagner’s *Ring*, *One of Ours* feels like a final outburst of heroic energy tempered by the author’s own growing resignation about the ugliness of the world.

If *One of Ours* is indeed a translation of Wagner into narrative, it is a different kind of translation than *The Song of the Lark*. It is no mere interpolation of a Wagnerian scene into a story; there is none of Cather’s exuberant hearing of landscape in the music. It is, instead, a Wagnerian world worked out in American terms. But in its working out, the power of Wagner as literary inspiration seems to have been either exhausted or internalized to such a degree that it would remain sub rosa in most of Cather’s subsequent work. Wagner disappears from her novels after *One of Ours*, and when he recurs in her stories, such as the 1925 “Uncle Valentine,” there is a marked valedictory tone. Indeed, “Uncle Valentine” is about the parceling away of the landscape—a landscape that is explicitly tied to the composer’s *Rheingold*—and its Wagnerian title character meets an even more absurd death than Claude Wheeler (*Stories* 235, 246–47). The story was published the same year Cather wrote her introduction to Hall; perhaps
with Hall’s book to recall to her Wagner’s music, she had taken what she needed from the composer and would move on to other landscapes, “far enough from the Metropolitan Opera.”

NOTES


WORKS CITED


Willa Cather’s Great Emersonian Environmental Quartet

“There are many ways of handling environment—most of them bad,” Willa Cather declared in her 1899 review of Frank Norris (Stories 922). Yet when used correctly, she added, environmental description can be “a positive and active force, stimulating the reader’s imagination, giving him an actual command, a realizing sense of this world into which he is suddenly transplanted” (922). A quarter-century later, when Cather realized four versions of this world as she scrutinized four modes of knowing, she produced a tetralogy designed around environments. Her four works cohered like the four autonomous movements of Dvořák’s American quartet—its rhythms half American, half European.1 To achieve a wide relevance, she focused on gender.

Starting with The Professor’s House, Cather used environmental keys to denote every important thematic or characterizing element in her four varied worlds. And because Ralph Waldo Emerson had authoritatively described nature on this continent, as well as because she loved him, she played with and against riffs of Emersonian music throughout.2 What she sought was enduring definitions. First she trenchantly critiqued the abstracting, objectifying, linear-thinking, phallocentric culture of the West in The Professor’s House; then she flayed the feeling-wrecked narcissism and gynocentric projections of My Mortal Enemy. Having settled the hash of both sexes, as well as their stereotypical ways of knowing the world, she turned to affirm myth-shaping and institution-building church fathers in Death Comes for the Archbishop. Then having accomplished in secular 1927 this astonish-
ing tour de force, she faced her most daunting challenge: how to depict a dominantly feminine culture or lifestyle positively—in the absence of convincing historical models. I believe she had already begun to outline the story she alternately titled “Three Women” when, in 1928, she first spotted Quebec and realized that in it she could successfully represent a matrifocal moment in time.\footnote{But when she finished the Quebec novel *Shadows on the Rock*, she immediately returned to her gestating story and therein produced an alternate ending for a gendered quartet.}

Napoleon Godfrey St. Peter, holding the keys to the kingdoms of patriarchal, linear-thinking Western cultures in his hands, name, and character, has lived much of his productive life as the embodiment of Emerson’s “American Scholar”—man thinking (65). He has built therefore his own world, as Emerson charged him to do at the end of *Nature* (*Selections* 56). He has done so by reordering history to emphasize *Spanish Adventurers in North America*, men “free and brave,” full of Emersonian self-trust in which “all the virtues are comprehended” (74). Beyond embodying the Canadian and American ancestral bloodlines of continental forefathers, Godfrey has made Spanish adventurers his life’s work. He therefore covers the whole continent, French top to Spanish bottom. He has concomitantly headed European History at his university (*Professor’s House* 56). Thus he serves as purveyor of transatlantic Western thought-styles. He has accomplished his professional work through conscious *design*—a word sacred to Emerson.\footnote{The fun of that effort—moving like Aristotle from beginning through middle to end—has produced an Emersonian delight.\footnote{This delight, appropriately for an Emerson man, encompasses Neoplatonic abstract ideas and forms.\footnote{He is, in short, the best of the West, the male who has fulfilled every Emersonian injunction and embodied every productive impulse of Western culture. The problem in the novel, in the Professor, and in Western cultures, however, is laid out clearly in the first sentence: “The moving was over and done.” St. Peter got along very well as long as his control, his design, and therefore his delight, lasted—that is, as long as he kept on moving. But now he’s finished.\footnote{In spite of his “powerful reaching arms” (71), St. Peter has no}}}}
place to go but within. He is tired of his family, none of whom he understands; he has no intimate friends left in his university; he can see that “Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course)” (69), but he has no access to either high art or deep religion. He is thus reduced to acedia, depression—that sinful condition theologians equate with spiritual sloth. St. Peter’s one inventive protégé is dead, having left as legacy a way for making war, creating carnage. By choice, St. Peter now occupies himself in staring fixedly at the “seven shaggy pine trees” (70) on his triangular beach. His action echoes Emerson’s poem “Brahma,” which ends,

The strong gods pine for my abode,
And pine in vain the sacred seven;
But thou, meek lover of the good!
Find me, and turn thy back on heaven. (Selections 451)

As the novel ends, St. Peter may be outward bound (281) with Augusta, who is like the taste of bitter herbs (280), but he is bound for a world beyond delight (282). His control of his backyard French garden he is delighted to have gotten the upper hand of after twenty years (15) is no longer enough for him. Even his delightful youth seems little more than a poignant memory.

For other consequences of delightful desire, of “hanging on with the heart,” Cather turned her attention to St. Peter’s opposite, Myra Henshawe. With My Mortal Enemy, she catapults us from a world of abstracted thought into a world of narcissistic feeling. The first sentence features four I’s, soon to be engaged with other eyes seen in mirrors. The last phrase mentions a mortal enemy the identity of which is still undifferentiated because in this story “others” are projections of the female ego, the self-centered vision. These brilliant renderings remind us of Emerson’s insistent I/eye/aye puns, in which one’s self, one’s sight, and one’s acceptances blend as one thing, or emerge from one spirit. It doesn’t matter who Myra thinks her mortal enemy is, or who Nellie thinks Myra thinks her enemy is, since all are swallowed into, and spring from, the all-encircling female ego, which exists by feeling: I feel, therefore I am. Nellie measures Myra by her own height, age, manner, and responses to Nellie: “By the
time her husband came in I had begun to think she was going to like me. I wanted her to” (7); Oswald, similarly, “had a pleasant way of giving his whole attention to a young person” (9–10). We know both Henshawes by how they make Nellie feel. And that’s the key to the novel, for the two females are variations on the same theme: women who think by feeling where they want to go.

The environments of *My Mortal Enemy* reveal the perceptual distortions that filter through feelings. While she ferries from the “Jersey City station,” for example, Nellie strains so eagerly to see the city through blurring snow that she misses at her right that female who holds up the powerful light—the Statue of Liberty. Soon, however, she can spot the more ephemeral and sexy lass, St. Gaudens’s golden Diana, stepping out “freely and fearlessly onto the grey air” (25). Half-blind or moonstruck, Nellie never asks about the difference between free stepping-out and real liberty. So Nellie, thoroughly delighted with her tourist site, sees Madison Square as setting for a dancing party into which winter is led like a tamed polar bear on a leash, held by a beautiful lady (25). Anyone who has survived a winter in Manhattan will gasp here. Even in Manhattan, nature cannot be leashed, manipulated or constrained so genteelly. In her pleasure to be out of Parthia, Nellie sees in Myra’s apartments only plum-colored curtains and soup tureen painted with birds and flowers, charmingly artificial reminders of natural things.

When they take a hansom cab around Central Park to enjoy a fine sunset and the changing light on the snow, Myra sees only a wealthier acquaintance in her own carriage, while Nellie sees only Myra. Both miss the natural light they say they are there for (40). Myra’s nature is unnaturally extravagant—like her florist’s holly that “naturally” belongs to Modjeska on Christmas Eve (30), or the violets one can buy in the New York snow (25). And when Nellie reassures us that Myra has lived to see the dawn (101), she fails to acknowledge that Myra is looking the wrong way—toward the sea in the West. Both seem to have missed the real light for the third time. At the end, Myra dies estranged from church, spouse, friend, even nature, as well as from the healing she longs for. Her *feelings* can’t get her where she wants to go. Her head would have graced “the wickedest of the Roman
emperors” (63), but she, living marginalized, has lived inauthentically, miscast. In her last days, she seems to be searching for the other half of herself—her reasoning brain; but her only trails wind through memorized lines. Even the comforting possibility she pronounces as a recognized principle—“in religion seeking is finding” (94)—is merely what she feels ought to be true. The fact is left undemonstrated. Myra never lets go of desire, as the Professor is forced to do.

When Lydia says that Myra is often “unreasonable . . .—most unreasonable!” with Oswald (35), she underscores the fact that Myra’s brains, her reason, don’t control her feelings. They certainly don’t prevent her brainlessly doing the romantic thing and leaving behind her uncle’s fortune to marry Oswald. Retaliating, John Driscoll wills his money to the Sisters of the Sacred Heart: to women committed to feelings he endorses.

“The eye is the first circle,” Emerson began his essay “Circles.” In My Mortal Enemy, all movement circles back to that eye and I, which circumscribes everything with one story—the only interesting story in town (3). But once the heroic female stages “Eve of St. Agnes” and rushes out with her lover into the storm, the story is over. “Our age is retrospective,” Emerson declared in his first published sentence. Looking backward to one heroic moment is a Parthian maneuver, what one should expect from natives of Parthia, Illinois. The Parthians perfected the Parthian shot, in which they feigned retreat before turning to shoot down their mortal enemies.

Death Comes for the Archbishop reverses The Professor’s House in almost every way, but none more charmingly than in its emphasis on la tour, the tower as “the fine thing that held all the jumble of houses together and made them mean something,” as we read in “Tom Outland’s Story” (Professor’s House 201). Latour, of course, holds together occupied houses and a living church in Death Comes for the Archbishop, not just sculptured ruins. He holds them by his political skill, administrative tact, tenacious perseverance, and clearheaded commitment to a higher good than his own life. Archbishop Latour is gentle, full of courtesy toward himself and others.

What is most remarkable about this almost infinitely complex
masterpiece, however, is the thematic uses to which Cather puts various environments. As the first chapter abruptly begins, for example, we are catapulted into the most malevolently predatory female landscape I know about in fiction. We register that if Cather can create an actively fertile, heaving female plain in *O Pioneers!*, or an awesomely yonic Panther Canyon in *The Song of the Lark*, she can render with equal power in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* a ravenous female desert, which represents that force utterly alien to our Christian father. Here the confused and disoriented Latour, his mind wandering and unable to focus, is surrounded by fissures and triangles and hills like Mexican ovens—breasts and buttocks. The earth has for Latour a “peculiar horror,” for the “very floor of the world is cracked open,” as Father Ferrand warned it would be (7). Succubus-like, that country tries to “drink up his youth and strength as it does the rain” (10). Only when Latour spots the male icon of the cruciform tree—a natural form fitting his chosen vision—can he surrender his consciousness to the suffering of his Lord, pray, recover, and escape the devouring female.12

Latour’s fear of the female is activated again in that snake cave, which saves him from freezing but also nauseates and offends him. Deborah Williams beautifully explains: “There is something primitive about the cave: the strong, devouring femaleness of the cavities and orifices directly contrasts with the icons of ‘dolorous Virgins’ above ground” (4: 85). That the snake cave is also a goddess cave, sacred to the Earth Mother to whom snakes are in turn sacred, at least explains Latour’s aversion to this “relationship that implies connection, a connection that makes Latour uncomfortable because it asks him to acknowledge beliefs other than his own” (Williams 4: 80). Indeed, as Williams explains, “This powerful force resides in the cave below the Sangre de Cristo mountains, which adds to the sense that its sacredness antedates the blood of Christ under which it hides. The ‘pagan’ lies under the Christian surface implying the presence of an earth goddess whom Latour senses but cannot name” (4: 85). For Father Vaillant, a Mexican cave can render up hidden vestments and sacramental objects. For Latour, however, the cave remains inexplicably abhorrent. Obviously, he’s intuitive as well as a man of
ordering reason; that is, he has the strong points of both Professor St. Peter and Myra Henshawe.

Given Latour’s distress when confronting older suggestions of female divinities than are dreamt of in his philosophy, we must explain why so many female readers regard him with marked affection. My own admiration has a lot to do with the orchestrated Emersonian sound track running beneath this text, much of it taken from Emerson’s very great essay “The Poet.” From the first chapter Cather places within her lethal female landscape a heroic male whose outlines we already know from far back: “As the traveller who has lost his way throws his reins on his horse’s neck and trusts to the instinct of the animal to find his road, so must we do with the divine animal who carries us through this world” (Selections 233), Emerson sings, simultaneously describing Archbishop Latour’s salvation in the desert and also defining Latour as a divine animal containing that of god within. When Latour kneels before the cruciform tree, Emerson explains, “The sublime vision comes to the pure and simple soul in a clean and chaste body” (Selections 234). The Emersonian poet, in fact, can be found “resigning himself to the divine aura which breathes through forms” (Selections 233), and is capable of new energy “by abandonment to the nature of things” (233). Saved at Agua Secreta, Latour ponders the mixed theology the spring suggests to him and Emerson intones, “No wonder, then, if these waters be so deep, that we hover over them with a religious regard” (Selections 228). My point is that the Emersonian echoes describing poets, who are thus liberating gods (“The Poet” in Selections 235), can manipulate my responses to Latour. I therefore accept as fitting the fact that in his last days, “he sat in the middle of his own consciousness” (290)—like a god—and thus dies happy.

As Latour recoils from assertive femaleness, so Cécile and the women of Quebec are repelled by the assaultive masculine wilderness. Henry David Thoreau may bellow vigorously that he loves the wild not less than the good, but Quebec women don’t share that point of view. And Pierre Charron agrees with them, saying, “Very well; religion for the fireside, freedom for the woods” (Shadows 175). In fact, in both Cather’s affirmative books, Death Comes for the Archbishop and Shadows on the Rock, these alien
environments are in reality dangerous. So nowhere in this quartet do dominant figures relax placidly in natural spots. All are happiest with the artificial—arranged, artistic, and civilized—where alien nature is under control.

But why call Quebec in 1697 matrifocal? Because its most successful figures are mothers, or mothers-to-be, like Cécile. The males, though usually concerned about the town’s daughters, are weak-willed as is Euclide Auclair, broken as is Antoine Frichette, guilt-wracked as is Blinker, extravagant and lawless as is Pierre Charron, pointlessly self-torturing as are Father Hector and Noël Chabannel, destructively willful and competitive as are the two bishops, imprudently audacious as LaSalle or disloyal as are his men, or dying as is Governor Frontenac. A bad father lets his little daughter be torn apart by carp.

This town is built around mothers. Its most central mother is Holy Mother Mary and its favorite church—Notre Dame de la Victoire—celebrates her military prowess and political intervention. Her church on the lower-town square features Mary at the central altar holding the baby Jesus, as it also honors Ste. Anne, who mothers Mary, as well as Ste. Genevieve, who once saved Paris and who appears here twice. Holy Family Hill is named for Mary’s domestic kingdom.

Beyond the holy mother are the reverend mothers and nuns who heal themselves and others at the hospital, as Mother Juschereau does, while telling their eager young friends heroic stories of other nuns and mothers. The triumphant adventurers in this novel are these mothers who get wherever they want to go, against all paternal opposition, and occasionally with the aid of a Queen Mother (41). In fact, though Willa Cather’s touchstone adventure story is the Aeneid, in which Aeneas carries his father from burning Troy on his back, here in Quebec Cobbler Pomnier carries his mother on his back when she needs to visit or go somewhere on Holy Family Hill.

Besides healing the sick, organizing charitable activities such as educating girls, making flowers for country altars, and carrying their country and families with them in their minds, these mothers stay within their wilderness-excluding fortress and stay cheerful.16 "They were still in their accustomed place in the world
of the mind (which for each of us is the only world), and they had the same well-ordered universe about them” (97). Maintaining that vision is their contribution to life on this rock where winter is “the deepest reality of Canadian life” (98).

The biological mothers within this artificial environment also preserve this way, their way, of life. Cécile’s mother gives her the pots and pans with which one makes a life, then teaches her how and when to use them (25). Their proper use is her sacred trust. No wonder, as the action begins, that Cécile is not interested in hearing her father’s fresh news from Montreal, that masculine world down the river: she’s concerned about her dinner roast, as she should be. Serving that dinner is the daily, culture-preserving performance that keeps her father “a civilized man and a Frenchman” (17).

There are bad mothers, of course—several of special interest. La Grenouille, mother of Jacques, is negligent and worthless. Madame Harnois leaves dirty sheets on her beds, lets her children go unwashed while they prattle of barnyard habits, and breaks the laws of hospitality. Even sainted Mother Catherine de Saint-Augustin fails to pray for Marie, the sinful pécheresse, until years after Marie’s death. But the most interesting failure is Jeanne le Ber’s, who refuses motherhood (177), breaks her father’s heart, rejects her dying mother’s last wish, and thereafter isolates herself completely. She experiences her cell as her paradise (136), however, and her “mode of knowing” allows her to receive grace and realize a heaven Myra never does. The male martyrs, conversely, even when bolstered by their vows of perpetual stability, live in hell (150–54). La Reclus summons angels to her aid and brings a miracle to Canada (128). Thus these women, good mothers or bad, transform the humdrum in ways that seem miraculous.

It is therefore no surprise, when we read of the wonderful Christmas Eve mass that brings all the town inside the glowing doors of the mother church (113), that we catch an echo of Emerson: “Meantime, whilst the doors of the temple stand open, night and day, before every man, and the oracles of this truth cease never, it is guarded by one stern condition; . . . it is an intuition. It cannot be received at second hand” (“Divinity School Address” in Selections 104). The intuitions here occur to gregar-
ious and caring women like Cécile and Madame Pommier and Madame Pigeon, who know where to go on Christmas Eve and how to gather together inside the feminine doors of the cathedral. Quebec’s opposite male summons to worship is furnished every iron-cold morning by Old Bishop Laval, who routs his reluctant flock out of bed and coerces them into early mass “because his will was stronger than theirs” (74).

It’s Emerson who seems to me to provide the best source for the title of Cather’s Quebec novel. In “Circles,” he says, “We learn that God is; that he is in me; that all things are shadows of him” (Selections 172). By the end of Shadows on the Rock Cather has brought off yet another tour de force. Even she seems to have been a bit incredulous, however, when she writes Governor Cross, “There, among the country people and the nuns, I caught something new to me; a kind of feeling about life and human fate that I could not accept, wholly, but which I could not but admire” (Stories 966). What she caught and then caught on paper was the way mothers could make a good life, even on a hostile rock. Cather’s uncertainty about her own accomplishment is the best explanation for why she turned immediately to “Old Mrs. Harris,” in time to have it ready for publication within the year.17 And that great story shows every sign of a long-previous conception, for it is not only built around triangles, as are all the books in this quartet, but is also only a few pages longer than My Mortal Enemy, which it inverts in as many ways as Death Comes for the Archbishop inverts The Professor’s House.18

The central triangle, as well as the three women she indicated in her magazine title, are the three generations of the Templeton family. Old Mrs. Harris, Victoria, and Vicky also represent the triune faces of the Earth Goddess—maiden, mother, and crone.19 This masterful story becomes historically as well as artistically important, however, because it provides the first instance incorporating the Great Goddess—in three equal parts—into this country’s fiction. Susan J. Rosowski, for example, has demonstrated compellingly in Birthing a Nation that Antonia suggests by 1918 the Earth Mother (81), the female force now often called the Great Goddess, who can be found in Native American emergence myths as well as in the artifacts unearthed in central Europe.20
Ántonia certainly stands as a “founder of races” (My Ántonia 342), whose children erupt dizzyingly from her well-stocked fruit cave (328). As Rosowski cogently points out, however, Ántonia disappears even from the text entitled My Ántonia, after Jim turns to Lena Lingard for sexual instruction. From Ántonia’s perspective, “there is no I here” (Rosowski 83). That is, Cather leaves Ántonia to find a legitimate husband and produce her happy houseful of children offstage, out of sight. She brings her back only as a grizzled crone in the we of her family. In Victoria of “Old Mrs. Harris,” conversely, Cather left an emphatic I at stage center, spotlighted.

The differences between Cather’s eyes-averted treatment of Ántonia during her sexually powerful, baby-producing period, and Cather’s treatment of Victoria in “Old Mrs. Harris,” is significant not only because the story “realizes” the female life force differently, but also because it closely follows Emerson to do so. In Emerson’s “Experience,” “the art of life has a pudency” (266). Emerson’s nature in this later essay is no longer the “beautiful mother” (see Nature in Selections 48) adored by her infantine child who is happily “embosomed for a season in nature whose floods of life stream around and through” him (Nature 20). Instead, Emerson’s maturer nature is wilder, freer, tangier, more transgressive and unpredictable:

Nature, as we know her, is no saint.... She comes eating and drinking and sinning. Her darlings, the great, the strong, the beautiful, are not children of our law; do not come out of the Sunday School, nor... punctually keep the commandments. If we will be strong with her strength we must not harbor such disconsolate consciences... We must set up the strong present tense against all the rumors of wrath, past or to come. (263)

Maiden, mother, and crone in Cather’s later story are avatars of this redefined, if still divine, life force. Cather finds not only a plausible way to set believable evocations of these strongly pre-Christian forms in the American Midwest, but also to create an unprecedented fiction depicting an American child-loving and domestically effective mother who is also actively and magnetically
sexual in the “strong present tense” of the text. The story presents approvingly this mother’s sexual power exerted over neighbors and townsmen as well as spouse and also insists that her house full of children is proud of her for having it (105).

Finally, “Old Mrs. Harris” is the first American story I know of to reject the still-active platitude that mothers should be self-sacrificing and should put their children first. That’s the way to rear selfish children, Mr. Rosen murmurs (85). Emerson, in “Experience,” comments, “Everything runs to excess; every good quality is noxious if unmixed…” (Selections 264). The three generations of Templeton women, whose “lot will be more or less” alike (190), provide in their three very different faces the healthy mix of generous and selfish motives characterizing a female principle, the natural mix reminding us of Emerson’s wry admission in “Experience” that “Nature hates calculators; her methods are saltatory and impulsive” (Selections 265).

To use an Emersonian phrase, in this story “All things swim and glitter” evanescently (see “Experience” in Selections 255). Vickie, who normally has a happy disposition (91), when severely disappointed “turned her face to the wall” (135), like Jeanne le Ber, though heretofore she has loved rocking in a hammock because it was “not on the earth, yet of it” (129). She gets what she wants through an old-lady network. The life-defining romance she cares about is education, not mating (125). And college will fulfill her dreams because she has no practical goals—she just wants it (131).

Conversely, Grandma Harris, who is willing to play kitchen cat to Victoria’s parlor cat (112), holds up a head like an “old lion’s” (76), reminding us of the lionlike female divinities to be found from Egypt through Asia. We then recall that the most powerful avatar of the Great Goddess was the crone. In some cultures she welcomed her beloved children back into her comfortable womb/tomb when they died, and in some cultures she ate them in the end. But her command and control of death is her great power. Thus, Old Mrs. Harris presides carefully over the lingering death of Blue Boy, the cat. Further, this story explicitly gives Grandma Harris the illusion of control at the time
of her own death. When she lost consciousness she did not die immediately, but she thought she did (156).

This intricately patterned evocation of a religious tradition so much older than Judaism, Christianity, or any of the sky-god myth systems explains, I believe, the crucial role of Mrs. Rosen. In Cather’s defining first sentence, Mrs. Rosen looks crosswise over her green back lawn toward the scorched earth belonging to the Templetons, while she does cross-stitch. Mrs. Rosen represents the Judeo-Christian tradition that must judge the goddess representatives. Mrs. Rosen is better educated, better organized, more accomplished, more affluent, perhaps more intelligent, certainly socially superior, than they. What is important here, as Jessica Rabin has demonstrated, is that she is not only willing but eager to perform her cross-cultural stitching, even to embrace all that Old Mrs. Harris suggests to her. The stronger, culturally dominant female overlooks her neighbor’s ragged ground and rushes to treat and honor Grandma Harris, whether Mrs. Harris wants the connection or not. In the gesture, Cather seems to suggest that women who stick together can prevail. It is Mrs. Rosen, after all, who takes the walk out of Skyline on a road that leads to the moon (101). But roads taken remind us that Cather’s favorite line from Michelet—“the end is nothing, the road is all”—though it appears in this story, has not yet been located in the work of that French historian. It does, however, echo strongly two lines from Emerson’s “Experience”: Twice Emerson repeats “Everything good is on the highway” (Selections 263); he also adds, “To finish the moment, to find the journey’s end in every step of the road, to live the greatest number of good hours, is wisdom” (Selections 261–62).

Grandma Harris relies on the wisdom of the earth. She knows to keep going when “every step cost her something” (114). She knows that “Everything that’s alive has got to suffer” (118). That narrative voice who tells her story acknowledges that every female lot eventually seems much like hers, whether recognition begins in maiden, in mother, or crone. That voice of experience in “Old Mrs. Harris,” articulating one of Cather’s greatest endings, moves in step with Emerson’s great finale in “Experience.” That
Emerson voice, in conclusion, is what I think Cather was hearing when she completed her great Emersonian environmental quartet: “Patience and patience, we shall win at the last....Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat; up again, old heart!...there is victory yet for all justice; and the true romance which the world exists to realize will be the transformation of genius into practical power” (see “Experience” in Selections 273–74).

N O T E S

1. These movements are: 1. Allegro ma non troppo; 2. Lento; 3. Molto vivace; 4. Finale: Vivace ma non troppo. Dvořák: Quartet in F Major, Opus 96 [“American”], produced by Thomas Z. Sheppard, Columbia Stereo M 32792. According to the record jacket, the quartet was written and first performed in 1893 in Spillville, Iowa, and incorporated both Native American rhythms and the Bohemian folk rhythms of the composer’s native Czechoslovakia.

2. According to Woodress, Cather probably read in its entirety, as a child, the complete works of Emerson available to her in her family’s library (50), studied him in college (72), and included him in the list of names “to stir the hearts of men” in her journalistic columns (108).

3. Cather’s magazine publication of “Old Mrs. Harris” appeared under the title “Three Women” (Scholarly Edition, Obscure Destinies 224).

4. “Every man’s condition is a solution in hieroglyphic to those inquiries he would put. He acts it as life, before he apprehends it as truth. In like manner, nature is already, in its forms and tendencies, describing its own design. Let us interrogate the great apparition that shines so peacefully around us” (see Nature in Selections 22). Emerson’s lines here seem especially relevant to the Professor, left staring at his seven shaggy pine trees on his triangular beach, at the end of the novel.

5. “In the presence of nature a wild delight runs through the man, in spite of real sorrows...the power to produce this delight does not reside in nature, but in man, or in a harmony of both” (see Nature in Selections 24).

6. Emerson’s first published reference to Plotinus, so far as I know, is in Nature (Selections 24).

7. Hence, the Professor loves the light opera he sees in Chicago, is an expert in Spanish furniture selection, and appreciates flower arrangement. He merely teases Augusta about his religious ignorance.

8. “...the sin of sloth is a state of dejection that gives rise to torpor of mind and feeling and spirit; to a sluggishness or, as it has been put, a poi-
soning of the will; to despair, faintheartedness, and even desirelessness, a lack of real desire for anything, even for what is good. Sloth is a deadly sin because it is ‘an oppressive sorrow that so weighs upon a man’s mind that he wants not to exercise any virtue.’ . . . morbid inertia. . . .” (Fairlie 113)

9. One often-seen explanation for the fact that seven is a “magic number” in almost every culture (including ours, which has a musical scale based on seven notes or features seven dwarfs or seven brides for seven brothers in fairy tales and musicals) assumes a “universal” recognition of seven directions: north, south, east, west, up, down, and within the viewer who stands to look or count.

10. In a world of “Brahma,” a state beyond delight and desire is a higher state of existence. Cather, as Emerson, seems to say with the Bhagavad Gita: “Seers know renunciation to be the giving up of acts of desire; Detachment is the relinquishing of the fruit of all action.” Cather used Frost’s words to paraphrase it as “letting go with the heart.”

11. In the phrase I am, of course, reversing Cather’s inscription to Robert Frost, identifying The Professor’s House as a tale about “letting go with the heart,” a phrase that derives from Frost’s poem “Wild Grapes.” For an excellent discussion of the implications of this phrase, see Stich (4: 237).

12. When Jacinto, spread-eagle, embraces the wall at which he listens in the snake cave, he reverses a cruciform position by assuming it backwards.

13. Drew University student Sarah Ross has also traced references to Emerson in this novel, though she finds “Circles” louder than “The Poet.”

14. “There is that of god in every man,” Quaker founder George Fox taught. Emerson, knowing and often quoting Fox, also reflects Fox when he uses such a phrase as “the divine animal.”

15. To elaborate as he did, “I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both. I love the wild not less than the good” (Walden 144).

16. It’s interesting that to Nellie’s moonstruck and dazzled eyes, the New York Battery shoreline suggests “an enormous fortress” (Mortal Enemy 23), while the church at ‘Acoma “was more like a fortress than a place of worship” (Archbishop 100).

17. The Scholarly Edition’s historical essay emphasizes the dateline of “New Brunswick, 1931” for this story (203) but speculates that it could have originated at the time of Mary Virginia Cather’s stroke in early December 1928—that is, half a year after Quebec charmed Cather
at first sight in June 1928. In any case, Shadows on the Rock was finished after Christmas of 1930 (205). “Poor Marty” was published in Atlantic Monthly in May 1931; “Two Friends” was dated “Pasadena, 1931.” This commentary adds, “The first of August marked the publication of Shadows on the Rock, the close of this chapter of her life. She must have been hard at work on ‘Old Mrs. Harris’ in August.” When her mother died at the end of August, Cather stayed on Grand Manan to finish her story, since she couldn’t leave the island in time to attend her mother’s funeral.

18. Kebec itself is described as “a fortified cliff” and “a triangular headland wedged in by the joining of two rivers, girdled about by the greater river as by an encircling arm” (4).
19. Two books on this subject may be of particular interest: Donna Wilshire, Virgin, Mother, Crone: Myths and Mysteries of the Triple Goddess; and Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image. I elaborated this reading of the story, equating the three women with the three faces of the goddess, in “Reading ‘Old Mrs. Harris’” Nebraska English Journal 37.1 (Fall 1991): 75–84.
20. The state museum in Budapest has a fine collection, to name one. And the Sackler Museum in Washington DC mounted the first comprehensive show of Devi, the Goddess as India knows her, in the spring of 1999.

WORKS CITED

Great Emersonian Environmental Quartet


From the Sinaguans to Thea Kronborg

ANN MOSELEY

From the time of Aristotle through the romantic period, art has been viewed as an imitation of nature. However, a closer study of the relationship between art and ecology, or the study of the relationship of human beings and other organisms to their natural environment, suggests that the relationship between art and nature involves the process of creation as well as its physical manifestations through cultural and artistic artifacts. The creative impact of culture, nature, and art as manifested through both space and time is clearly illustrated in the ecology of Walnut Canyon, Arizona, as reflected in the canyon itself, in the history of its people, and in its fictional representation as Panther Canyon in Willa Cather’s novel *The Song of the Lark*.

As Cather describes it, the canyon is an “abrupt fissure” (297, see fig. 1) in the earth in northern Arizona with walls that are “perpendicular cliffs striped with even-running strata of rock” (see fig. 2) for the “first two hundred feet below the surface”:

> From there on to the bottom the sides were less abrupt, were shelving and lightly fringed with *piñons* and dwarf cedars. The effect was that of a gentler canyon within a wilder one. The dead city lay at the point where the perpendicular outer wall ceased and the V-shaped inner gorge began. There a stratum of rock, softer than those above, had been hollowed out by the action of time until it was like a deep groove running along the sides of the canyon. In this hollow (like
a great fold in the rock) the Ancient People had built their houses of yellowish stone and mortar. (297)

Called “the most thoroughly elaborated female landscape in literature” (258) by Ellen Moers, this symbolic description clearly provides the potential for Thea’s creative renewal, especially when her presence on this “high cliff, full of sun” (298) is con-
Fig. 2. Soft stratum of rock hollowed out over time to create grooves for ancient cliff-dwellings, Walnut Canyon. Photo by the author

contrasted with her earlier feeling of being “erased” during her descent into the dark canyon on the night of her arrival. Before Thea experiences her personal artistic awakening, however, she must come to understand the culture and the ecology of the canyon.

Thea takes as her own “one of these rock-rooms” (289) in the canyon, and in so doing her life becomes inextricably intermingled with its ecology—with its geological and cultural history and with its natural life. In the canyon she finds what Susan Rosowski calls “evidences of ancient life that remain as if in a primal womb” (235). Covered eons ago by a shallow sea, the high Colorado Plateau on which Walnut Canyon is located experienced two periods of volcanic activity in which the plateau itself slowly rose, forming not only the San Francisco Mountains to the north of Flagstaff but also Walnut Canyon itself. Certainly this landscape can be viewed as an artistic creation, as suggested in the following description by Albert H. Schroeder:

Erosion began its ceaseless work on the still relatively flat
The Creative Ecology of Walnut Canyon

plain, rounding off sharp edges, cutting deeper into cracks, and shifting sands. As river gradients increased with the rise of the land, rushing waters gouged out larger quantities of sand and gravel and began the long process of scouring out the now famous Grand Canyon, colorful Oak Creek Canyon, [and] scenic Walnut Canyon. Water, heat, cold, and winds began carving the higher land masses, exposing colors and shaping land features to form the scenic landscape of the Painted Desert that stretches east from Wupatki to Petrified Forest National Park. To the north, erosion cut around Black Mesa, leaving three finger-like mesas protruding to the south on which the Hopi Indians many eras later built their villages. By Pleistocene times (the last ice age) the Colorado Plateau had been sculptured into its modern form. (5)

For Walnut Canyon, the result was the fissure described by Cather, with its lower layer of Coconino sandstone, its middle layer of soft limestone where erosion left edges on which the cliff dwellers built their homes, and its upper layer of hard Kaibab limestone covered with a mixture of clay loam and volcanic ash. 

Walnut Canyon and the area around Flagstaff, Arizona, experienced several different periods of inhabitation by early Pueblo tribes between A.D. 600 and 1450. The people whom Cather calls the “Ancient People” have been identified by Harold Colton as a “branch of the larger Mogollon Culture,” related to the Hohokam and Anasazi peoples through trade and other connections but a separate culture (Reid and Whittlesey 209). First encountering this little-known culture of Walnut Canyon on his honeymoon in 1912—the same year that Cather made her seminal visit to the canyon—Dr. Colton and his family again visited the Flagstaff area in 1916 and periodically thereafter, eventually moving there and establishing the Museum of Northern Arizona in 1926 (Reid and Whittlesey 206; Stein and Baldwin 36). The ancient people, whom Colton named the Sinagau from the Spanish words sin agua, meaning “without water” (Houk 2), “made only light use of the Walnut Canyon area before their descendants returned in strength about A.D. 1125” (Thybony 5). After living in the canyon
for about one hundred years, the Sinagua left the area and by A.D. 1250 had moved several miles southeast to the Clear Creek and Chavez Pass areas south of Winslow (Thybony 14; Reid and Whittlesey 220) to pueblos identified as ancestral locations of the Hopi. Although the archeological findings of Colton and others about the Sinagua people were not available to Cather when she wrote *The Song of the Lark*, she not only believed in a “cyclical historiography” (Reynolds 70), as suggested by the title of her article “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle,” but she also intuited the cyclical history of the canyon and of life itself: “Not only did the world seem older and richer to Thea now, but she herself seemed older. . . . Nothing had ever engrossed her so deeply as the daily contemplation of that line of pale-yellow houses tucked into the wrinkle of the cliff. Moonstone and Chicago had become vague” (306). As Guy Reynolds explains, the “basic movement” here is “one of time turning; by situating ourselves at different points on the cycle we can contrast cultures, comparing ancient and modern” (70), as Thea does here.

Several explanations exist for the cyclical rise and fall of the Sinagua population around Flagstaff during the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The first and most popular theory is Colton’s belief that the eruptions of Sunset Crater north of Flagstaff in the late 1060s scattered moisture-holding cinder throughout the area and thus increased its moisture and fertility, drawing people from surrounding areas into the Sinagua culture (Schroeder 33; Reid and Whittlesey 216). More recently, the rise in population in this period has been explained by increased rainfall in the area between 1050 and 1150 (Pilles 6) and by increased trade (Reid and Whittlesey 217). Most recently, Jefferson Reid and Stephanie Whittlesey have theorized that the inhabitants of the region associated the eruptions of Sunset Crater in the late 1060s and periodically thereafter with a supernatural power and that people from surrounding areas came to “propitiate” or “absorb” its power (217).

Whichever theory one believes, however, the Ancient People of Walnut Canyon and their artifacts portray a symphonic union of cultures through the amalgamation or the influence of diverse groups, just as Thea’s voice will be influenced by artists from
various cultures—her German piano teacher Wunsch, her friend Spanish Johnny, her Hungarian piano and voice teacher Andor Harsanyi, and the Ancient People of the canyon. As Cather realized, the artifact most revealing of both the culture and the art of these Ancient People is their pottery—the rounded shapes of which Debra Cumberland connects not only to the reproductive womb but also to the inverted, bowl-shaped diaphragm, which is the muscle shaping the breath for singing (68). Thea finds “fragments of pottery everywhere” (303) and takes them back to her room. These fragments derive from many different styles of pottery representing various cultures—“jars done in a delicate overlay, like pine cones; and . . . many patterns in a low relief, like basket work. Some of the pottery was decorated in color, red and brown, black and white, in graceful geometrical patterns. One day, on a fragment of a shallow bowl, she found a crested serpent’s head, painted in red on terra-cotta” (305). As represented by most of the fragments found in Walnut Canyon, pottery made by the Sinagua was plain reddish brown, thinned with a paddle and anvil (see fig. 3). However, other types of pottery were brought to the canyon through trade. For example, the “jars done in a delicate overlay, like pine cones” are probably examples of corrugated pottery from the nearby Elden Pueblo.
that were finished by leaving the coils unobliterated, adding vertical indentations, and then partly smoothing or flattening the resultant surface (Colton and Hargrave 63). The “patterns in a low relief, like basket-work” are probably Tusayan corrugated pottery (see fig. 4), which differs from Elden corrugated primarily in that the unobliterated coiled surface is “usually deeply finger indented” instead of being vertically indented (Colton, Ceramic Series No. 3, Ware 8A-Type 11). Although associated with later settlements in Walnut Canyon, the black-and-white pottery with graceful geometric designs is probably Anasazi in origin, and the red on terra-cotta bowl with a crested serpent’s head probably came from the Jeddito Valley in Navajo County, Arizona, although Cather could have also seen such a fragment at the Homol’ovi Pueblo north of Winslow.

To Thea, the pottery made by the Indian women so long ago becomes a symbol of the art she is seeking. She finds “a bowl with a broad band of white cliff-houses painted on a black ground. They were scarcely conventionalized at all; there they were in the black border, just as they stood in the rock before her” (305). Cather’s description here suggests the “living form” that Susanne K. Langer (Problems 45) identifies as the very essence of art, an essence that may be more clearly illustrated through the simplified artifacts of primitive peoples than through more complex modern representations. Leslie Marmon Silko uses the analogy of a squash blossom to illustrate this same concept:

The squash blossom itself is one thing: itself. So the ancient Pueblo potter abstracted what she saw to be the key elements of the squash blossom—the four symmetrical petals, with four symmetrical stamens in the center. These key elements, while suggesting the squash flower, also link it with the four cardinal directions. By representing only its intrinsic form, the squash flower is released from a limited meaning or restricted identity. Even in the most sophisticated abstract form, a squash flower or a cloud or a lightening bolt became intricately connected with a complex system of relationships which the ancient Pueblo people maintained
with each other, and with the populous natural world they lived within... (266)

As Langer observes, “It is . . . when the first semblance of organic form is achieved that a work of art exhibits its general symbolic possibilities, like a statement imperfectly made or even merely indicated, but understandable in its general intent” (Feeling 122). Thus, the abstract representation of the cliff houses or the squash blossom portrays the ideas of the objects more than the objects themselves.

As Langer also recognizes, the art object is a “projection” rather than a “copy” of the object in nature (Problems 53); nevertheless, the relationship between art and nature is so close that the artist can gain from nature not only a sense of organic form but also the symbolic Ideas that are the very essence of art—ideas like those Cather must have gained in May of 1912 when she visited Walnut Canyon and ideas like those she bequeaths to Thea in her visit to the fictional Panther Canyon. Indeed, as Rosowski has suggested in another context, “botanical and ecological principles helped shape Cather’s very idea of art” (“Ecology” 42), a
statement that can certainly be applied to “The Ancient People” section of *The Song of the Lark*.

Ecologically, Walnut Canyon represents a botanical transition zone just as Panther Canyon is a place of transition for Thea. Interestingly, Patricia A. Gilman’s observation that “deep canyons permit an extension of the vegetation of one zone into other zones” (4) implies an organic vitality similar to that suggested through Moers’s metaphor of the canyon as a female landscape. As Thea travels from Flagstaff toward the canyon, she passes through a pine forest “where the great red-trunked trees live out their peaceful centuries in that sparkling air” (295). One of five vegetation zones identified at Walnut Canyon (Rowlands et al. 1), this ponderosa pine forest grows up to the canyon rim and extends into Ranger Canyon, the shallow canyon between the “ranch house,” based on Cliffs Ranger Cabin, where Cather stayed during her 1912 visit, and the head of the main canyon.¹ Cather refers to the second vegetation zone, that of the piñon-
juniper woodland (Rowlands et al. 1), in the symbolic passage quoted at the beginning of this article, in which the “sides were less abrupt, were shelving, and lightly fringed with \textit{piñons} and dwarf cedars (Rowlands et al. 1). Cather locates Thea’s “rock-room” (see fig. 5), with the morning sun shining on it and the “tough little cedars,” or junipers, “twisted” into the doorway (298) on the south-facing slope, the site of the third vegetation zone of blue grama grass woodland, piñon pine, and cacti—including yucca, prickly pear, and three other varieties (Rowlands et al. 1).2 Although the tower beside which Thea and Fred play single-sticks seems to be located on or above the north-facing slope, Cather doesn’t specifically refer to the Douglas fir or other plants in this vegetation zone.3 She does, however, make several references to vegetation in the fifth zone, the deciduous, riparian woodland at the canyon bottom (Rowlands et al. 2). More specifically, the “flickering, golden-green” cottonwood seedlings behind which Thea bathes are probably the narrowleaf cottonwood with its yellowish green leaves and smooth, yellowish green bark that grew in greater numbers along Walnut Creek before it was dammed in 1941.

Remarkably, Cather not only uses such specific details that the particular species of plants and animals she is describing can be identified nearly one hundred years later but she also artistically imbues her botanical descriptions with symbolic meaning. Blooming from May until July, the banana yucca fits Cather’s description of the yuccas that “were in blossom” in \textit{The Song of the Lark} in July: “Out of each clump of sharp bayonet leaves rose a tall stalk hung with greenish-white bells with thick, fleshy petals” (309, see fig. 6). At the same time, the crimson hedgehog (or claret cup) cactus—which Cather calls the “nigger-head cactus”—was “thrusting its crimson blooms up out of every crevice in the rocks” (309, see fig. 7).4 Rosowski has observed that the “previously separated male and female imagery [in these descriptions], now combined as opposites working together, anticipate[s]” what she views as “the final state of Cather’s metaphor of imaginative growth, that of androgyny” (“Female” 237), but the image of botanical growth can also be directly related to Thea’s artistic growth.
A significant part of Thea’s growth as a singer in Panther Canyon results from experiencing the rhythmic and often symphonic voices of nature’s singers—the chirping of the “little brown birds” (314), the constant, rhythmic tapping of the woodpecker (307, 320), and the repetitious sounds of the cicadas (301) or locusts (319). Describing the rhythmic nature-based ceremonies of Native Americans, Paula Gunn Allen explains that
Repetition has an entrancing effect. . . . The distractions of ordinary life must be put to rest and emotions redirected and integrated into a ceremonial context so that the greater awareness can come into full consciousness and functioning. In this way the participants become literally one with the universe, for they lose consciousness of mere individuality and share the consciousness that characterizes most orders of being. (250)

Similarly, Thea instinctively and intuitively lets go of her personal consciousness and develops a universal consciousness in Panther Canyon, where she discovers the “vitality” in her voice and the “driving power in the blood” (307) and where “her power to think seemed converted into a power of sustained sensation. She could become a mere receptacle for heat, or become a color, like the bright lizards that darted about on the hot stones outside her
door; or she could become a continuous repetition of sound, like the cicadas” (300). These natural rhythms are experienced within Thea’s own body, for, as Langer has recognized, “Breathing is the most perfect exhibit of physiological rhythm . . .” (127), and one of Thea’s strengths as a singer is her “unusually long breath” (187).

The natural creatures and vegetation of the canyon metaphorically suggest not only the organic nature of art in general but also of music in particular. As Langer asserts, “The essence of all [musical] composition . . . is the semblance of organic movement.” Music, Langer believes, provides listeners with an “awareness of emotional storm” and an insight into “the ‘life of feeling’” through “the same principle that organizes physical existence into a biological design—rhythm” (126). To support her view that music is inherently organic and rhythmic, Langer quotes from Basil de Selincourt, who claims that

The growth of a musical composition may be compared to that of a flowering plant . . . where not only the leaves repeat each other, but the leaves repeat the flowers and the very stems and branches are like un-unfolded leaves. . . . To the pattern of the flower there corresponds a further pattern developed in the placing and grouping of flowers along the branches, and the branches themselves divide and stand out in balanced proportions, under the controlling vital impulse. . . . Musical expression follows the same law. (Langer, Feeling 130)

This passage emphasizes not only the major structural principle of repetition that, as discussed above, is “deeply involved with rhythm” and thus “gives musical composition the appearance of vital growth” (Langer, Feeling 129) but also the important idea of vitality.

As used by Selincourt, Langer, and Cather, the concept of vitality was most likely derived from Henri Bergson’s Creative Evolution, in which Bergson develops his theories about vitality and growth in nature and art, declaring that the artistic process “is a vital process, something like the ripening of an idea” (340). Cather’s familiarity with Bergson is documented both by her 12
September 1912 letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, in which she wrote that she had been reading *Creative Evolution*, and by her preface to the 1922 edition on *Alexander’s Bridge*, in which she asserts that the writer must rely on “what Mr. Bergson calls the wisdom of intuition as opposed to intellect” (9). Moreover, Loretta Wasserman, Tom Quirk, and Toni McMillen have clearly illustrated Bergson’s influence on Cather’s work. One particular parallel between *The Song of the Lark* and Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* is that both use organic metaphors to represent music. After describing the process that an artist goes through to solve an artistic problem, Bergson writes: “[T]he concrete solution brings with it that unforeseeable nothing which is everything in a work of art. And it is this nothing that takes time. Nought as matter, it creates itself as form. The sprouting and flowering of this form are stretched out on an unshrinkable duration, which is one with their essence. So of the works of nature” (341). Cather’s description of Thea at the moment of her greatest triumph clearly recalls this passage: “[S]he was conscious that every movement was the right movement, that her body was absolutely the instrument of her idea. Not for nothing had she kept it so severely, kept it filled with such energy and fire. All that deep-rooted vitality flowered in her voice, her face, in her very fingertips. She felt like a tree bursting into bloom” (478). To Bergson, “consciousness only emphasizes the starting-point of instinct, the point at which the whole series of automatic movements is released” (145). The culmination of this process, which Bergson calls the perfect representation of the idea through the act (144–45), is what Thea seeks and achieves in her triumphant performance.

Music is, as Langer explains, an “occurrent art; a musical work grows from the first imagination of its general movement to its complete, physical presentation, its occurrence” (Langer, *Feeling* 121). In other words, music exists on several planes, beginning with the Idea of the composer, moving to the interpretive Idea of the performer, and ultimately culminating in one or more performances. Langer explains that

Performance is the completion of a musical work, a logical continuation of the composition, carrying the creation
through from thought to physical expression. Obviously, then, the thought must be entirely grasped, if it is to be carried on. Composition and performance are not neatly separable at the stage marked by the finishing of the score; for both spring from the commanding form and are governed throughout by its demands and enticements. (138)

As shown by the performances in which Thea recreates the role of Fricka as a wise and beautiful goddess and projects “one lovely attitude after another [as] the music swept her” in the role of Sieglinde, Cather would have agreed with Langer’s conclusion that, “Real performance is as creative an act as composition” (139).

Although musical notes appear spatially on a sheet of paper, music is actually an “art of time” (Langer 120) rather than space. Appropriately, then, Cather’s description of Panther Canyon encompasses not only elements of geological, architectural, and natural spaces but also elements of historical, personal, and musical time. Against the background of the lives of the Ancient People, Thea develops a new understanding of time. In Moonstone and Chicago, she “had always been a little drudge, hurrying from one task to another—as if it mattered!” (300). But in Panther Canyon, she moves beyond clock-time to what Henri Bergson calls “lived time,” or “duration.”

She used to wonder at her own inactivity. She could lie there hour after hour in the sun and listen to the strident whirl of the big locusts and to the light, ironical laughter of the quaking asps. All her life she had been hurrying and sputtering, as if she had been born behind time and had been trying to catch up. Now, she reflected as she drew herself out long upon the rugs, it was as if she were waiting for something to catch up with her. She had got to a place where she was out of the stream of meaningless activity and undirected effort. (299)

Although Bergson stopped short of identifying a symbol for “duration,” Langer believes that his concept of “‘lived time’ [or duration] is the prototype of ‘musical time’” (Feeling 115). Cather,
too, seems to have connected this more meaningful time with musical development, for in Thea’s inactivity in Panther Canyon, she held pleasant and incomplete conceptions in her mind—almost in her hands. They were scarcely clear enough to be called ideas. They had something to do with fragrance and color and sound, but almost nothing to do with words. She was singing very little now, but a song would go through her head all morning, as a spring keeps welling up, and it was like a pleasant sensation indefinitely prolonged. It was much more like a sensation than like an idea, or an act of remembering. Music had never come to her in that sensuous form before. (299–300)

Thea is learning to distinguish between the artistic instinct that Bergson associates with matter and the artistic intelligence that he relates to form (149). Ultimately, Thea will be able to combine instinct and intelligence, subject and form, into one intuitive artistic whole.

At this early stage of her artistic evolution, Thea’s growth is primarily physical, involving the senses and the body. She comes “to understand that—with her at least—voice was, first of all, vitality; a lightness in the body and a driving power in the blood” (307). Moreover, Fred not only observes the elasticity in her uncorseted body as she climbs the steep canyon path, but he also tells her, “If you go in for opera, there’s a fortune in a flexible body” (318–19). As Cumberland has observed, Cather’s emphasis on Thea’s body here reflects the emotional and sexual elements of contemporary physiological singing theory as taught by Lilli Lehmann and practiced by her students Geraldine Farrar and Olive Fremstad (64), whose physical approaches to singing Cather praised in her essay “Three American Singers.” Moreover, just as Cather connects the artistic expression of Fremstad, the prototype for Thea, to the “old paths of human yearning” (46), so does she identify the primary source of Thea’s artistic expression and understanding as her physical experience in Panther Canyon. After several triumphant performances at the Met, Thea tells Fred that she learned the “inevitable hardness of human life” from the rocks
and dead people of Panther Canyon but that “you can’t know it with your mind. You have to realize it in your body, somehow; deep. It’s an animal sort of feeling . . .” (463).

At the same time that Thea is developing physically in Panther Canyon, she is also growing mentally and emotionally, for her “ideas were simplified, became sharper and clearer” (306) during her stay in Panther Canyon. Cather uses the concept of “ideas” here not to mean a controlling intellectuality but rather what Langer has identified as the “central significance” of a musical composition, or “what Flaubert called the ‘Idea,’ ” whose “symbol is the commanding form that guides the artist’s judgment even in moments of intense excitement and inspiration” (Feeling 122). A composer or performer who truly understands and presents the central musical Idea of a piece sacrifices personal awareness and identity for the artistic Idea itself. Thea, for example, “seems to sing for the idea”—indeed she “simply was the idea of the Rhine music” (396). Similarly, Cather claims that for Olive Fremstad, the operatic prototype for Thea, “the idea is always more living than the emotion; perhaps it would be nearer the truth to say that the idea is so intensely experienced that it becomes emotion” (“Three” 46). Significantly, like Bergson, Cather associates the development of artistic ideas with organic metaphors. These organic images—the poetic flowering of musical ideas that Cather discovers in Fremstad’s heroic roles (“Three” 46) and the metaphorical “bursting into bloom” that she attributes to Thea (478)—derive, at least in part, from the ecological spaces and times of Panther Canyon.

As shown by the influence of Walnut Canyon on Cather’s artistic expression, analogously represented by the effect of Panther Canyon on Thea’s music, we can adapt William Howarth’s assertion that “places shape thought” through the “interaction of nature and culture” (“Ego” 3) to read that “places shape art” through the influence of their creative ecological energy on the artist. As Howarth further explains, these ecologies themselves result from the intermingling of nature and culture, “like water and soil in a flowing stream” (“Principles” 69). However, it is only when members of the cultural group seek to express themselves artistically that a permanent “living form,” to use Langer’s
term, is created. In *The Song of the Lark*, this organic, living
form is beautifully symbolized by “The stream and the broken
pottery: what was any art but an effort to make a sheath, a mould
in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element
which is life itself—life hurrying past us and running away, too
strong to stop, too sweet to lose?” (304). Combining the cultural
expression of Sinagua pottery with the natural element of the
stream, this passage does more than symbolize art; it actually
becomes art. Here, as in many other places, Cather has achieved
the essence of art as she described it in 1896, for to her,

Art is not thought or emotion, but expression, expression,
always expression. To keep an idea living, intact, tinged
with all its original feeling, its original mood, preserving in
it all the ecstasy which attended its birth, to keep it so all
the way from the brain to the hand and transfer it on paper
a living thing with color, odor, sound, life all in it, that is
what art means. (*Kingdom* 417)

Ultimately, Cather’s creative voice in *The Song of the Lark*, like
that of Thea’s, draws on both cultural and natural sources in
Walnut Canyon to express artistic Ideas in inviolable living forms.

NOTES

People,’” for further explanation of Cliffs Ranger Cabin as the prototype
for the ranch house near Panther Canyon and of Ranger William Henry
and Mattie Pierce as prototypes for Old Henry Biltmer and his wife.

2. Cather and her brother Douglass, who accompanied her on her
visit to Walnut Canyon, may have spent the night of 24 May 1912 in
this room or in a similar room nearby. Howarth reports that he saw
Cather’s signature in the Cliffs Ranger Canyon logbook for 23 May and
25 May of 1912 but not for 24 May (Letter). Unfortunately, this logbook
has since been misplaced.

3. No tower exists on this site today, but Cather may have had in
mind the ruins on top of a landform at Walnut Canyon known as the
Third Fort, a promontory that extends out into the canyon.

4. Descriptions of the banana yucca cactus (*Yucca baccata*) and the
crimson hedgehog cactus (*Echinocereus triglochidiatus*) can be found in
A Field Guide to the Plants of Arizona by Anne Orth Epple (29–30, 161). According to Jeri DeYoung, archeologist and director of Walnut Canyon National Monument, both varieties have been recorded at Walnut Canyon.

5. The “little brown birds” (The Song of the Lark 314) to which Cather refers could be either the shyer canyon wren (Catherpes mexicanus) or the more melodious rock wren (Salpinctes obsoletus) (Stokes and Stokes 358–59). Both species have been sighted in the canyon, but Jeri DeYoung believes that Cather was probably referring to the rock wren. DeYoung also reports that several species of woodpeckers have been recorded at Walnut Canyon National Monument, including the northern flicker (Colaptes auratus), acorn woodpecker (Melanerpes formicivorus), Lewis’s woodpecker (Melanerpes levis), and hairy woodpecker (Picoides villosus or Dendrocopos villosus).

6. Another source for Cather’s description of Thea as a “tree bursting into bloom” is act 1, scene 3, of Richard Wagner’s opera Die Walküre. In this scene Siegmund sings to Sieglinde a love song about the coming of spring, in which “blissful birdsong” emits sweet sounds and “from his [Spring’s] warming blood bloom / wondrous flowers, buds and shoots / sprout forth from his strength” (Spencer 135). I am indebted to Susan J. Rosowski for first pointing out this connection to me.

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Unmasking Willa Cather’s “Mortal Enemy”

For many years, scholars have regarded *My Mortal Enemy* as somewhat of an enigma. Written in only a few months during the early spring of 1925 and published both serially and in book form in 1926, Cather’s shortest novel was sandwiched in between *The Professor’s House* (1925) and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). While the subject matter of these latter two works can be traced to Cather’s experience of and growing interest in the desert Southwest, *My Mortal Enemy* seemingly has nothing to do with these subjects or her Nebraska roots; it appears to have come out of nowhere, baffling those who have tried to fit this rather anomalous work into a logical progression of Cather’s artistic development. The question of what prompted Cather to write such a novel at this point in her career, for example, has still not been answered definitively. One commonly held hypothesis was first voiced by Marcus Klein, who in his 1961 introduction to the novel wrote that for Cather, “The story of Myra Henshawe must have been [the product of] a personal crisis” (xxiv). Klein, though, acknowledged that he could not prove his theory, “because there is available no record other than the novel” (xxiv–xxv). Emmy Stark Zitter has recently argued that in *My Mortal Enemy* and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940) Cather “exercises the autobiographical impulse by melding details of her own life into her fiction” (297), but, like Klein, she is unable to name which “details” of her life Cather drew on in writing *My Mortal Enemy*.

As hinted in the above statements by Klein and Zitter, much of
the general uncertainty about the meaning of *My Mortal Enemy* can be traced to the absence of a persuasive theory as to who the real-life models for the novel’s characters were and what Cather’s relationship to them was. Cather herself wrote in a 1940 letter that, in James Woodress’s paraphrase, “she had known Myra’s real-life model very well, and the portrait drawn in the story was much as she remembered her”; Cather also added that the woman had died fifteen years before *My Mortal Enemy* was published, and that many relatives of this model later wrote to her to say that they recognized the “real” Myra from her depiction in the novel (Woodress, *Literary Life* 380). Given such hints and Cather’s penchant for drawing on her experiences in Nebraska for characters, settings, and plots, it is quite understandable that scholars have thus looked to Red Cloud and Lincoln for possible sources of the people and events depicted in *My Mortal Enemy*. In 1986 Mildred Bennett argued, citing unreliable evidence, that the character of Myra Henshawe “may have been Myra Tyndale . . . wife of Troilus Tyndale” (“Who Was Myra Henshawe?” 19), people whom Cather had once known years before in Lincoln. This hypothesis, however, is based solely on a conjecture made by Mrs. Walter Trent, granddaughter of the Westermanns from Lincoln. Thus, in his 1987 biography of Cather, Woodress was forced to conclude: “Of all Cather’s works, *My Mortal Enemy* has the most obscure provenance,” adding that “the prototype for Myra Henshawe in this work has never been identified” (*Literary Life* 380).

In light of the evidence presented in this article, though, I believe that Cather intended her comments about the model for Myra Henshawe to serve as red herrings that would protect her relationship with the couple who were the prototypes for the Henshawes, both of whom were still alive in 1925. Mark Madigan has recently demonstrated how Cather in 1905 had to hold off publishing “The Profile” because of fears that the main character might recognize herself and commit suicide, and twenty years later Cather would have been well aware of how her portrayal of the Henshawes might have affected both the real-life wife (who died in 1929) and husband (who died in 1949) if they had recognized themselves. It is my contention that the Henshawes
were modeled after people Cather knew not in Nebraska but rather in New York: S. S. and Hattie McClure. Myra’s uncle, John Driscoll, was modeled after Hattie’s father, Professor Albert Hurd. The prototype for Aunt Lydia, too, can also be named: Louise Williston, who first introduced S. S. McClure to Hattie and who subsequently served as secret intermediary during their courtship.

Possibly most important, identifying the Henshawes as the McClures allows us to more conclusively identify Cather herself with Nellie Birdseye. Nellie and Cather, both Midwestern onlookers and recorders, experienced four distinct stages in their relationships with the Henshawes and the McClures (especially with S. S.), respectively: idealization, disillusionment, pity, and understanding. In turn, the striking similarity of Cather’s and Nellie’s evolving relationships with these couples prompts a re-assessment of the novel’s meaning and its place in Cather’s career and life. *My Mortal Enemy*, I believe, was an extended attempt by Cather to deal with certain aspects of her own past and to move on in a world stripped of romantic illusion, taking the people and places who inhabited it for what they really were rather than for what she had idealized them as. Cather’s “mortal enemy” was not so much S. S. McClure himself but rather what he represented: an idol from her past. To progress artistically and personally, Cather needed to fully understand and come to terms with the “real” McClure; *My Mortal Enemy* is the product of that process.

What inspired Cather to write about S. S. McClure and his wife Hattie in the spring of 1925? The answer can be found in a photograph that many Cather scholars are undoubtedly familiar with (fig. 1). In it former *McClure’s Magazine* staffers Cather, Ida Tarbell, and Will Irwin are seated on a bench in Washington Square Park in New York City on a fall day in 1924, laughing and smiling as they look at S. S. McClure, their former boss from over a decade earlier.¹ McClure, in 1924 the figurehead editor of a greatly diminished *McClure’s Magazine*, might have called these former staffers together simply for lunch, but the copy of the new *McClure’s* sticking out of his jacket pocket in another photo taken that day (fig. 2) indicates his more likely motive: he wanted to en-
list their help in saving his current venture (Tarbell eventually did contribute a series of articles on the head of United States Steel, Judge E. H. Gary). Undoubtedly they reminisced about the past and, at least briefly, could laugh about it. The second photograph, though, taken just minutes before or after the other, indicates that the reunion had its less convivial moments: all four stand, stiffly, with dour looks on their faces. The frowns are certainly not surprising, since all four persons present possessed many painful memories of their working relationships with each other.

In fact, as recently as the spring or summer of 1924, Cather had been urged by S. S. McClure to convince author George Brooks to write a series of stories for the magazine. Instead, remembering how working for McClure could take an author down paths he or she never intended, Cather invited Brooks to tea at her apartment and “on that occasion she all but made him swear he would never attempt such a series” (Lyon 398). Both Tarbell and Irwin would later write autobiographies (in 1939 and 1942, respectively) in which they would laud McClure’s editorial genius and commend
him for his charming personality. Cather never wrote an autobiography, but I believe that this reunion in Washington Square Park brought up Cather’s many contradictory feelings about the past and S. S. McClure himself, which she only a few months later began writing about in My Mortal Enemy.

The visit with McClure and the others would almost certainly have brought back a flood of memories for Cather, especially of her earlier relationship with him. When she first met McClure in 1903, Cather was a young Midwesterner eager to make it in the East. McClure promised to start publishing Cather’s fiction himself and help her place various stories with other publishers, and three years later he brought her to New York to work on his magazine; suddenly, Cather had the entrée to Eastern literary culture that she had been seeking ever since she was a young girl. Sharon O’Brien argues, however, that McClure’s “help” came with a price: “a mentor who wants to plan the smallest details of his protegee’s career can be an oppressive father who may not
grant his daughter a separate identity; similarly, a daughter who imagines going to the stake for a fatherly leader [Cather once wrote that if McClure were a religious leader people would go to the stake for him] is displaying a disturbingly self-destructive allegiance” (289). James Woodress concurs that “Next to her father and brothers he was the most important man in her life,” and adds, “Her devotion to McClure . . . was a hindrance to her career, for he kept her editing his magazine long after she should have been channeling all her creative energies into writing fiction” (Literary Life 171–72).

Yet, while it is commonly recognized that Cather sometimes felt artistically stifled by her editorial work for McClure’s and wanted out, it is also important to recognize that for six years she kept in place. In part this was because her position as managing editor made her one of the more powerful women in New York magazine publishing at the time; in addition, McClure provided solid financial support and time off when her ill health required it. Her unwillingness to leave McClure also stemmed in part, however, from her own doubts about her writing ability and from McClure’s comments that echoed such doubts. As Cather wrote to Sarah Orne Jewett in November 1908 about McClure, he “tells me that he does not think I will ever be able to do much at writing stories. . . . I sometimes, indeed very often, think that he is right” (Cather to Jewett, 18 November [1908], qtd. in Donovan 44). Eventually, prompted by Sarah Orne Jewett’s advice that to do her own best work she needed to break away from the journalistic world of McClure’s, Cather began in the fall of 1911 to leave it behind in order to pursue her own writing.

But while Cather could leave the magazine relatively easily, she found it much more difficult to break from McClure himself. In early June 1912, as McClure was losing control of his magazine in a financial and editorial reorganization, he wrote to Cather asking for help; Cather, from Lamy, New Mexico, expressed her indignation at the shabby treatment he was receiving and pledged to aid him in whatever way she could (letter to McClure, 12 June 1912). Cather honored her pledge in January 1913 when she began working with McClure on his autobiography, a project that he valued highly for the possible income and prestige it could
generate for him. McClure, though, was not the only one to benefit from this experience. Many critics have noted that as Cather wrote down what McClure told her about his life and then constructed his autobiography, she learned to narrate from a male point of view, a skill she employed in *My Ántonia* (1918), *A Lost Lady* (1923) and *The Professor’s House* (1925). Deborah Lindsay Williams has recently argued, too, that Cather’s position as “ghostwriter” on this project taught her that “invisibility, or apparent invisibility . . . [can be] a mode of power—power over access to secret knowledge and the power to escape definition and categorization” (29). In addition, this experience provided Cather with valuable material for use in future fictions. Robert Thacker notes how McClure-like figures showed up later in “Ardessa” (1918) and “Her Boss” (1919) and concludes that “as she listened to McClure tell this story, Willa Cather made it her own and made it, too, part of the stories of the numerous characters who were to spring from her fecund imagination” (Thacker, Introduction xiii), including Thea Kronborg, Jim Burden, and Godfrey St. Peter. In fact, Thacker’s recent linkage of the latter character to McClure, and Cather’s narrative technique in *The Professor’s House* to Cather’s methods writing McClure’s autobiography (“‘It’s Through Myself’” 133–37), suggest that *My Mortal Enemy* is more closely linked to the novel that immediately preceded it than has been previously recognized; both works reflect Cather’s interest in understanding complex men such as McClure.

McClure publicly acknowledged Cather’s help with his autobiography, including as a headnote to the serialized version that began in October 1913, “I wish to express my indebtedness to Miss Willa Sibert Cather for her invaluable assistance in the preparation of these memoirs” (“My Autobiography” 33), and in a foreword to the book, published in 1914, “I am indebted to the cooperation of Miss Willa Sibert Cather for the very existence of this book” (*My Autobiography* v). For obvious reasons, though, Cather did not reciprocate by revealing how the experience of ghostwriting McClure’s autobiography helped her construct *My Mortal Enemy* twelve years later.  

Even before starting work on McClure’s autobiography, Cather
certainly had had ample opportunity to know a great deal about McClure. After all, between 1906 and 1911 she was managing editor of McClure’s Magazine and worked closely with her boss. But as Cather listened to McClure dictate his story in the winter and spring of 1913, writing it down in longhand the next day and having her secretary subsequently type up these notes (Thacker, Introduction x), Cather was afforded even greater access to the details of McClure’s life. One of the most prominent strands of this autobiography, significantly, is McClure’s dramatic, passionate, and romantic courtship of his future wife, Harriet (Hattie) Hurd. Given the importance of this story to McClure’s self-conception (and knowing that McClure would not shy away from sharing private matters), it is not at all unlikely, too, that during this time McClure would also have given Cather access to the numerous letters that passed between him and Hattie over the years and which they had saved; these would have given Cather an even greater understanding of their relationship.

In 1913, Cather thus helped McClure produce for his autobiography, intended for public consumption, a version of the great, dramatic love story involving he and his wife that he had told innumerable times to other staffers and anyone else who would listen. After the autobiography was published, Cather pursued her own writing and developed new friendships. Yet, between 1913 and her meeting with McClure in the fall of 1924, Cather did keep in touch with both S. S. and Hattie McClure (there are many letters extant between the two women, and Cather in her letters to S. S. always asked him to give her best to Hattie). What prompted Cather to write about the McClures in early 1925, though, was learning about McClure’s pathetic position during her 1924 meeting with him. Possessing detailed knowledge both of the McClures’ courtship and their current situation, Cather commenced her novel about the lies, contradictions, and disappointments involved in such a seemingly passionate love affair, and the disillusionment of one who wants so very much to believe in it. The numerous parallels between the stories of the Henshawes and the McClures make identification of these persons as Cather’s models unmistakable; furthermore, the evolution of Nellie’s relationship with the Henshawes is closely mirrored by
Cather’s relationship with the McClures, and with S. S. McClure in particular.

Oswald and Myra Henshawe first fall in love in Parthia, a small town in southern Illinois. When Myra’s rich uncle and guardian John Driscoll finds out that his beloved, pampered, and well-educated niece is being courted by Oswald, “he forbade him the house” (*My Mortal Enemy* 538). Driscoll, a devout Catholic, dislikes Oswald not only because he comes from a lower social class but also because he dislikes Oswald’s father, who is an “Ulster Protestant” (538), a faith presumably shared by his son. To circumvent the uncle’s interdiction, Nellie’s Aunt Lydia helps them meet secretly at her parents’ home. Eventually, “Driscoll so persecuted the boy that he felt there was no chance for him in Parthia. He roused himself and went to New York. He stayed there two years without coming home, sending his letters to Myra through” Aunt Lydia (538). Once Oswald is sufficiently established to afford marriage, “He wrote to John Driscoll, telling him his resources and prospects, and asked him for his niece’s hand. It was then that Driscoll had it out with Myra” (538). Driscoll tells Nellie that “If she married young Henshawe, he would cut her off without a penny” (538) and her inheritance would go to the Catholic Church. He also advises her, “It’s better to be a stray dog in this world than a man without money. . . . A poor man stinks, and God hates him” (538).

Despite this warning, Myra forsakes great wealth for romantic love and secretly elopes with Oswald. Aunt Lydia and some other friends take her to a neighboring town, where she and Oswald are married by the “civil authority” (539); Myra tells Nellie, “I went before a justice of the peace, and married without gloves, so to speak” (572). Afterwards the couple leaves on the Chicago express train, never to return to Parthia until after John Driscoll’s death. For their leading roles in this drama, Oswald and Myra Henshawe become romantic, nearly mythological figures to the residents of Parthia and to Nellie Birdseye in particular. Nellie recounts that Myra Henshawe “and her runaway marriage were the theme of the most interesting, indeed the only interesting, stories that were told in our family, on holidays or at family dinners”
Fig. 3. S. S. McClure, circa 1875. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington

Fig. 4. Hattie McClure, circa 1871. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington
For Nellie, the Driscoll house and grounds became almost a shrine to romantic love; as a teenager she enjoys walking by the place and thinking of it “as being under a spell, like the Sleeping Beauty’s palace; it had been in a trance, or lain in its flowers like a beautiful corpse, ever since the winter night when Love went out of the gates and gave the dare to Fate” (540).

Compare the Henshawes’ story, then, to the romance of Hattie and S. S. McClure. McClure was an Irish immigrant and “Ulster Protestant” who came to America in 1866 and eventually enrolled in 1874 as a preparatory student at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. Due to his poverty, McClure during his first month at Knox lived in a vacant dormitory room and subsisted on bread, soda crackers, and grapes. In 1876 he met Harriet (Hattie) Hurd, a fellow student and daughter of Albert Hurd, a professor at the college (see figures 3, 4, and 5). (Oswald’s inscription of the volume of Heine love poetry that he gives to Myra is, significantly, dated 1876 [My Mortal Enemy 570].) The person who introduced them, Louise Williston, was an older woman who had been the object of Sam McClure’s crush but who had hoped to distract him with Hattie, three years older than he, who she
believed could act as “a kind of wise & distant second cousin or aunt” (Williston to Hattie, 12 November 1876). The great social and educational gulf between them, Williston presumed, would preclude any romantic involvement. After all, Hattie lived in one of the finest houses in Galesburg, described in detail by a French visitor in 1894 as being surrounded by a fence—just as the Driscoll place was enclosed by an iron fence—and furnished in luxurious good taste (Bentzon 887). S. S., on the other hand, at the time lived in a cheap boarding house across town. Hattie, who was beautiful and extremely accomplished (she was valedictorian of her class and spoke French and German, just as Myra did), represented her parents’ beliefs in what young women could achieve with higher education; it is thus not surprising that she was sought after by numerous young men of high social status. Yet, to the dismay of her parents, family, and friends, she was transfixed by the young man who literally came from the other side of the tracks.

Learning of the relationship, Hattie’s father vehemently expressed his desire that she not have contact with McClure. This led Louise Williston to act as intermediary during Hattie’s senior year, letting Sam and Hattie meet at her house and passing letters between them. The strong passion of their attraction is quite evident in these letters. In May 1877, for example, Sam wrote to Hattie, “My darling, God only knows how wildly and terribly I love you. My love is a living agony that scarce can find expression” (19 May 1877). Hattie, recognizing that her feelings for Sam were inappropriate—at least according to all social conventions and to her parents and friends—tried on numerous occasions to deny her love for Sam and break off their unofficial engagement, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it. “Every time I tried it,” she wrote to him later in May, “it almost took my life” (29 May 1877). She adds in this same letter, “My heart aches to see you. I feel that I must make you know how I love you and that I will always be true to you.” Years later in My Autobiography, in words dictated by McClure yet shaped by Cather, McClure recalled, in a gross understatement, “Professor Hurd and his wife naturally looked with disfavor upon their daughter’s attachment for a rough country boy who had already a reputation for being
visionary and unstable, and who had certainly no very encouraging prospects” (88). In fact, in August 1877 Professor Hurd, a clear prototype of John Driscoll, spelled out to his daughter in no uncertain terms his expectations for her, leaving no doubt at all that Sam McClure didn’t even come close to measuring up. Underlining those words he felt deserved emphasis, Hurd told his daughter she should marry “a man who can support you. . . . Love and poverty in your case would give you a very wretched life” (26 August 1877). In words that the older Myra Henshawe might have thought to herself, Louise Williston also at the time warned Hattie about the dangers of making an impulsive, romantic decision: “[I]t is a fearful awakening to a woman when at thirty or any other age, she probes the fact, with her mature consciousness, that she does not love the soul to whom she is mated as it is possible for her to love” (Williston to Hattie, 25 February 1877).

After his daughter’s graduation from Knox in June 1880, Albert Hurd made Hattie break off her unofficial engagement to McClure, would not let McClure see Hattie at her house, and then sent her away to a French Protestant school in Berthier-en-Haut, Quebec. Before leaving, Hattie wrote to McClure, “you mustn’t write to me or expect to hear from me as long as I am dependent on my father. If I should bring his displeasure on me it would kill me” (5 July 1877). For the next two years, Sam and Hattie were kept separate, just as Oswald and Myra were. Yet McClure never gave up his pursuit of Hattie. During those years he continued, doggedly, to send her letters and await any reply. After graduating from Knox in 1882, McClure tracked Hattie down in upstate New York but was sent away without much encouragement. As McClure recalled in his autobiography, during this time, “My feeling for her became a despairing obsession” (96).

Then, like Oswald Henshawe, McClure established himself in the East, becoming the editor of a Boston bicycling magazine and earning just enough to support a wife. Unbeknownst to Albert Hurd, McClure at this time also reestablished relations with Hattie, who was teaching at Abbot Academy in nearby Andover. Sam again professed his love and pressed his case; the result was
that in the spring of 1883 he and Hattie set a wedding date of 4 September 1883. In *My Mortal Enemy*, Oswald wrote to Myra’s uncle Driscoll to ask for his niece’s hand in marriage, but in the McClures’ case it was Hattie who wrote to her father to announce the wedding plans. In reply, Hattie received the following: “Last summer I gave you my opinion of McClure. . . . His personal appearance, his bearing, & his address are not pleasing to me; I think him conceited, impertinent, meddlesome, &c., &c., and, of course, would not choose him for your husband. I regard it as a misfortune that you ever made his acquaintance” (qtd. in Lyon 42). Hattie was thus forewarned: marriage to S. S. McClure would result in strained relations with and distance from her parents. (No mention is made in *My Mortal Enemy* of how Oswald’s parents reacted to his relationship with Myra; McClure’s father was dead, but his mother strongly opposed the match with Hattie, a fact he did not reveal in *My Autobiography*.)

Even though Sam and Hattie did not elope, as Oswald and Myra did, their romance certainly became the stuff of small-town legend. According to Peter Lyon, who was not only McClure’s chief biographer but also his grandson and thus privy to confidential family history, when Hattie returned to Galesburg to make wedding preparations in June 1883, “from the day she got home her family was sullen and bitter; all over the town her affairs had set malicious tongues to clacking” (Lyon 43). And just as the Henshawes were married outside the auspices of the Catholic Church, the McClures were married at the Hurd home, not at the Congregational Church to which the Hurds belonged. During the ceremony, “Outside in . . . [the Hurds’] yard, a considerable company of curious gathered to peer through the windows and the wintry party that followed it” (Lyon 45). In 1964 a writer for a Galesburg newspaper could still recount with zeal how “the story of this Knox romance was first told us by the mother who was on the scene when the affair was on every Galesburg tongue” (“S. S. McClure Success”). In a curious convolution of actual events, the mother supposedly had told this reporter “that Harriet, refused permission to marry the young man whom her father believed to be an upstart, eloped with him by climbing out her bedroom window” (“S. S. McClure Success”). Fervently desiring to believe
in the power of love, the bride’s own mother and the townspeople thus had greatly embellished a romantic tale. Cather, recognizing this desire in others—and herself—would later portray such legend making in *My Mortal Enemy*.

As far as can be determined, Albert Hurd never financially disowned his daughter. However, for having broken the “faith” with her father she was, to some extent, emotionally disinherited by him. Numerous letters between Hattie and her sister and mother in later years indicate not only her father’s distance from Hattie but also that she was always on the defensive, feeling as if she had to justify her choice of husband and path in life. Hattie also suffered from her father’s negative opinion of her husband: until Hurd died in 1906, he only grudgingly allowed S. S. McClure to stay in his house when visiting and publicly stated that he never approved of him.

After giving the details of the romance between Hattie and S. S. McClure, the author of the newspaper article in which Mrs. Hurd’s faulty reminiscences were recounted asks, rhetorically, “And did their romance endure forever?” His answer is quite cryptic: “Well, not without some costly interruption” (“S. S. McClure Success”). In a similar vein, Nellie Birdseye, her voice brimming with hope and innocence, asks Aunt Lydia about the Henshawes, who sacrificed money for romance: “But they’ve been happy, anyhow?” (539). Although Nellie had already been somewhat surprised at Myra’s “short, plump” (533) appearance and “could not help feeling a little disappointed” (540) when she first met Myra in Parthia, she had still gotten her hopes up from her initial meeting with the Henshawes, during which she believed she saw a long-married, still-loving couple (535). Thus, Aunt Lydia’s reply—“Happy? Oh, yes! As happy as most people” (539)—deflates many of Nellie’s dreams about the Henshawes. She comments, “That answer was disheartening; the very point of their story was that they should be much happier than other people” (539).

The Henshawes soon regain their status as idols in Nellie’s eyes, though, when she and her Aunt Lydia later travel to New York to visit them. Nellie believes that the Henshawes’ apartment
on Madison Square is the epitome of taste and elegance, and the couple’s glamour for Nellie is further enhanced by their association with numerous artists and famous people such as Madame Modjeska. Nellie believes that such a lifestyle, combined with the Henshawes’ supposed great love for one another, should suffice to make them extremely happy.

Yet Nellie soon sees the faults in the Henshawes’ marriage. She finds out, for instance, that Myra wants much more than Oswald can give her with his limited income. Nellie observes with some surprise that Myra “was wishing for a carriage—with stables and a house and servants, and all that went with a carriage!” (552). Myra’s disenchantment with her life is also evident when she whispers to Nellie, “[I]t’s very nasty, being poor!” (552). In addition, Nellie discovers that Oswald is receiving cufflinks as a gift from a younger woman—probably someone with whom he is having an affair—and that he wants Nellie and Aunt Lydia to help him lie about them. Myra immediately sees through the ruse and cuts Oswald to the quick with a comment about the cufflinks. At first Nellie approves of the way Myra deals with Oswald’s deception and probable infidelity, commenting, “I thought him properly served then” (550). In the same breath, however, Nellie indicates her deeper understanding of Oswald, which came much later and allowed her to sympathize with him. Learning after this incident how cruel and harsh Myra could be beneath her charming exterior, Nellie comments, “often since I have wondered at his gentle heart” (550).

When Nellie a few days later walks in on the Henshawes’ argument over a key that Myra had found in Oswald’s things, they are completely knocked off the pedestal upon which Nellie had placed them. Oswald lies to Myra about what the key unlocks, and the malicious distrust each has for one another is palpable. Nellie states, “I stood bewildered. This delightful room had seemed to me a place where light-heartedness and charming manners lived... And now everything was in ruins” (556). The Henshawes, cosmopolitan idols of Myra’s Midwestern innocence, had now tumbled to the floor and broken in pieces. As Nellie and her Aunt Lydia leave town, the latter expresses her anger at Myra, exclaiming, “I’m sick of Myra’s dramatics...
I’ve done with them. A man never is justified [in having an affair], but if ever a man was . . .” (558). Nellie, significantly, does not respond, implying tacit approval of her aunt’s sentiments, and, once again, sympathy for Oswald’s position.

Similar to Nellie, Willa Cather probably began idealizing the McClures from the time she first went to New York to visit the offices of McClure’s Magazine in May 1903. This year, incidentally, is just one year before Nellie Birdseye’s visit in 1904 (Murphy, “Complex Past” 70), and the magazine’s offices at East Twenty-third Street were just a few blocks east of Madison Square and the Henshawes’ fictional residence. After their meeting, S. S. McClure invited Cather to visit at “The Homestead,” his large house in Ardsley-on-Hudson, Westchester County. Given McClure’s personality, by this time he had already probably told Cather the official version of his long, arduous courtship, which might have made the McClures’ life appear even more perfect. Upon arrival, though, Cather’s romantic image would have been somewhat deflated when she met Hattie McClure, who, like Myra, was a rather short, plump woman (see fig. 6). Possibly counterbalancing her disappointment, however, was Cather’s discovery that the McClures had as a houseguest none other than Mrs. Robert Louis Stevenson; like the Henshawes, the McClures associated with famous, artistic people. Cather must have realized even then that she had begun to penetrate the ranks of the Eastern publishing and artistic world, which she viewed as the most glamorous available to her at the time. James Woodress writes that when Cather left after her one-day visit with McClure, “she was in a state of delirious excitement, his captive for life” (Literary Life 171).

Cather would have soon been disavowed of any such idealization of the McClures, however, when she came back to New York in April 1906 to work at McClure’s Magazine. After all, this was only weeks before McClure’s leading staff members walked out on the “Chief” on May 10 to protest not only his harebrained business schemes, but also his increasingly outrageous behavior with young women; Cather could not have avoided hearing detailed discussions about both of these subjects.

Everyone who knew McClure recognized that he was completely inept regarding money matters. On the surface, McClure’s
Magazine appeared to be extremely successful. At the time Cather joined its staff in 1906, it enjoyed an extremely high circulation and carried more advertising than almost all the other major monthlies. However, because of overextension and debt, it was running at a loss (Wilson 191). On a personal level, similar to the Henshawes, who were profligate in their spending, the McClures spent far more than they had and were always deeply in debt despite their apparently prosperous lifestyle. McClure, reared in near poverty, liked to play Lord Bountiful, financing European tours for his family and friends and paying for his and his wife’s visits to expensive spas for their health. Cather, despite being in charge of the editorial end of the magazine, was well aware of the magazine’s financial troubles. As former McClure’s Magazine
business manager Curtis Brady remembered, on one occasion in 1908 when he and McClure were heatedly discussing a particular financial issue, “Willa Cather was there, as white as a sheet” (Brady to Lyon, 24 April 1957). Early on, too, Cather would have learned that the McClures’ magnificent home that she had visited in 1903 was, in fact, only rented.

Potentially more disturbing to Cather’s image of McClure was his proclivity toward dalliances with young women. When Cather came to the magazine in 1906, McClure had for a few years been carrying on an affair with a young female poet named Florence Wilkinson, who had seventeen poems published in McClure’s Magazine between 1900 and 1904. During an ocean crossing in June 1903, McClure gave Hattie an extravagant marquisé ring of twenty-one stones for the twentieth anniversary of their engagement, but during the same trip McClure was evidently carrying on with Wilkinson, who was in their traveling party along with Ida Tarbell (see fig. 7). It was also common knowledge that Wilkinson was not the first to fall prey to McClure (Lyon 261). The staff worried that if word of McClure’s affairs leaked out it would compromise the integrity of the magazine, a fear exacerbated by the fact that one day in 1905 Hattie McClure brought to the office a package entitled, “The Shame of S. S. McClure, Illustrated by Letters and Original Documents,” sent to her by one Edith Wherry, who was probably Miss Wilkinson’s competitor for S. S. McClure’s affections (Lyon 277).

Ida Tarbell in particular was angered at what she saw happening, not only because she worried about the magazine’s fate but also because she cared for Hattie McClure. Behind the scenes Tarbell wrote to various staffers and to Hattie herself to try and devise a scheme to put a stop to McClure’s philandering. To John S. Phillips, McClure’s college friend and business partner, she wrote, “‘He’s a Mormon, an uncivilized, unmoral, untutored natural man with enough canniness to keep himself out of jails and asylums’” (qtd. in Lyon 261). In the year after the disastrous European trip, numerous magazine staffers wrote to Hattie to advise her on how to handle the situation (see Tarbell to Hattie, 12 July 1904; Mary Bisland to Hattie, 22 June 1904; John Phillips to Hattie, 29 June 1904). In July 1904 Tarbell advised Hattie,
FIG. 7. Trip to Europe, 1903, left to right: unidentified (behind railing), Robert McClure, Florence Wilkinson, Cale Young Rice, S. S. McClure, and Alice Hegan Rice. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington

“Nothing but good can come from your exercising your rights with him,” so “You must take the upper hand for Mr. McClure’s sake as well as your own” by helping him to “learn to control his whims and desires” (12 July 1904). Like Oswald, then, McClure enjoyed the company of young women, probably for the ways in which they made him feel young and vital; the key question, though, was how their wives and those who loved these men would respond to knowledge about the affairs. Cather, in My Mortal Enemy and in her life, had to deal with the question: How should someone respond to the revelation that romantic love is not always enough to keep both parties committed to a relationship?

Cather has Myra Henshawe react by displacing her romantic dreams onto young people for whom she played matchmaker, and by becoming extremely distrustful of her husband, trying to wound and control him with bitter and sarcastic verbal thrusts. Hattie, on the other hand, appears to have taken a less con-
frontational approach. Some parties mistook Hattie’s reaction for an unwillingness to deal with the truth. Mary Bisland of the McClure’s London office wrote to Tarbell on 7 July 1904 that Hattie had “‘lived all her life in a world of illusion, has shunned the truth & does not realize in the least the [physical] needs of her husband, who like nearly all men of his gifts is more or less of a sensualist, & is going to gratify that side of his nature at all costs’” (qtd. in Lyon 263). Tarbell, too, in early June 1905 wrote to John Phillips, “‘Of course Mrs. McClure is stone blind and deaf and dumb. She makes me wild’” (qtd. in Lyon 275).

Nothing, though, could have been further from the truth; Hattie was fully aware of her husband’s philandering. She had learned from an 1893 dispute with him, though, that frontal expressions of her distrust were ineffective, merely eliciting from him angry denials and profuse expressions of his undying love for her (see S. S. McClure to Hattie, 11 and 12 January 1893).

It is also possible that what precluded an open break in the relationship was the way Hattie almost idolized her husband (her letters to him throughout her life express her deep, almost spiritual feelings for him). In addition, there is some evidence that she herself felt unworthy of S. S. In 1893 she speculated about the reasons he sought out the attention of other women and wrote to him, “I have very much regretted lately that I am not different for your sake—younger, handsomer, stronger, more brilliant and interesting, and more self-assured” (12 January 1893). Such idolatry and insecurity could have made her wish to disbelieve the facts right in front of her.

Another perspective on the situation, though, was offered many years later by Curtis Brady, who remembered Hattie as “a little bossy” and believed this might have helped push McClure into his philandering (Brady to Lyon, 5 June 1957). Such a comment distantly echoes Aunt Lydia’s comment that “A man never is justified [in having an affair], but if ever a man was . . .” It might also reflect the feelings of some of those staffers who, like Cather, remained loyal to McClure. Eugene Englund has argued that Myra deserves a good deal of the blame for her marriage’s sorry state (126), and the same might be said for Hattie. If Hattie
had felt in some way responsible for her husband’s womanizing, it is possible that her guilt would have led her to avoid confronting him.

Yet Hattie’s more significant motivation for remaining married to her adulterous husband, forgiving him, and attempting to reform him can be traced to her religious beliefs. She believed S. S. was her cross to bear, sent by God as a test of her devotion. In one letter to him she wrote that he might think of her “as exercising a noble vocation in relation to you. God has given me to you as your guardian angel.” She then told him:

[L]ove of my heart, I know of [sic] long time now, that it is not the natural thing for you to take such a long journey in solitude. I know that when a man is known to desire a female companion and to entertain her generously, he can always have one. But God has not given your personal attractions or your power thro [sic] money to have them used in degrading indulgences, or in buying the personal honor of women, corrupting their consciences and staining their reputations. Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation. Take care of these very things, that you may tender your account to your Lord with joy and not with grief. (1 September 1904)

She continues: “In quietness and confidence is my strength. Say, rather, that I am proving my faith by my works; for God bids me speak thus.” After citing numerous biblical passages, Hattie exhorts her husband: “Oh, precious, weary one! Oh, that He may indeed love and sustain, and cheer and enlighten you through me, the one he has chosen and ordained for this dear task!” This letter represents the most explicit statement Hattie made to S. S. on this matter; in general, Hattie used indirect methods to restrain S. S., putting into practice what Deborah Lindsay Williams argues Cather learned in writing McClure’s autobiography: that “invisibility, or apparent invisibility . . . [can be] a mode of power” (29). Such a strategy evoked Ida Tarbell’s admiration: “You are able to command him in a degree which amazes me. . . . You are able to be so kind with your firmness” (12 July 1904). Hattie, unlike Myra, clearly achieved some type of inner peace and effective
methods of dealing with her “fallen” husband and the dashing of her romantic illusions.

Cather, too, like Myra and Nellie with Oswald, had to make a decision as to how to react to knowledge of McClure’s romantic escapades. At least according to Edith Lewis, she apparently tried to overlook them. Lewis writes that “To the end of her stay at McClure’s, Willa Cather’s relationship with Mr. McClure was without a cloud” (70), adding, “[S]he understood and truly admired him; his faults never blinded her to his great qualities” (71). Further evidence of Cather’s desire to believe in McClure’s integrity is seen in the way she refused for some time to view as credible the stories circulating about McClure’s affairs with young women. After the breakup of the McClure’s staff in 1906, Cather remained ever loyal, dismissing rumors about the Chief’s affairs, seeing him as a kindly man. As Elizabeth Sergeant recalls, “it was clear that she regarded the ‘walk-out’ as disloyal to McClure” (39). Possibly the strongest indication of Cather’s willingness to accept McClure, warts and all, was her complicity in reproducing for McClure’s autobiography his version of his courtship and marriage. However, I believe that despite this show of public loyalty, Cather privately could not have avoided being somewhat disillusioned by what she had learned of her boss and father figure.

Ten years after she last sees the Henshawes in New York, Nellie encounters them again, this time in an unnamed city on the West Coast. There she is moved to pity the Henshawes for their pathetic situation. Even before Nellie discovers that the man who lives in the apartment next to hers is Oswald Henshawe, she pities him: “an old man, a gentleman, living in this shabby, comfortless place, cleaning his neckties of a Sunday morning and humming to himself . . . it depressed me unreasonably” (559). Nellie soon learns that Oswald had lost his high-status position with the railroad during its “reorganization” (560), and ever since that time they had lived what Woodress calls “a modern, rootless existence” (Literary Life 380), “wandering about among the cities of the Pacific coast” (My Mortal Enemy 560). Money is tight, for Oswald is currently working in “a humble position, poorly paid,
with the city traction company” (565). At least initially, Nellie believes Oswald is poor in spirit as well as in pocket: “not more than sixty, but he looked much older. He had the tired, tired face of one who has utterly lost hope” (561).

In contrast, despite her confinement to a wheelchair, Myra at first appears to Nellie to have retained her indomitable spirit. Nellie observes, “I was delighted. She was . . . she was herself, Myra Henshawe! I hadn’t expected anything so good . . . she looked much less changed than Oswald” (561). As Nellie comes to know her better, however, she realizes that Myra has changed a great deal. For one thing, Myra now, more than ever, greatly regrets having married Oswald and traded money for love. Frustrated at not possessing the financial means to insulate herself from the noisy upstairs neighbors, Myra tells Nellie, “Oh, that’s the cruelty of being poor; it leaves you at the mercy of such pigs! Money is a protection, a cloak; it can buy one quiet, and some sort of dignity” (564). A short time later Myra blames financial poverty for the failure of her marriage, telling Oswald, “We’ve destroyed each other. I should have stayed with my uncle. It was money I needed. We’ve thrown our lives away” (567).

Nellie, a romantic herself through much of the novel, is sobered by Myra’s additional comment to her, “People can be lovers and enemies at the same time, you know. We were . . . A man and woman draw apart from that long embrace, and see what they have done to each other. Perhaps I can’t forgive him for the harm I did him. Perhaps that’s it . . . In age we lose everything, even the power to love” (574). Myra now spends her days looking to the past, both rescripting it and examining it in an attempt to understand how she ended up in her current state. Oswald fondly remembers the days when they were happy and in love, but Myra will not allow him this, telling him (in front of Nellie): “We were never really happy. I am a greedy, selfish, worldly woman; I wanted success and a place in the world” (567). Myra a short time later says to Nellie about Oswald, in a disparaging tone, “He’s a sentimentalist, always was; he can look back on the best of those days when we were young and loved each other, and make himself believe it was all like that. It wasn’t. I was always a grasping, worldly woman; I was never satisfied” (573). In a final,
chilling comment on her marriage, Myra plaintively asks herself, with Nellie overhearing, “Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?” (577).

Living without her health, her husband’s love, or enough money to provide comfort, Myra turns to the Catholic religion that she had walked away from when she left her uncle so many years before. She accepts frequent visits from Father Fay and clings to her crucifix, at one point revealing why she takes great solace in religion: “Religion is different from everything else; because in religion seeking is finding” (576). Thus, in contrast to her own life, it is an arena free from potential disappointment. Myra’s planned death is a highly spiritual one: they find her body “wrapped in her blankets, leaning against the cedar trunk, facing the sea . . . the ebony crucifix was in her hands” (579).

Meanwhile Oswald, during Myra’s final illness, is buoyed by the attentions of a young, eighteen-year-old female reporter who has “respectful admiration” for him (569). Nellie “could see that he got great refreshment from her. Her questions woke pleasant trains of recollection, and her straightforward affection was dear to him” (575). Furthermore, as Nellie observes, “her admiration was undoubtedly a help to him. It was very pretty and naïve. Perhaps that was one of the things that kept him up to the mark in his dress and manner. Among people he never looked apologetic or crushed” (569).

After Myra’s death, Oswald moves on, this time to Alaska, where, he tells Nellie, a steamship company has a place for him. He explains, “I have always wanted to go, and now there is nothing to hold me” (580). Clearly, Oswald is ready to continue his restless journey. He contradicts Myra’s version of events by encouraging Nellie to do as he does: “Remember her [Myra] as she was when you were with us on Madison Square, when she was herself, and we were happy. Yes, happier than it falls to the lot of most mortals to be” (580).

Michael Murphy has criticized Oswald for the way he “tries to avoid the present,” arguing that “Cather uses him to embody the pathetic lure of the idealized past, and Myra to shatter his illusions” (“Mortal Affirmation” 47). Emmy Stark Zitter, too, faults Oswald for tenaciously hanging on to a “romantic male
view of life” (296), arguing that “Nellie seems to accept Myra Henshaw’s view that her husband Oswald’s romanticized version of life and youth and love . . . is actually deceitful and dangerous to the potential female author” (296). Susan Rosowski has further argued that “The most chilling testimony of the trap provided by the romantic myth is Oswald’s denial of his wife’s human, and therefore, temporal reality,” specifically her illness (147).

Yet in fact, Cather, instead of forcing the reader to choose either Myra’s or Oswald’s way of dealing with the past and present, creates an approach that synthesizes their personal strategies. After all, the reader must recognize that Myra, the supposedly “present-minded” one of the pair, is crippled by her fixation on the past (hence the wheelchair) and is thus incapable of either enjoying the present or moving forward into the future. In the end Nellie comes to grudgingly admit that there is something admirable in Oswald’s ways of dealing with the past: remember it as you wish, but don’t dwell on it or let it weigh you down. He possesses what Nellie terms “indestructible constancy . . . almost indestructible youth” (580), which will allow him to carry on despite the burden of past mistakes. When he realizes that the romantic myth of complete fulfillment in one other person is just that, a myth, he “fell”—but does not stay down. He is reconciled with his past, which enables him to fully function in the present—fully cognizant of his wife’s illness—and make plans for the future. Mildred Bennett has posited that Oswald at the end of the novel “has only the past. He has no present or future with Myra” (“Myra’s Marriage” 18). However, just because Oswald has only the past with Myra, the object of his youthful idolization, this does not mean he has no present or future at all; at the very end he actually feels liberated from the past (Myra) and leaves for Alaska. Nellie even goes so far as to defend Oswald’s right to his relationship with the past. After Myra remembers the painful nights she had spent waiting for Oswald’s letters to come so many years before and makes disparaging remarks about the past, Nellie “murmured” (573): “Then I wonder why you are sometimes so hard on him now” (573). In response, Myra curtly asks her not to visit her any more.
Cather does not portray Oswald’s departure as wholly worthy of celebration, however. After all, there is no sense that his new position in Alaska represents the fulfillment of any dream; it is simply another place to go. At the same time, Cather, through Nellie, recognizes the danger of being too much like Myra, for as she says, “Violent natures like hers sometimes turn against themselves. . . . against themselves and all their idolatries” (577). I believe Cather, too, wished to formulate a relationship with the past that did not take such a violent turn. What she sought was a peaceful reconciliation with her romanticization of the past that would allow her to embrace the reality of the present and future.

When Cather saw McClure in Washington Square Park in 1924 and heard about his situation, she must have pitied him much as Nellie did the Henshawes on the West Coast. By 1924, the McClures’ life was a shambles. Various reorganizations of McClure’s Magazine had left S. S. in a greatly diminished position; at this time, “S. S. was merely the desk editor: [Moody] Gates made all editorial decisions, large and small, and no one took care of business and advertising except to watch over and growl at every dollar S. S. spent” (Lyon 394). This job afforded the McClures barely enough to live on. In 1921 McClure had written to Hattie, “Unless I can get a new magazine business . . . all the rest of my life will be spent in a hand-to-mouth struggle, with what money I earn going through a sieve” (qtd. in Lyon 390), and this is precisely what happened. In a poignant, handwritten note at the bottom of a typed letter to his wife in November 1924, McClure wrote: “Go easy on money!” (13 November 1924).

Furthermore, the McClures had no place they could call a home. S. S. had spent a restless life dedicated to keeping on the move, going from city to city and country to country in search of fresh ideas and new opportunities. Unfortunately, in his old age he had ended up with no real home at all. During the early 1920s, Hattie was living with her sister in a small cottage in Brookfield Center, Connecticut, taking in a boarder to make ends meet; in October 1924 she had only fifty dollars in the bank (see Hattie to S. S. McClure, 22 October 1924). McClure himself lived at the Majestic Hotel on West Seventy-second Street in New York City and spent most of his days at the Union League Club. The
pathos of their situation is evident in a letter S. S. wrote to Hattie in 1924: “I am so ashamed & sorry that I haven’t [sic] a home for you!” (qtd. in Lyon 400). The situation was so bleak that around this time S. S. contemplated suicide, telling his wife, “I would rather die than to go on in this hopeless fashion,” adding, “I tell you I have got to the point of breaking. I wake up in the night in despair. I don’t wonder at what my brother Robert [who committed suicide] did” (letter, 28 July 1924). Significantly, just around the time Cather was meeting McClure in Washington Square Park, the McClures resolved that to save expenses, Hattie would move in with him at the Majestic Hotel (fig. 8). After the quiet and serenity of a country cottage, Hattie probably, like Myra did, found herself greatly bothered by the noises of a city apartment building.

Another similarity with Myra is that Hattie in 1924 was in very poor health. For years she had suffered from rheumatoid arthritis and, like Myra, frequently needed a wheelchair to move around (fig. 9). Hattie would not die until 1929, but judging by her letters, she became quite devoted in her later years to Congregationalism, the religion of her youth. This is especially evident in
Unmasking Cather’s “Mortal Enemy”

Fig. 9. Hattie McClure and an unknown fellow convalescent, circa 1902. Courtesy Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington

a letter she wrote to S. S. just a few months before her death (and thus of course unknown to Cather when she wrote My Mortal Enemy): “Many powerful friends have prayed with me for you. Our Father says to you, ‘Son, thou art ever with me, all that I have is thine. Your Heavenly Father knoweth what things ye have need of before ye ask him’ ” (qtd. in “Impressive Services for Mrs. M’Clure”). Her return to the church is also shown by her funeral being held in Galesburg at the Central Congregational Church. However, the religious schism between the couple continued even after death; due probably to her husband’s intervention, a Presbyterian minister presided over the funeral (“Impressive Services”).

Like Oswald, S. S. McClure, up until his death in 1949, greatly enjoyed his memories of the happier, glory years of the past, as seen in various newspaper and radio interviews. He, too, was undoubtedly buoyed by attention from reporters and the credit he often received for having “invented” the newspaper syndicate and having been a pioneer of cheap magazines. And, like Oswald, McClure especially enjoyed the admiration of—and requests for advice from—young women. Willa Cather had been one of those women many years before, and his later meetings with her always had a positive effect on him. Edith Lewis remembers that when McClure had worked with Cather he “found in her something
which heightened his pleasure in his magazine—which gave him back his old youthful excitement and pride in being an editor, and made him feel that the game was worth while” (71). Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant also observed, many years later, that “Their Midwest voices harmonized, their seething inner forces supplemented each other. There was an inspirational quality about the dynamic unspoiled assistant that kept the older editor afloat on his sea of discovery” (39). Even on his deathbed, when he learned that a biography of Cather was being planned, he envisioned a much younger Cather and offered to help, saying to Lewis, “‘She was wonderful—a wonderful girl!’” (qtd. in Lewis 73).

Yet, although McClure remembered the past and enjoyed telling about it, like Oswald he did not let it cripple his present or confine him. As Woodress accurately notes, McClure “was always the incurable optimist” (“Pre-eminent Magazine Genius” 191), and he always found things to do, whether it was a new book project, a speaking tour, or investigative travel abroad. Cather was quite familiar with McClure’s way of dealing with the past, for Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant noted that a passage in McClure’s autobiography in which McClure “abruptly” left behind his past self and “decided to live in the present,” with “hardly...a farewell look,” “might have come out of a novel” by Cather (125). Cather must have sensed in 1924 that if and when Hattie died, S. S. would not fold but would instead carry on. If a steamship company had offered him a position in Alaska, he probably would have taken it.

The most striking difference between the Henshawes and the McClures (besides the fact that the McClures had children), is that Hattie until the end of her life continued to express her love for her husband in their private letters (see, for instance, her letter of 24 June 1924). It is unknown whether she harbored bitterness toward S. S. and regrets about the past decisions that had led to their poverty and rootlessness. But Cather, of course, could not have known the inner life of this couple in 1925 when she began to write My Mortal Enemy; she would have seen only its pathetic exterior and speculated on the basis of what she observed.

What difference, then, does it make in our interpretation of My
Mortal Enemy and our understanding of Cather’s life and professional development to know the probable real-life models for the Henshawes, Aunt Lydia, John Driscoll, and Nellie Birdseye? Chiefly, I believe, such knowledge serves to confirm and support many previous hypotheses and suppositions about the meaning of this novel and what Cather was going through at this point in her life.

As we have seen, to a great extent Willa Cather’s relationship with S. S. McClure and his wife clearly went through the first three stages that Nellie Birdseye went through with the Henshawes: idealization, disillusionment, and pity. But this was not to be Cather’s final attitude toward her mentor and friend, S. S. McClure. Susan Rosowski has insightfully argued that Nellie Birdseye in the final section of the novel “moves beyond the simplistic romanticism of her youth and the subsequent, equally simplistic disillusionment of her adolescence to a complex attitude of human understanding” (145). The same was true, I believe, for Cather with McClure. The ways in which Cather portrays Oswald’s and Myra’s attitudes toward the past supports Michael Murphy’s contention that Cather “does not reject the present” but does “reject both that unreal present devoid of a past, and that nostalgic clinging to a past which excludes full acceptance of the present” (81). In a similar way, Cather came to view both Hattie’s and S. S. McClure’s relationship with the past as worthy of emulation, and I believe she wanted to apply this lesson not only to her relationship with him but also with other idols of her past. In 1925 Cather, like Nellie, wished—and needed—to break free of certain idolatries of her past yet also to reconcile with them and not feel angry about how they had disappointed her; it is this reconciliation that Cather was seeking as she wrote My Mortal Enemy.

Cather could have easily, like Myra, become bitter toward McClure and resentful of the way he had stifled her career, consuming herself with “what ifs” about the past. But Cather clearly did not want to be like Myra, possessing a “violent nature” that, in turning against her idolatries, destroyed herself. Instead, she found a way to reconcile her idol and her past with him with his reality in the present, so that, unlike Myra, she would be able to move
forward and not be alone—both physically and mentally—with her memories of him at the end of her life. She, like Nellie, eventually “reach[ed] a perspective of understanding and compassion” (146). Even after she psychologically broke S. S. McClure’s spell on her with *My Mortal Enemy*, she continued to show her affection for him: her 1931 subscription to Ida Tarbell’s fund to support him and her public embrace of him on stage in 1944, when she and McClure both received awards from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, clearly indicate her warm feelings. And if anyone had challenged McClure’s right to his own version of the past or criticized him for his affairs with various women, Cather, like Nellie, would undoubtedly have defended him.

Yet Cather would never again be weighed down by McClure’s view of her as someone better suited to journalism than to artistic fiction. After writing *My Mortal Enemy*, Cather came out from under McClure’s shadow and could begin to write, as Emmy Stark Zitter has argued, from “a clear-eyed, female perspective” (296). Cather must have taken great pleasure in writing the scene where Nellie, a teacher as Cather had been, negatively responds to Myra’s suggestion that she become a journalist: “I hate journalism. I know what I want to do, and I’ll work my way out yet” (*My Mortal Enemy* 562). Cather was thus not what Woodress called her, “his [McClure’s] captive for life” (*Literary Life* 171). Others might have been blinded by their idolization of S. S. McClure and been among those whom Cather envisioned would have gone to the stake for him, but Cather would not be. James Woodress once wrote that *My Mortal Enemy* “seems to have produced a final catharsis” (*Willa Cather: Her Life and Art* 216) but was unable to describe its true nature; I believe that Cather’s actual catharsis in writing this novel was to shake loose from her idolization of S. S. McClure.

Cather, like Nellie, thus found a way to live in a fallen world. Her “knowledge” of the McClures’ true relationship was akin to Nellie’s realizations about the Henshawes. But instead of portraying a character crippled by her recognition of human, carnal sinfulness and seeing transgressors solely as sinners unworthy of consideration, Cather advocates taking a more understanding and forgiving path. People may “sin,” she shows in *My Mortal
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Enemy, but one should never preclude the possibility of redemption. Quite appropriately Myra, who feels herself a sinner, dies, according to Nellie, at Gloucester’s cliff after dawn, which Myra had described as “such a forgiving time” (566), when “all our sins were pardoned; as if the sky leaned over the earth and kissed it and gave it absolution” (567). This passage implies that people should be judged not just by a few incidents in their lives but in their entirety. S. S. McClure committed adultery, but he was also a brilliant editor and hard-working provider for his family; possibly as a result of this realization, Cather encourages the reader to remember that the philandering Oswald faithfully nurses his wife, even despite her scathing remarks to him. As Oswald says to Myra in front of Nellie, one must not try to revise the past because of how things turned out but instead accept that past and work from there. In reply to Myra’s exclamation of “We’ve thrown our lives away,” he says, “You don’t mean it. Remember the long time we were happy. That was reality, just as much as this” (567). Such a comment echoes Edith Lewis’s description of Cather’s attitude toward McClure, cited earlier: “[S]he understood and truly admired him; his faults never blinded her to his great qualities” (71). S. S. McClure, like Oswald, frequently reminisced about the happy early years of his marriage with Hattie, but he also recognized the present. He wrote to her in February 1924 about how, forty-seven years before, she had helped him (“a half-famished student”) and now, “that student, grown to be an old man of 64 writes you, thanking you for such vital help. . . . Had I not got you, my life would have been an obscure failure” (17 February 1924). Cather could just as easily have written such words to S. S. McClure.

My Mortal Enemy, I believe, does not represent a wholly pessimistic Cather. Instead, it shows her in the process of trying to reconcile what she recognized as the overly romanticized aspects of her past with the reality of her present. This process would afford her the artistic maturity necessary to write her later works and to follow her own dreams, just as Nellie Birdseye is determined to do. At long last, Cather had achieved a healthy relationship with her “mortal enemy,” her propensity to overidealize the past. She, like Nellie, was ready to move on.
NOTES

1. The date “1924” is written in pencil on the back of this photograph and the one listed as figure 2, both in the S. S. McClure Papers, The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Phyllis Robinson locates figure one in Washington Square Park and attributes it to United Press International ("Mr. McClure and Willa" 31). The time of year is clearly autumn, given the defoliated trees and sweeping brush in the background. The typography of the McClure’s Magazine issue sticking out of McClure’s coat pocket in figure 2 also matches that used only after the summer of 1924.

2. Except where otherwise noted, all letters cited and quoted are from the S. S. McClure Papers, The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

3. Cather wrote, probably in 1922, that she had not wanted her name to be put on the title page of McClure’s autobiography (see Willa Cather to Ned Abbott, 25 October [1922?], Ned Abbott Manuscript Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society).

WORKS CITED


“Impressive Services for Mrs. M’Clure [sic].” Galesburg (IL) Register Mail 3 June 1929: 2, 14.
Unmasking Cather’s “Mortal Enemy”

Admiring and Remembering
The Problem of Virginia

“Life began for me,” Willa Cather famously said, “when I ceased to admire and began to remember” (Sergeant 107). Literally, of course, life had begun for her in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, in the Reconstruction days of 1873. In the more than nine childhood years Willa Cather lived there, in Back Creek Valley, she found much to admire. According to Edith Lewis, Cather’s “Virginia life was one of great richness, tranquil and ordered and serene,” free “from all tension and nervous strain” (12). But Cather discovered early that admiration, a largely passive state of acceptance and celebration, was not a mode in which she could grow as a writer. Another of Cather’s often-cited Virginia anecdotes, recounted by Lewis, is the story of the “old judge who came to call at Willowshade [sic], and who began stroking her curls and talking to her in the playful platitudes one addressed to little girls.” The child “horrified her mother by breaking out suddenly: ‘I’s a dang’ous nigger, I is!’” (13). Among its many other implications, this is a story about the dangers of admiration—and of becoming its passive female subject. And it indicates that, even as a small girl, Willa Cather knew another story about Virginia, one that encompassed violence and racial (and perhaps gender and class) tensions.

When the young Willa Cather began to write fiction at the University of Nebraska, Virginia memories were among the first resources she turned to. “The Elopement of Allen Poole,” published in a university literary magazine when she was nineteen, is a melodramatic tale that awkwardly tries to represent Virginia
mountain dialect; its plot concerns a poor white bootlegger (a common Blue Ridge occupation) who is shot by a revenuer en route to his elopement. The narrator affects an easy familiarity with Southern manners and class conventions: “It takes a man of the south to do nothing perfectly, and Allen was as skilled in that art as were any of the F.F.V.’s who wore broadcloth” (19–20). (An F.F.V. is a member of a First Family of Virginia, as Cather assumed, perhaps erroneously, that her Nebraska readers would know.) But what is most skillful about this story is its precise evocation of a place that the young author has not seen for ten years. Readers of Sapphira and the Slave Girl, published forty-seven years later, will recognize many local particulars—Bethel Church, Timber Ridge (here renamed Limber Ridge), the swinging bridge over Back Creek—and above all the botanical, environmental specificity: “sleepy pine woods, slaty ground.... the laurels... just blushing into bloom.... the fields of wheat and corn, and among them the creek... between its willow-grown banks.... the mowers swinging their cradles.... the Blue Ridge... against the sky” (20). In this lucid microcosm, wild and cultivated plants and local geology seem to coexist in a harmonious ecosystem. Yet, as Cynthia Griffin Wolff has astutely noted, the story is laced with violence, not only Allen’s murder but his fears, as he dies in his lover’s arms, that he might have lived to abuse her.

In 1896, Cather made another attempt to use her Virginia sources, with “A Night at Greenway Court,” a swashbuckling tale of Lord Fairfax, her great-great-grandparents’ patron, whose nearby Virginia estate she had visited as a child. This story seems a rehearsal for A Lost Lady, with a star-struck youth defending the honor of a lady and a lord by an act of discretion—the refusal to relate the memory of a duel—that costs him a king’s favor. Although he is in England and far from Virginia, the young man has no regrets, he says, “for I had kept my friend’s secret and shielded a fair lady’s honor, which are the two first duties of a Virginian” (61).

The question of what “the first duties of a [displaced] Virginian” might be to her memories of her native state must have been telling to Willa Cather in her early Pittsburgh years, her first
extended separation from her beloved Southern family. One of the best stories from those years, “The Sentimentality of William Tavener,” is a probing study of how memories and relics of Virginia affect the domestic equilibrium of a Nebraska family and reinforce the bonds of the wife and husband, both Virginia emigrants. William and Hester Tavener, whose marriage has become so businesslike that they are emotionally estranged, accidentally find that they share childhood memories of a circus back in Virginia and discover a world of affectionate recollections that they can happily share, rekindling their love for one another. However, this happy discovery alters the dynamics of the Tavener household: no longer can the Tavener sons count on their mother to side with them against their father. And Hester Tavener’s allegiances to her Virginia past are subtly changed, too. When prairie flies buzz around her sleeping husband’s face, she expresses her renewed tenderness for him by removing a piece of mosquito netting from a treasured ornament—a basket of wax fruit made in Virginia by her dead sister—and using the net to protect her husband’s face. The small adjustment signals a reordering of priorities, privileging living, narrative memories of Virginia that can be shared over the commemorative admiration of a fixed object. Hester Tavener, too, chooses remembering over admiring—and for her and her children, the choice will have costs and consequences.

These three early stories show how freighted and how intimate Willa Cather’s heritage of Virginia memories was. Frederick County, her Virginia birthplace, is a site with a particularly conflicted history, geography, and economy. It is the northernmost Virginia county; adjacent Berkeley County—home of Cather’s maternal Grandfather Boak and many other relatives—refused to join the Confederacy and became a part of West Virginia. To evade the Confederate draft, Willa Cather’s Union-sympathizing father and his older brother had only to travel a few miles into neighboring West Virginia. And within the family circles, Confederate/Union lines were hard to draw. Grandmother Rachel Seibert Boak was reportedly opposed to slavery, but she sent her three sons to the Confederate army. Aunt Sidney Cather Gore—like
her brother, Grandfather Cather—was a Union supporter, but she sheltered Confederate soldiers in her house. In the frequent family discussions of the war, Willa’s father always took the Union, “Northern” side. Yet his daughter saw him as quintessentially Southern; when he died, she mourned his “Southern” sweetness and boyishness (WC to DCF).

Willa Cather described her second home, Nebraska, as physically “essentially the same throughout its extent” (“Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle” 1). Virginia, however, is a state of great physical variety, bisected by the Blue Ridge and extending from eastern Tidewater plantation country to western coal mines. The little community of Back Creek Valley, where Cather’s ancestors settled, was poised between two geographic and economic regions. In the eastern small-farm region, “slaves were employed on small-scale farm operations, as well as in various industries, such as milling,” and the land was suited to profitable farming. Just west of Great North Mountain (the twenty-mile-long mountain adjacent to the Cathers’ home at Willow Shade), was Appalachia, where the rocky soil attracted “less affluent” settlers, “subsistence farmers” who struggled for “economic survival” (Kerns, Frederick County 18–20) and were often considered “mountain trash” (Sapphira 33).

In 1913, remembering her departure from Virginia, Willa Cather said that it taught her “how much a child’s life is bound up in the woods and hills and meadows around it.” While her first impression of Nebraska was as flat and “bare as a piece of sheet iron” (Bohlke 10), her memories of Virginia had the varied and sometimes extreme topography of Frederick County itself. Willow Shade, Cather’s childhood home, literally had its back to the economically depressed Appalachian Mountains, and when Grandfather Cather built the architecturally ambitious house in 1851, in a period of agricultural prosperity for the region and for the Cathers, it was a gesture of economic assertion. In her childhood at Willow Shade, young Willa was part of a household that comprised vocal, storytelling representatives of multiple, contesting political and economic positions—including loyal Confederate women (her mother and grandmother), a staunch Union man (her father), poor white Ap-
palachians (Mary Ann Anderson, her children, and others), and African Americans, at least one of whom (Matilda Jefferson) had been, until Emancipation, a slave belonging to Willa’s Seibert great-grandparents.

As she depicts herself as a Virginia child in the epilogue of *Sapphira*, young Willa Cather was repelled by Nancy’s precise “Northern” speech. In language as in other matters, Back Creek, Virginia, was the only imaginable standard to her—it embodied “the right and easy way” (284). When Willa Cather’s family abandoned this densely storied and familiar milieu at Willow Shade for Nebraska, the child was confronted with one of the major tasks of her life. She had to learn how to remember Virginia, how to live and to write with her Southern inheritance. In the first weeks in Nebraska, miserably homesick, she vowed not to eat much until she could get “back to Virginia” for “some fresh mutton” (Bohlke 10). To survive—to keep from starving to death—she had to “cease to admire” Virginia as the only “right way” and right place.

Less that ten years later, Willa Cather was defining herself as very much a Nebraskan and had taken pains to suppress her Virginia accent (Lewis 18). Thus her adolescent flirtation with the persona of a Confederate soldier (as documented in a famous photograph) and her precise invocation of Frederick County geography in that early story, “The Elopement of Allen Poole,” may seem surprising if we do not remember that, although she had lived for ten years in Red Cloud, Cather had grown up in a Virginia household there. Her family kept up a lively correspondence with relatives back in Frederick County and visited back and forth. They took a Virginia newspaper, cooked and organized the household work Southern style, preserved Southern stories and relics (including a Confederate flag, sword, and uniform), and the War Between the States continued to be fought at the Cather dinner table in Red Cloud. A surviving high school theme by Willa’s youngest, Nebraska-born sister, Elsie, is evidence of this—it is a comic but ardent tale of an animated umbrella that preserves the honor of the Confederacy. (And it is not so far from her older sister’s ode to Virginia “honor” in “A Night at Greenway Court.”)
For, as a Southern-born daughter of Reconstruction, Willa Cather grew up in a period when how to remember the nineteenth-century South was a national problem, especially for Southern women and girls. As Catherine Clinton points out, the postwar South was preoccupied with the work of memorializing, and much of that project fell to surviving Confederate women, like Cather’s Grandmother Boak, her mother, and their servant Marjorie Anderson. “The cult of the Lost Cause captured the imagination of many Southern women in the wake of the war,” and they led “a campaign to re-create the past” (174–75). Numerous women’s memorial groups joined together in 1894 to form “the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), which became a powerful force in the South during the first half of the twentieth century.” The UDC “established Confederate memorial days and cemetery celebrations” and “dot[ted] the nation with” monuments intended “to preserve Confederate values and memories.” By 1982 there were 1,120 such memorials—more in Virginia (223) than in any other state (182–83, 186). Willa Cather’s epilogue to Sapphira, with its description of the Stonewall Confederate cemetery in Winchester, indicates her obvious familiarity with this project. She provides a brief, admiring eulogy to the local Confederate hero Turner Ashby: “Even today [1940] if you should” visit the cemetery on the anniversary of his death, “you would probably find fresh flowers on Ashby’s grave. He was all that the old-time Virginians admired: Like Paris handsome and like Hector brave. And he died young. ‘Shortlived and glorious,’ the old Virginians used to say” (275). The imposing monument to Turner Ashby is a women’s project, erected by “the Ladies of Winchester” in the 1880s. Only a few steps away—and perhaps the reason Willa Cather knew the location well—is the much more modest grave of her young uncle, J. W. Boak, a casualty of Second Manassas.

According to Clinton, another brilliantly effective strategy of Reconstruction Confederate women was to rewrite the Southern past, particularly race relations. The intent of this project was again to glorify the past—thus often “relying on a culture of dissemblance and denial”—but also “to demonstrate a tradition
of harmony that they hoped could characterize black-white relations in the post-war South” (198). This effort produced a flood of plantation memoirs and novels, popular in both North and South, some of which were found in the Cather library in Red Cloud. In addition, the UDC sponsored essay contests at schools and pioneered initiatives (in their words) to “collect and preserve materials for a truthful history of the war,” in order “to have used in Southern schools only such histories as are just and true” (183). The Cather children and other children of their generation were the particular targets of such efforts. (And thus the small controversy over little Willa’s “hist’ry” book in the Epilogue of Sapphira seems very suggestive.)

Most standard biographical approaches to Willa Cather’s career have given short shrift to this complicated legacy of Virginia memories. “The tug of Virginia was weak for her,” James Woodress said (31), and Edwin and Lillian Bloom concluded that, “almost until the end of her career,” Cather chose “to ignore the South” (7). I would argue, instead, that much of Cather’s best fiction before her specifically Southern novel of 1940 is, on some level, engaged with the problem of how to remember and to render the South. For example, the South surfaces in My Ántonia through Jim Burden’s early memories and the Virginia landscape of his dreams and in the troubling inset story of Blind d’Arnault, an African American artist who was born a slave. In A Lost Lady, Niel Herbert inhabits a dilapidated Southern household that has been transplanted to the Great Plains, complete with “Black Tom,” a servant who is lent to his employer’s friends as if he were a piece of disposable property, and a distracted Kentucky housekeeper whose favorite book is a Southern cult classic, St. Elmo. Death Comes for the Archbishop, with its powerfully evoked New Mexico setting, also touches lightly on Southern concerns that Cather would return to probe more deeply in the 1930s. The flirtatious, fair-skinned Doña Isabella, born in Kentucky and reared in New Orleans, is a type common to postbellum Southern fiction: the aging Southern belle caught between the requirements of her vanity and monetary realities. Two Southern men—the heroic Kit Carson and the murderer Buck Scales—
would seem to be opposites, but they share a troubling capacity for interracial violence. And slavery is an important issue in the novel. Archbishop Latour agonizes over how and if to intervene for Sada, a Mexican woman who is held in slavery by a local Southern family named Smith (one of Cather’s own family names). His uncertainties about slavery foreshadow those of Henry Colbert in the later novel.

Then, in “Old Mrs. Harris,” Cather returned (with the deaths of her parents) to the stuff of “The Sentimentality of William Tavener” and a more nuanced exploration of how Southernness persists—as memory, as cultural baggage and as inheritance—for a Tennessee family (based on the Cathers) who are transplanted to a “snappy little Western democracy,” a small Nebraska town. The South of this story is the source of charming manners, unstinting hospitality, and domestic graces, a preindustrial Eden of spinning wheels and potted orange trees with ample space and honor for old women. But it is also a “feudal” culture that has fostered Victoria’s cruel self-absorption and permitted the exploitation of the dying Mrs. Harris. In letters, Cather expressed unusual pride in “Old Mrs. Harris.” She wrote to Zoë Akins that she was pleased with the way the elements of the story had come together. Akins would be familiar with the types, Cather knew, but she wondered what the story might mean to other readers who were unfamiliar with the South—both its charms and its lies.

Five years later, Cather was at last at work on a novel devoted entirely to that South, the Virginia that she had spent a lifetime learning how to admire and not to admire, how to remember. Distraught over ill health, the approach of World War II, and the deaths in 1938 of her beloved friend Isabelle McClung Hambourg and her favorite brother Douglass (her first loss of a sibling), Cather found deep solace in an imaginative “return” to the Back Creek of 1856 and the Willow Shade of her childhood, a world that predated personal loss. In a letter to her editor, Ferris Greenslet, she described this process. Her early memories came back in a “rush,” she said, and, although they were weighty, they relieved her grief. She wrote page after page of Virginia customs and manners, and the writing brought her ease.
and comfort. Then, long-schooled in the rigors of editing, Cather made her cuts. She was delighted to discover, when she put the discarded pages on the scales, that they weighed all of six pounds (WC to FG). When she wrote to another old friend, fellow writer and editor Viola Roseboro’, Cather also described *Sapphira* as an almost devotional act of memory. She had worked to deal with her material honestly and “humbly,” she said, without excessive color. Roseboro’s approval meant a great deal to her—she was “honored” that *Sapphira* had the ring of truth for a Southerner in exile, like Roseboro’, whose experiences had resembled Cather’s own (WC to VR, 28 November 1940).

In other letters too, Cather advised her readers and friends that this book was more a work of memory than a work of fiction. But what did “memory” mean to Willa Cather? Earlier she had implied that it was something more complex and active than admiration. Late in life she wrote to her old friends Carrie and Mary Miner that they were both ensconced safely in her memories, in a small house to which Cather made many happy mental visits and which no outsider could harm or spoil (WC to Carrie Miner Sherwood). Here memory is safety—a shelter protected from the depredations of loss. In Edith Lewis’s description of Cather on their 1938 visit to Frederick County, while writing *Sapphira*, memory becomes an intense effort of will: “The countryside was very much changed. But she refused to look at its appearance; she looked through and through it, as if it were transparent, to what she knew as its reality. . . . All these transformations, instead of disheartening her, seemed to light a fierce inner flame that illuminated all her pictures of the past” (183).

In *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*, Richard Terdiman argues that, in the period between 1815 and 1920, Western culture underwent a “memory crisis,” a sense of dislocation from its own past. “Beginning in the nineteenth century the past began to look like a foreign country.” The “sense of time’s continuous flow and of our unproblematic place within it” were lost. With this crisis came “a massive disruption of traditional forms of memory” and a preoccupation with the institution of history as cultural memory (4–5).

For readers of Willa Cather, Terdiman’s “memory crisis” may
seem strangely familiar. In 1936, the year she began to write *Sapphira*, Cather expressed a similar sense of dislocation, famously asserting that “the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts” and that she was one of “the backward” who had no common ground with readers “under forty” (Prefatory Note v). As a child in Virginia, depicted in *Sapphira*, young Willa obviously possessed a sense of “time’s continuous flow,” and the child in the epilogue is supremely confident of her own secure and “unproblematic place” in that continuum. When her parents moved the family to Nebraska, young Willa Cather’s sense of the stability of an “ordered and settled” Virginia life, with its “slow . . . rich and kindly” rhythms (*Willa Cather* 2), was abruptly broken. She described her first experience of the flat Nebraska landscape, which she later grew to love, as a loss that at first seemed to threaten her very selfhood: “As we drove further and further out into the country, I felt a good deal as if we had come to the end of everything—it was a kind of erasure of personality” (Bohlke 11).

For Willa Cather, the move from Virginia may have triggered a “memory crisis” that persisted until the last years of her life. According to Terdiman, many of the “most striking representations” of memory crisis occur in novels. “It is the novel . . . that most organizes itself as a projection of the memory function and its disruptions. Novels are exercises in the process of memory” (25). Such exercises were very familiar to Willa Cather by the late thirties; *Sapphira* was her twelfth (and last) novel. But—especially in the memoirlike epilogue—this novel strains the conventions of the form perhaps more than any of Cather’s others, especially as it blurs boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. Cather wrote to Roseboro’, who had said that she cared little for fiction any more, that she hoped her friend would nevertheless like *Sapphira*, because so little of the book was fiction. Instead, it was mostly a collection of family and local stories—so much so that she could hardly draw a line between the remembered tales and her own inventions (*wc* to *vr*, 9 November 1940). The novel’s remarkable solidity of specification is the work of memory; geography, botany, architecture, and names (but not their spellings) are carefully rendered. As I have discovered, *Sapphira* still functions as an excellent guidebook to the strip of territory between Winchester’s
western boundary and Timber Ridge. In such cases, memory is the near-devotional work of patient replication, as Cather’s letters reiterate.

But, as the memory crisis necessitates, “memory,” if it is to continue to serve us, must also be an act of invention. In *Sapphira*, it is clearly that. For example, Sapphira and Henry Colbert are obviously based on Cather’s great-grandparents, Ruhamah Lemmon Seibert and Jacob Funk Seibert, who owned the mill on Back Creek during the mid-1850s. In the novel, Sapphira dies in 1857 and Henry immediately frees her slaves. In fact, it was Jacob Seibert who died in the late 1850s; his slaves were never freed, but belonged to his wife until Emancipation. At least one of them, Matilda Jefferson (the “Aunt Till” of Cather’s Virginia memories) stayed on to work in the household of her former owner, Ruhamah Seibert—who lived into her eighties, dying only six weeks before Willa Cather’s own birth. Is Henry’s fictional repudiation of slavery a novelist’s act of invention, necessitated by the breakdown of memory and Willa Cather’s lack of access to her great-grandfather’s history? Or does it reflect tales that Cather may have heard about Jacob Seibert from his fond daughter, her Grandmother Boak, or from his slave, Matilda Jefferson? Or is it an attempt to find—or create—something to admire in this strain of her slaveholding maternal Virginia history? The ambivalent character of Henry Colbert seems to be based on an untraceable mixture of memory, desire, and invention, and as such, it epitomizes Willa Cather’s art as a novelist.

Willa Cather often spoke of Mary Ann Anderson (who appears in *Sapphira* in the character of Mrs. Ringer; see fig. 1) as one of her earliest storytelling models. But another such model is the African American “Aunt Till” of the epilogue, who gave the child Willa lessons in memory.

Till used to take me across the meadow to the Colbert graveyard [the Seibert graveyard, behind the Mill House—Willa Cather was photographed there when she returned to Virginia for a visit after her graduation from college], to put flowers on the graves. Each time she talked to me about the people buried there, she was sure to remember something
she had not happened to tell me before. Her stories about the Master and Mistress [Henry and Sapphira] were never mere repetitions, but grew more and more into a complete picture of those two persons. (292)

Till’s process is very much like Cather’s descriptions of her own writing of Sapphira: memory proliferates memory, growing into a work of art, “a complete picture.” Till also makes idiosyncratic—and, for many readers, troubling—choices about what to admire. She interprets Sapphira’s death as a choice to go away with the “fine [white] folks” of her privileged plantation youth and reads Sapphira’s entire adult life at Back Creek as a colossal mistake.

Cather’s picture of Till in the epilogue appears to be a portrayal of an actual African American woman who was an important figure in her childhood—someone she described in a 1940 letter as a person of “dignity” and “personality” (WC to FG). It also suggests that Cather has taken up some of the Reconstruction work advocated by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, facilitating a benign collaboration between a former slave and the grandchild of her former owner to memorialize an antebellum past and to
rewrite race relations. But, on the other hand, Cather’s text undercuts such a collaboration. For the “Aunt Till” of her epilogue is strangely discontinuous with the younger Till who appears earlier as a character in the novel: that Till is a taciturn, isolated woman who refuses to tell stories to her own daughter, Nancy—even withholding the identity of Nancy’s father. Such discontinuities may indicate another crisis of memory—the stringent limits of a white Virginian’s access to African American Virginians’ cultural memory, limits that Cather tacitly acknowledges with the reticences of this novel.

In fact, it is possible to read Sapphira as a book about memory problems. Henry Colbert, for example, vainly searches his holy texts, repository of Christian cultural memory, for the confirmation and support they might provide, but he finds nothing to sustain him in a moral crisis. If Henry is to continue to honor his marriage, he cannot emulate his daughter Rachel, who looks at her mother and her slaves and concludes—dismissing local memory, history, and tradition—that “they believe in it [slavery]....But it ain’t right” (221). Such a conclusion gives Rachel the courage to enact her principles, helping Nancy to escape, but it estranges her from full intimacy with her parents and many of her neighbors and leaves her an isolated, lonely young widow, old for her age. Nor can she take solace in her memories of her marriage in Washington—those memories are so painful that she repudiates them.

Another key scene that probes the complexities of memory is Sapphira’s proprietary visit to her aged, dying slave, Jezebel. In it, memory is both a common and a contested territory for the two women. Sapphira begins, when she arrives:

“You know who it is, don’t you, Aunt Jezebel?”

Jezebel counters:

“Co’se I does, Miss Sapphy! Ain’t I knowed you since de day you was bawn?”

Then they trade memories of their active days, establishing the ornamental gardens. Sapphira concludes:
“I expect you remember those things too.”
The old Negress looked up at her and nodded.

Can memory be shared by a mistress and a slave? Sapphira, proprietary as ever, assumes it can. Jezebel’s silence is noncommittal. But in a few moments, lest it seem that Sapphira has won the memory contest, Jezebel breaks out with a stunning rejoinder when asked if there is something she desires to eat. “I cain’t think of nothin’ I could relish, lessen maybe it was a li’l pickaninny’s hand” (86–89).

The remark reminds Sapphira and Jezebel’s timid great-granddaughter Nancy, who is cowering by the bed, that the old African woman has a fund of memories and desires that neither of them can own, explain, or share. And it is a sharp corrective to Reconstruction narratives of the acquiescent slave in a benign Confederate past.

Willa Cather told several of her correspondents that the return visit of the former slave Nancy, who had made a successful adult life in Canada, was the most vivid memory of her childhood, and that this memory was the germ of the novel. Why did Nancy’s return make such an unforgettable impression on the little girl at Willow Shade? I would suggest that the adult Nancy may have been the first person young Willa knew who lived a double life: as urban, Northern sophisticate and as Southern home girl. She replicates the hungers and problems of memory of Willa Cather herself, with her juggling of familial loyalties and distance, her desire for the tastes and tales of her home place. Young Nancy had an immense capacity for admiration; she “didn’t believe there was a lovelier spot in the world than this right here” (197), on Back Creek. As a girl, like Willa Cather, she suffered near-oblitration by separation from and homesickness for the only community she could imagine. By her very pronunciation of “his-to-ry,” as well as her presence, the adult Nancy problematizes history and memory. In fact, we might conclude that the problem of how to remember Virginia, in Willa Cather’s work and life, begins where Sapphira ends—with the return of Nancy.5

Another major part of the work of memory in Sapphira is the novel’s rapt attention to the Virginia environment, even its
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smallest details—from quartz crystals in the earth to the tiny “oak leaves no bigger than a squirrel’s ear” (115). Some of the most vivid and beautiful of these images are clustered on the “Double S,” a stretch of the road up Timber Ridge that curves around large “hills of solid rock.” This steep, serpentine road seems to encourage reflection and awareness of natural beauty in everyone who travels it. When local country people speak of the road, “their voices took on something slow and dreamy, as if recalling the place itself; the shade, the unstained loveliness, the pleasant feeling” (171).

The Double S is a human product, the result of arduous road building by Willa Cather’s ancestor and other early settlers.6 That early road building worked in cooperation with the natural world (which necessitated the S’s), creating a harmonious, cooperative physical and psychic environment. In the 1930s, when Cather made her last visit to her birthplace, road building (facilitated by the Works Progress Administration [WPA]) was again a major project in Frederick County. Nearby, the Blue Ridge Parkway was under construction, and it and other new roads would drastically change both the topography and the culture of the region—including the landscape of Willa Cather’s earliest memories. In an authorial aside to her 1940 readers, Cather railed against “the destroying armament of modern road-building,” which had effaced much of the vegetation that made the road so lovely and left the loops of the Double S “denuded and ugly” (170), but still insistently serpentine.

Like Nancy’s escape and return, and perhaps like memory itself, the figure of this Double S keeps doubling back, slowing us down and encouraging us to reflect again. It also appears—as Cather insisted—in the novel’s title, linking Sapphira and Slave Girl, named owner and nameless property (WC to DCF). And, as the device used to mark chapter headings, the Double S becomes the typographic signature of the novel. Again and again, it reiterates the complexity of memory as an animating force in Sapphira.

Finally, this last novel breaks down Willa Cather’s earlier distinction between admiring and remembering. For Sapphira encompasses both, and, like the figure of the Double S, it renders both cruelty and beauty, reflection and disjunction, preservation
and loss. I had planned to end this essay by saying that in *Sapphira*, Cather solved the problem of how to remember Virginia. I now think, however, that what she has done is not to solve the problem, but, at last, to render it in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*: with all its gaps and fissures, its serpentine returns and reversals, its double S’s.

NOTES

1. June 6, the anniversary of Turner Ashby’s death, is still celebrated in Winchester as Confederate Memorial Day, and flowers are indeed placed on Ashby’s grave. This annual observance began in 1866. It was a great occasion in Frederick County during the Reconstruction years and received extensive coverage in the Winchester newspapers; Willa Cather would probably have known of the local significance of the date.

2. John J. Murphy has established that the prototype for Isabella Olivares was Isabella C. de Baca, who married Major José D. Sena. While the prototype was a New Mexico woman, “descendant of a respected family in the territory” (Murphy 460), Cather made her fictional character a Southerner, who left New Mexico and returned to New Orleans after her husband’s death.

3. In 1860, William Smith, the half-brother of Willa Cather’s grandmother, Caroline Smith Cather, was the largest slave owner in the Back Creek Valley district, owning fourteen slaves. Other members of the Smith and Cather families disapproved of William Smith’s slave ownership (George P. Cather).

4. For details about Cather family prototypes in “Old Mrs. Harris,” see Kari Ronning’s explanatory notes and historical essay in the Scholarly Edition of *Obscure Destinies*.

5. Cather told Dorothy Canfield Fisher that the epilogue, which is titled “Nancy’s Return,” was written early in the novel’s composition process and that she considered the entire book to be aimed at this final chapter (WC to DCF).

6. The Double S, with its two consecutive S-shaped curves, branched off Hollow Road about two miles west of Willow Shade, the Cather home. Hollow Road was a portion of the Romney Wagon Road, which Willa Cather’s great-grandfather, Jeremiah Smith, helped to construct in the 1740s (Chapin). By the mid-nineteenth century, this road was known as the Northwestern Turnpike. The turnpike (now U.S. Route 50) ran directly past Willow Shade and figures importantly in *Sapphira*. About
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the time that *Sapphira* was published, the Double S was almost totally demolished.

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Character, Compromise, and Idealism in Willa Cather’s Gardens

In the early pages of *The Song of the Lark* Willa Cather establishes the garden, that intensively humanized parcel of nature, as a deeply informative figure. Here it appears to the novel’s protagonist:

As Thea approached the house she peeped between the pink sprays of the tamarisk hedge and saw the professor and Mrs. Kohler in the garden, spading and raking. The garden looked like a relief-map now, and gave no indication of what it would be in August; such a jungle! Pole beans and potatoes and corn and leeks and kale and red cabbage—there would even be vegetables for which there is no American name. Mrs. Kohler was always getting by mail packages of seeds from Freeport and from the old country. Then the flowers! There were big sunflowers for the canary bird, tiger lilies and phlox and zinnias and lady’s slippers and portulaca and hollyhocks—giant hollyhocks. Besides the fruit trees there was a great umbrella-shaped catalpa, and a balm-of-Gilead, two lindens, and even a ginkgo—a rigid, pointed tree with leaves shaped like butterflies, which shivered, but never bent to the wind. (23)

The Kohlers’ garden, packed as it is with plants and flowers from Europe, Asia, and northeastern America, prospers at the margins of the great southwestern desert through dint of a human—partially deranged—desire. The relief map that Cather’s garden provides for her readers charts the contours of sensibility, narra-
tive poetics, and besieged idealism, particularly during Cather’s emergence as an American great, from the moment of *One of Ours* through *The Professor’s House* to *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Cather’s already strong notions of nature, landscape, and the human presence in each are sophisticated and clarified in this phase. Nature as antagonist (the hostile winds and belittling horizons of the prairie novels) is replaced by a nature that gives either in proportion to human greed or takes in proportion to our neglect. Nature as benefactor (the springs and bountiful harvests of the prairie novels) is replaced by a nature that can represent the boundless human capacity to despoil and pervert the good or, if the soul of the gardener is modest and true, demonstrate the magnificence, perhaps even the divinity, of the idealized garden, or the garden in the mind.

*Garden* is a far more complex and laded notion than we ordinarily recognize. For example, when we use the word *garden* do we intend its ideal state, referring ultimately to Eden as a made place, either static and perfect or, after the fall, as stable and forever lost? Or is the garden in the gardening, in the efforts of the gardener and the changes of growth and decay, rain and drought, which she experiences? Such gardens are never finished, except in the imagination, which provides the desire to keep weeding and watering. Such gardens are as perennially demanding as raising children or keeping accounts. So why not sit still and simply dream Eden? Cather knows that we mean both at once; the contradiction reveals ambivalence we feel in our relationship to nature, to whom as Mother we assign our origins, and toward which, in our mortality, we feel resentment. In other words, gardens depend on nature and while in them we recognize our acute need to create human spaces, in nature improbable, yet they are signs of our desire to pull level and replace nature’s hold over us with products of our willfulness.

Thus, an effort to define *garden* opens a paradox for which Cather’s work provides many analogues. Consider how deeply our reading of Cather’s protagonists depends on a continuously unresolved conflict between character—as inner nature, or the ground of self—and others—the outward culture, those who exist for the character in the space of action. For example, is it
wholly clear that the four men who help Thea Kronborg are altruists, uncorrupted by any trace of a desire to exploit her? Is Claude Wheeler—as brother, husband, lieutenant—a stoical hero and idealist, or is he a doormat who justifies himself with a spurious and finally suicidal belief in high ideals and golden ages past? Is Tom Outland the Professor’s ruin, or is he his making? Is the Archbishop’s cathedral in Santa Fe representative of the triumph of a pure soul acting through an incorruptible will, or is it another of Cather’s architectural incongruities, French Romanesque masonry travesty the stone pueblos of the Anasazi? Gardens, I argue, offer an exceptionally compact and lucid way of grasping an ennobling and tragic vision essential to Cather, one in which pure desire seeks to act in a rank world that nowhere offers concrete demonstration of absolute good or truth. Gardens confront us with the inescapable clash of the splendors and sorrows of the human condition.

Indeed, the only unparadoxical element to my definition is that gardens are defined by human presence; only an unflagging human proclivity to impose design where no design necessarily inheres creates a garden of the wilderness, as our literal and figurative journeys to the edge transform the landscape through the acculturating eye. In this sense, following Susan Rosowski’s thesis in *The Voyage Perilous*, gardens are Romantic, particularly in the Keatsian need to struggle through, to discover the perfect blossom in the least likely purlieu, or, within the metaphor of dangerous pilgrimage, to grasp not the crushing irony but the inspiring possibility of the garden as menaced by the wasteland that encircles and will ultimately reclaim it. In other words, Romanticism invests the garden with greatest value, the poetry of life, that ephemeral human capacity to conceive of beauty and truth where none necessarily abides. We are never without it, for we garden as we go, no matter how lightly we tread in the wilderness: nature gives us, not glimpses of her inward truths, but reflections of cultural assumptions. Rare and precious and real, however, are the moments when in our gardening relation to the land we glimpse, in imagination, not the fatuousness of our desire for pastoral perpetuity, but the Edenic idea of a perfect relation to God and nature.
In this sense, Cather inserts herself into the uniquely American argument about the connection to the new continent of people of European origin. The red *kraut* and the native sunflower seeds for the imported canary in Mrs. Kohler’s garden suggest aliens and native accommodation. Many of her plants are grown from seeds that left on their own might never germinate, or that might invade and destroy the environment. The tamarisks that shade the yards and mark the water holes, the tough feathery trees beloved of Father Latour, are introductions. Though some think they came with the Spaniards, others suggest that they were introduced after New Mexico became a U.S. territory, or about the time Latour and Vaillant arrived. (I have also seen the assertion that the U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] brought them in between 1909 and 1915, which if true means that Thea could not have peeked through them at the Kohlers’.) But any Westerner can tell you today that they are interlopers, aggressive, wasteful of ground water, to the Southwest what kudzu is to the Southeast and the starling to the whole continent. Yet they are beautiful to Latour, and in an abstract sense one must agree. This tree that Abraham called the Tree of Life and planted at the well at Beersheba is nice to look at.

Botanical immigration to North America repeats the fundamental contradiction of human immigration in which we are stuck between the postulates of Manifest Destiny (or the Promised Land) and the worry that in our westward expansion and industrial explosion we have despoiled a pristine continent. During Cather’s youth and early adulthood it became increasingly difficult to hold to an agrarian, even Mosaic, sense of America as a perpetually renewed land to which we held a divine grant. By the time Cather is at work on *Shadows on the Rock*, the Agrarians’ *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930) advances a hair-raising reactionary politics in defense of a rural society that was always harsh and undemocratic. It is now long gone, and its vestiges can only survive in the manner candles persist in the age of the electric lamp or the cold compress after the invention of aspirin. The response to modernity by Lytle and the Nashville group is risible compared to Cather’s, for she refuses to arrange the past in curio cabinets or to conceive of the fundamental connection to land as fully ex-
pressed in the defeat of the Agrarian aristocrat by the industrial bully. Rather than the desperate hankering of Nashville, she had a prairie stoicism. She guessed that in the modern moment we needed to travel farther, to ever less comfortable liminal zones like the canyons once inhabited by the Anasazi, to be able to intuit incorruptible nature. As agricultural communities declined into soul cramping bitterness and poverty—for example, as in Wharton’s 1913 *Ethan Frome* or Sherwood Anderson’s 1919 book of grotesques, *Winesburg, Ohio*—a nostalgia for the great America garden meant that we needed special places, distant prospects, in order to refresh belief.

This recognition reveals something of Cather’s connection to Sarah Orne Jewett. About midsummer the narrator of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* walks with her landlady’s brother William to the top of a small island off the Maine coast. He is taking her to a high pasture where she will witness a sweeping prospect and reckon its significance:

> Through this piece of rough pasture ran a huge shape of stone like the great backbone of an enormous creature. At the end, near the woods, we could climb up on it and walk along to the highest point; there above the circle of pointed firs we could look down over all the island, and could see the ocean that circled this and other bits of island ground, the mainland shore and all the far horizons. It gave a sudden sense of space, for nothing stopped the eye or hedged one in,—that sense of liberty in space and time which great prospects always give. (45)

In *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) Cécile longs to visit the Ile d’Orleans, four miles down river from Quebec and a “landscape [that] looked as if it had been arranged to please the eye” (148). At first Cécile is enraptured:

> She had never seen so many wild flowers before. The daisies were drifted like snow in the tall meadow grass, and all the marshy hollows were thatched over with buttercups, so clean and shining, their yellow so fresh and unvarying, that it seemed as if they must all have been born that morning at
the same hour. The clumps of blue and purple iris growing on these islands of buttercups made a sight almost too won-
derful. All the afternoon Cécile thought she was in paradise.
(153)

Of course, the trouble in paradise is that its ordinary human inhabitants, the people with whom she must lodge, are smelly barbarians with a coarse diet and no sense of the natural splendor that surrounds them. Seeking relief Cécile strikes off on her own and comes to a place strikingly similar to the place where William takes the narrator of Jewett’s The Country of the Pointed Firs:

Cécile got away unobserved into the nearest wood. She went through it, and climbed toward the ride in the middle of the island. At last she came out on a waving green hayfield with a beautiful harp-shaped elm growing in the middle of it. The grass there was much taller than the daisies, so that they looked like white flowers seen through a driving grey-green rain. (156)

Safe from the Harnois, Cécile naps and is refreshed. She can manage another night with the family, for she has discovered a vantage from which to see the world around her deeply and differently. She feels that her trip has taken her long and far away; she is glad to find her home unchanged. Looking at the implements of daily life, “these brooms and clouts and brushes,” she realizes that “with them one made, not shoes or cabinet-work, but life itself. One made a climate within a climate; one made the days,—the complexion, the special flavour, the special happiness of each day as it passed; one made life” (159–60). Or, to return to Jewett’s terms, Cécile has been briefly freed of space and time, constituents and limits of human consciousness. What happens, therefore, at the threshold between gardened space and wilderness is transcen-
dence, in the Kantian sense, of basic categories of understanding. It is also a moment of beauty, a grasping not of content and line of a transcendental self, but the reassurance that this unspeakable self exists, for if it did not Cécile would be incapable of conceiving of an outside—or stepping beyond—the quotidian self to which she returns with happiness and new insight.
Surely some continuity, perhaps even an intentional allusion, is at work that the key moment in the mentor’s masterpiece should resonate in a late novel by the ephebe. Here surely is a fascinating archetypal recursion in the imaginative life of Willa Cather. The trope of the woodland clearing provides a prospect that is constant in Cather’s work, no matter what else she may change in her nature, gardens, or understanding of the function of landscape architecture. For example, in *The Professor’s House* (1925) Godfrey St. Peter, a man not given to vain indulgences, bought himself “a little triangle of sand running out into the water, with a bath-house and seven shaggy pine-trees on it” (57). Though in fact on the shores of Lake Michigan, St. Peter’s parcel is a place to which he retreats and where his meditations are most likely to return him to calm determination and where his youthful years in France replay themselves. The clutter of suburb, university, family, and materialism are at his back as he looks over—or swims into—the oceanic immensity of the water. As a liminal garden, then, this parcel, unlike the tidy half-acre he made behind his house, is a shred of residual wilderness, the habitable edge of an immensity that may be entered only at its extremes and then temporarily. Indeed, in the contrast of the two bits of land one sees the disequilibrium in the Professor. On the one hand, the natural element is shoved to the imperiled margins; the ordered, artificial, overcivilized garden is central and a sign of the Professor’s public success. The two worlds of the Professor mesh almost not at all for deep in him is a schismatic pathology that, unresolved, compels continual accommodation to the vulgarity of modern life. Life becomes shabby, drab, suffocatingly interior. Its degradation becomes his exclusive perspective. As if to reiterate how complete is the rout, how invidious the menace, Cather puts the physics building, shoddy and compromised, in a grove of pines. The Professor can see it profaning the pines from the window of his study in the old house.

Cather describes the Professor’s garden at the old house as “without a blade of grass” and “a tidy half-acre of glistening shrubs and bright flowers” (6). A work of twenty years, the garden is “Frenchified,” grassless at the edge of the prairie, and laid out with a constipated Cartesian’s wish that a rational reg-
ularity suit the intimate space that publicly expresses the individual’s relation to nature. This is not the nativist aesthetic of Frank Lloyd Wright; indeed, as quiet and tasteful as it may seem by contrast with the vulgarity of the new Marsellus house—the pseudo-Norwegian place named Outland—the Professor’s garden, his work of twenty years, is similarly at odds with its natural context. It expresses determination, a stolid ability to make something work where it does not belong, and as such is a sign of the Professor’s repression, first repression of the prairie, finally repression of self. By the end of the novel, when St. Peter has let go much of the control he had exerted over himself, “the Kansas boy who had come back to St. Peter . . . was a primitive” who “was only interested in earth and woods and water” (241). To be returned to himself is to leave the garden and the self it mimics:

Wherever sun sunned and rain rained and snow snowed, wherever life sprouted and decayed, places were alike to him. . . . He seemed to be at the root of the matter: Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths. He seemed to know, among other things, that he was solitary and must always be so . . . He was earth, and would return to earth. When white clouds blew over the lake like bellying sails, when the seven pine trees turned red in the declining sun, he felt satisfaction and said to himself merely, “that is right.” (241)

Clearly Cather intends us to understand the return of the repressed landscape of youth as the positive result of a catharsis and a return to the native ground of essential character.

All biographies of Cather, even brief ones on book covers, mention the psychological contrast opened in her memory by the move from verdant Virginia to the gray sheeting of south-central Nebraska. To the gardener, the transposition is as harsh and as mythic as the contrast between Beulah (long a nickname for the Shenandoah region) and the Sinai Desert in which the chosen wandered and nearly lost hope. My contention is that, more than a key archetype in a particularly interesting woman’s imagination, more even than a source of especially relevant images and themes, the garden was an early and important key to the development of Cather’s narrative poetics. During her first
visit to Europe, Cather was at Barbizon near Fontainebleau in September of 1902. With a sensibility remarkably like the one she will give to Claude Wheeler, she praises the residents of the village:

They have built no new and shining villas, introduced no tennis courts, or golf links, or electric lights. They have even heroically denied themselves any sewage system whatever, and the waste water from the kitchens and water tubs flows odorously along through the streets. The village at first sight looks like any other little forest town; the home of hard-working folk, desperately poor, but never so greedy or so dead of soul that they will not take time to train the peach tree against the wall until it spreads like a hardy vine, and to mass beautiful flowers of every hue in their little gardens. (120)

Barbizon represents, not the Professor’s rationalist and monarchical France, but Cather’s own France of good omelets and unpretentious farmsteads. It is a wholly different human adaptation to topography than nearby Fontainebleau, or, for that matter, Le Notre’s Vaux le Vicomte, or Versailles, which even the laudatory recent essay, “The Grand Gesture,” by Roy Strong, admits is “an expression of French absolutism, the garden as a manipulation of perspective whose lines met in the eyes of le Roi Soleil” (82). According to Strong, we recognize the space of the classic French garden by “its ability to orchestrate vast space, its glorification of the central axis, its rigid adherence to symmetry, its subtle manipulation of changes of level, its stately progression from parterre to bosquet to park and its embrace of infinity” (80). Thus, rather than take the gardening mentality to the edge, as does the narrator of The Country of Pointed Firs and so many of Cather’s more sympathetic characters, the absolutist model creates a center point of human dominion around which nature is compelled to organize itself, or, in caricatured submission, to resolve itself into evergreen cubes, cones, and spheres. Such sculpting, obedient to an inflexible human will, is remarkably like the huge consolidated farms on which monoculture is practiced and the creation of which destroyed the orchards and back gardens of the humble
and respectable immigrants of the early novels. Or, as becomes clear to Claude Wheeler as he experiences the rural France of the yeoman farmer, a particularly American obsession with wealth transformed what might have been the great American garden into a giant agricultural factory that is offensive to sensibility, as if the organizing principle revealed in the new landscape were the industrial and financial absolutism of the age.

Cather’s model is altogether other. Having traveled from Barbizon to the extreme south, she finds at the fishing village of Lavandou on the Mediterranean a place where “the gardens are for the most part pitiful little hillside patches of failure” (Willa Cather in Europe 156) and yet it is here that she achieves “a sense of immeasurable possession and immeasurable content” (157). Human presence clings to the steep landscape of Lavandou, the “principality of pines” where there is “the scent of dried lavender always in the air, and the sea reaching like a wide blue road into the sky” (161). Here at the end of human grasp Cather is able to conclude: “One cannot divine nor forecast the conditions that will make happiness; one only stumbles upon them by chance, in a lucky hour, at the world’s end somewhere, and holds fast to the days, as to fortune or fame” (157–58).

Quite likely when she was writing Thea Kronborg’s visit to the Southwest, Cather’s imagination was invigorated not just by her own discovery of the land and ruins of Colorado and New Mexico, but also by the memory of her time at Lavandou. She understands that there are some people—Mrs. Kohler, for example, or Ántonia—who are humble and admirable, and their worthiness is reflected in their gardens, outward signs of self-sufficiency, a love of beauty for its own sake, and a talent for accommodating desire to nature. But there are others, those who have greatness within, for whom the tended half-acre is not enough. They need to find themselves within a deep quiet and against a broad prospect. These are Cather’s artists and heroes. They risk being plowed under by capitalism. They are almost capable, as is Thea, of transcendence, of thinking beyond language, or of hearing a music beyond sound, if they happen on that place where their inward nature is in harmony with outward nature. Like Outland, they do not need maps or instructions on how to move about the far
limits of human occupation, though they do seem to need, as did Cather at Lavandou, and Thea and Tom in the Southwest, some rudiment of shelter and some potsherds, traces of ancient human struggle. The corners of the world hospitable to such people are, Cather insists, very few and diminishing in number.

The garden does not simply reveal a binary relation between the good and humble and the good and great people of the world. *One of Ours* complicates the case. Claude is not one of the great characters, nor is he one of the admirable Bohemians or others who prosper within modest limits. Claude never quite generates the ego to insist on his fair share, or to do something entirely for himself, for though he desires a better education, he hasn’t the temerity to demand it, and though he should kiss Gladys, he doesn’t. Rather, he builds for Enid a house of modest proportions reflecting a desire that she cannot understand. He places it near a grove—to which, like St. Peter, he can retreat—and plants a flowering vine on its porch. Frosty Enid traipses off to China and Claude heads for France where, having mothered his men through the Spanish influenza on the troop ship, he will meet his soul mate, Olive de Courcy, and see the house and garden she tends. Claude grows from a naïve young man of deep but extremely vague desires into someone who has real human weight. He has a breadth of sensibility that makes him nearly androgynous, or at least extremely rare in his ability to grasp the perspective of women. And as soon as he sees in Olive and her garden just what he would have were he to get what he was never really quite able to tell himself that he wanted, he is about to die. Both of them know that events have precluded their happiness; each is stoical in his or her own way as Claude leaves. Finally, he is an inverted Candide, for when his ideal garden materializes and his Cunégonde appears, it is too late for him. History has rendered him obsolete; it cannot admit the private man who looks to his own work and family and is satisfied.

Once, however, it was possible to retire from the world and be satisfied in one’s garden. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* the detestable Fray Baltazar grows corpulent at Acoma largely from eating the produce of his garden. It took coerced labor to build it, as soil was carried up from below the mesa, and the
virtual slavery of the women of Ácoma to keep it watered. The garden demonstrates that greed, even in the absence of common sense, can accomplish just about anything. Of course, it is not the demands of the garden but the accidental murder of an Ácomite boy that gets Baltazar tossed off the rock; still, the deterioration of the garden of arrogance delights the women who had once carried water up the cliffs. How different is Latour’s garden at Tesuque, down from the heights of Santa Fe to a well-watered valley and a milder climate. Latour lays out the garden in front of a two-hundred-year-old apricot tree that gives particularly sweet fruit, planting where prosperity has a natural chance. Moreover, rather than press labor the retired archbishop helps tend the garden and shares its produce with willing helpers; it is, Cather says, his “recreation,” adding: “Wherever there was a French priest, there should be a garden of fruit trees and vegetables and flowers. [Latour] often quoted to his students that passage from their fellow Auvergnat, Pascal: that Man was lost and saved in a garden” (267). Before he dies, this gardener gains the power to understand:

There is... something charming in the idea of greatness returning to simplicity—the queen making hay among the country girls—but how much more endearing was the belief that They (the Holy Family), after so many centuries of history and glory, should return to play Their first parts... in a wilderness at the end of the world, where angels could scarcely find them. (282–83)

Finally, the return to simplicity is the point, the destination of the pilgrimage, the first principle of horticulture and the central aesthetic recognition that transformed Cather from an American realist into a survivor of modernism and a major writer.

The notion of Cather’s garden is not limited to glossing her fiction; it can also situate her in the context of American literary history and current criticism. In fact, something of its ability to clarify functions appears even in such apparently unlikely places as Marilee Lindemann’s *Willa Cather: Queering America* and Guy Reynolds’s *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire*. Lindemann, for example, places the struggles to live out a lesbian
identity within “the battle to authorize and claim custody of the word “America” (3). Working from Alan Trachtenberg’s perspective of what she calls “the massive structural and economic transformations that occurred between the Civil War and World War I, a process of redistribution of wealth and reorganization of society” a time of the “increasing standardization and mechanization of American life” (3), Lindemann discovers the acute challenges to Cather’s sexuality and Lindemann’s own in her relationship to Cather. The garden, as mythic archetype and as real place, is displaced and threatened by the same obliterating forces that challenge any identity that is not normative or mediocre. As an ideal it appears newly precious and precarious, needing reformulation in order to survive. As such, it shares similarities with progressivism for the new garden must respond to what Reynolds describes as “the splintering of . . . idealism during the First World War” (14). Cather’s poetics (narrative and horticultural, I would claim) resemble progressivism in being “structured around polarities of idealism and disillusion” (14). Her gardens would be archaic, sites of lonely nostalgia, were it true that Cather’s “earthly heavens and Utopias . . . seem ahistorical—purely and simply mythic ideal communities.” But as Reynolds shifts the terms, “an apparently mythic discourse is revealed as historically conditioned; the great, good places of Cather’s fiction emerge as part of a large cultural pattern, namely the Utopian idealism of progressive America and its reforming drive to recreate the nation as an earthly Eden” (15). Now it becomes clear, how, within a context of social transformation, the garden re-gardened, transfigured by new exigencies, can become freshly expressive of characters who are not human relics and ideals that are not obsolete.

Joseph Urgo’s premise that “a dialectic between migration and settlement informs New World history at every stage” (1) recalls the central paradox in my definition of the garden, that inescapable oscillation of never-finished gardening—Urgo’s “exploring the world as it emerges from an imagination in continual transposition”(7)—over against the ideal of Eden as original and final home place. The dream of being done, or settled, keeps us moving and we keep moving so as never to still the dream of settlement. Or consider this sentence: “Migration is paradoxi-
cally the keystone of American existence, and migrants father paradoxes as they move from one ‘permanent residence’ to the next” (13). Slightly amended: “Gardening is paradoxically the keystone of American existence, and gardeners father paradoxes as they move from one ‘permanent residence’ to the next.” Or perform a similar perversion on this passage from his conclusion: “American culture, in the context of Willa Cather’s writing, exists as a finished object in the future alone, in the form of spatial imagination, national purpose, and migration [gardening] into possibility. American hostility toward history, toward the past as the image of completion, is the migrant’s [gardener’s] resentment for the settled, the traveler’s [horticulturalist’s] suspicion of the entrenched” (195).

In *The Home Plot: Women, Writing, and Domestic Ritual*, Ann Romines writes of Cécile that “as she becomes more conscious of the satisfactions of her domestic life, she also becomes more conscious of its fragility” (156) and “for her, art, religion, and housekeeping are one” (157). Cécile chooses “not the flowery Edenic island—but the beauty of the domestic enclosure” and so “insures the continuity of a culture, although it will almost certainly cost some of the complex potential of Cécile’s selfhood” (158). Romines’s shrewd recovery of what can be called the quiet nobility of the homely arts can be extended to gardening as well, but not just women’s gardens. Indeed, though some gardens are gendered—Le Notre’s landscape rhetoric at Versailles is thoroughly masculinist, Gertrude Jekyll’s late nineteenth-century revolution of the country house garden was feminist—Cather’s gardens are not as pervasively gender-inflected as, say, the raising of children or the baking of kolaches, or the making of money and the maiming of birds. While her return home and her disappearance into marriage certainly suggest Cécile’s emergence into womanhood, Romines is far from condemning a “simultaneous process of self-discovery and self-loss through which a girl cloaks herself in the traditional life that her culture offers to women” (163). Rather than a regrettable dynamic of young womanhood, it resembles characters crossing the garden, shedding ego, and recovering contact with the deepest self. Defined by her home, Cécile resembles the gardener writ large, especially the grateful
steward who renders her plot always more fecund as she increases its produce and beauties from year to year, cycle to cycle, or through the phases of life’s migration.

Four decades ago John Randall recognized the significance of Ántonia’s garden, “the garden of the world,” as he calls it, for “at the center of all this fertility of farm and family is a place of quietness, a place which contains the deepest peace which human kind can know” (142). I would be more emphatic, for Ántonia’s grape arbor, not the house, is the center of the world she creates, a still point of comfort, productivity, and beauty so attractive and personal that it is the most revealing place on the farm to take Burden. The grape arbor shows Ántonia’s triumph and happiness to her old friend; it is so pleasant that minor community events are held there. Gardens may be the best-civilized places on earth, like Ántonia’s, and so a balm to enter; or sad mistakes for all outward signs of labor and intention, like the Professor’s tidy half-acre; or repugnant for the ease with which the land gives up nutrients as money, as do Mr. Wheeler’s many acres. All good gardens are laid out and tended like a Cather novel. Though today we tend to read The Song of the Lark as one of Cather’s masterworks, we understand why William Heineman brought the well-pruned O Pioneers! to England but declined The Song of the Lark. Cather’s return to a less fulsome method in My Ántonia (or in her cuts to The Song of the Lark in the late 1930s) as well as the principles she elaborates in “The Art of Fiction” (1920) and “The Novel Démeublé” (1922) reveal an artist clear about her aesthetic principles. Later statements, such as “A Chance Meeting” (1933)—the piece on Flaubert’s niece—and “Light on Adobe Walls” (1949), demonstrate their continuity throughout her artistic maturity and the success of the simple expression of the grape arbor.

In “The Novel Démeublé,” Cather writes about The Scarlet Letter: “[T]he material investiture of that story is presented as if unconsciously; by the reserved, fastidious hands of an artist, not by the gaudy fingers of a showman or the mechanical industry of a department-store window-dresser” (49). Soon she will damn Lawrence for reducing characters to “mere animal pulp,” for failing to create: “Whatever is felt upon the page without being
specifically named there—that, one might say, is created. It is the inexplicable presence of the thing not named, of the overtone divined by the ear but not heard by it, the verbal mood, the emotional aura of the fact of the thing or the deed, that gives high quality to the novel or the drama, as well as to poetry itself” (Not Under Forty 50). The sheer good of creation cannot be revealed through a narrative poetics that regards richness as derived from diversity and intensity of detail or, for that matter, novelty of linguistic effect. Indeed, to write this way is to kowtow to materialism and hedonism, or, to stretch my metaphor, to industrialize the land on which literature grows. In Cather’s gardens, at their most important, we see characters touch their idealism before, inevitably, being snapped back into ordinary life. She instructs us: Novelists compromise to historical moment and readers; gardeners compromise to soil and to climate; noble souls suffer anomie and die. But all of them keep reaching, not for sensation, not for power, not for material wealth, but for that truth that is just over the fence, that can be “killed by a tasteless amplitude” (51). She makes clear in “Light on Adobe Walls” that “nobody can paint the sun, or sunlight,” they “can only paint the tricks that shadows play with it” (On Writing 123). My point is that the garden, Cather’s prolific metaphor, her metaphysical passe-partout, is the place where we encounter the possibility of being at liberty in space and time. To recall Jewett, the garden is permission to be at liberty from categories of consciousness—past and present, male and female, self and other, public and private, civilization and nature. Rather than compensate us for the degradations of industrial prosperity with more of the same, Cather’s novels and her gardens are intended to bring us into the perfect light in a perfect place possible only in the liberated imagination.

NOTE

1. For a broader discussion of the tamarisk’s history and its threat to southwestern wetlands, see especially the following web sites: Cameron Barrow’s “Tamarisk Control and Common Sense”; Ken A. MacKenzie’s “Fighting Tamarisk Infestations on the South Platte River”; “Tamarisk

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