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## Vergilian Allusions in the Novels of Willa Cather

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Vergilian Allusions in the Novels of Willa Cather

By

Nathaniel C. Wagner

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

English Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

(July, 2015)

Vergilian Allusions in the Novels of Willa Cather

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student's committee.

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Abstract:

Vergilian Allusion in the Novels of Willa Cather

M.A. in English Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato

2015

This work aims to explore the nature of Vergilian allusion in the novels of Willa Cather – how the author implicated classical language in her own texts as well as the purpose and efficacy of such allusions. By surveying traces of Vergilian passages and rhetorical techniques such as ecphrasis and anacolouthon across three of the writer’s major novels, *My Antonia*, *The Professor’s House* and *Shadows on the Rock*, this study reveals an important and persistent aspect of Cather’s artistic program. The author intentionally and regularly uses Vergilian language and figures to lend a sense of grandeur to the small, individual lives of her characters, to suggest a sense of the infinite in the infinitesimal. Moreover this study will also demonstrate that such moments of epic insight rarely last and that Cather plays up not only the elevation of such moods but highlights equally the fading of such moments to reveal a bitter-sweet tragic beauty in the human condition.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Virginia Woolf once said that the experience of reading Montaigne was like examining a portrait from a bygone era and seeing at the same moment both the artifact and one's own reflection in its glass case framed together. This analogy fits aptly the experience of reading Cather today. In her characters and their concerns we recognize a distinct past – the 19<sup>th</sup> century immigrant experience on the plains, the discovery of Anasazi ruins in the pueblos of Colorado, the forging of a new civilization in the 18<sup>th</sup> century wilderness of Quebec. Yet within the accounts of these characters, as removed as their experiences may be, we recognize ourselves in the glass. We cross the decades and centuries empathetically to share in their comedies and tragedies. Stephen Tennant reflects on Cather's genius: "We know that she is a great writer, not because we feel that she deals with epic themes, passions at white heat or noble dramas, but because of the curious fact that with a few mild sentences and rather uneventful narrative she convinces us that our own lives have given, and received, happiness" (xii). The mystery of how this author of humble beginnings, raised on the great plains of a young nation, is able to translate the grave and constant in human experience in "a few mild sentences" is my concern here. How does she suggest the momentous in the trivial? What techniques or rhetorical choices inform this seemingly mysterious ability to invest the mundane with the marvelous? I propose here that Cather's greatness lies in an allusive depth dimension in her work, her ability to write in both historical and mythical modes simultaneously.

While she deplores the idea of author as journalist, enumerating details of overstuffed scenes, Cather effectively recreates the scenes and lives of characters who engage her reader by those details, leading them to cross the oceans of time and find a shared fascination with the minutiae of little lives like their own. In an unpublished fragment "*Light on Adobe Walls*", Cather writes: "Nobody can paint the sun or sunlight. He can only paint the tricks that shadows play with it, or what it does to forms. . . . At bottom all he can give you is the thrill of his own poor little nerve – the projection in paint of a fleeting pleasure in a certain combination of form and colour" (*On Writing*, 124). Yet as trapped as the writer may be by the specific Cather strives to capture the elemental light, to apprehend, if only for an instant, an intense feeling of unity in moments of transcendent participation in larger patterns of experience. She regularly works to reconstitute the "fleeting pleasures" of another time and place, creating a montage of the particular of specific ages from which the eternal emerges as a suggestion of the infinite. She explains this technique in her essay, *The Novel Demeuble*. She notes of such an artistry that, "Out of the teeming, gleaming stream of the present it must select the eternal material of art" (40).

Moreover this phenomenon of recognition and participation in another age fires the imagination of her characters too and delivers to them an ecstatic sense of unity with larger, holistic patterns of experience that emerge from the specific. Jim Burden recognizes his own experiences in Black Hawk as larger in light of Vergil's *Georgics*. Tom Outland, when reading the *Aeneid*, sees "two pictures: the one on the page and one behind that" (228). Cecile Auclair finds in the flickering cast of

European candlelight on the Quebec cathedral walls the persistence of a sacred fire that she carries to her New World like the Roman hero Aeneas, bound in a shared duty to meet the needs of the new race she will found. In such allusive moments, when Vergilian passages, techniques and thematic echoes perforate present, the modern reader finds the key to Cather's magic; they come, as Tom Outland does on the Blue Mesa, to marvel at the play of light and shadows, the details of the ancient city recreated on the page, but also to approach the larger fire, the holistic feeling never named but only suggested, and to "see it all whole" (228) but to lose that vision shortly thereafter. By examining Vergilian allusions across three of her major novels, spanning the breadth of her career, one can recognize the power and persistence of Vergilian allusions in her artistic program as a whole. Cather drew from the classical past, and Vergil in particular, from her early years in Red Cloud, through the darker 1920's, after the world "broke in two" for her, and on into her later years when she was writing in relative seclusion in Jaffrey, NH and Quebec. More than flourishes to flash evidence of her classical learning, more than ironic gestures to mock an unreliable patriarchal tradition, more than bearing the flag of piety to old world virtues, Cather's classical allusions mark the heart of her artistic endeavor – to hint at the tragic beauty in human life.



## Chapter II: Review of Literature

That Classical literature influenced Cather has found strong agreement amongst biographers and scholars alike. Bernice Slote notes that Cather “learned the great epics so well that all the seas and islands of the ancients were living and real” (35). James Woodress and Edith Lewis both recount an interest in the classics that sparked at age thirteen, was further fanned by her tutor William Drucker, and flared to a passion for Greek and Latin literature that led her to major in Classics at the University of Nebraska under Herbert Bates, and persisted throughout her lifetime. Mary Ryder too, in her assessment, judges Cather a “well-trained and capable classicist”(117). Even those who, in the vein of Sutherland, point to her misquotation of Classical texts and her discomfort as a Latin teacher seem to agree that Cather was a well-read and competent classicist.

Furthermore, out of this immersion in classical literature no author held greater importance to Cather than the Roman poet Virgil. Joan Acocella counts Virgil, along with Henry James, as one of the writers who influenced her most (5). Theodore Ziolkowski notes that in *My Antonia*, “Virgil clearly informs the whole”(150), and Donald Sutherland points to Virgil as a “deep influence” (157). In addition to these testimonies, a number of commentators confirm the abundance and significance of Vergilian allusions in her novels.

That said, there remains a debate about the effect and purpose of Cather’s frequent Vergilian allusions. Before tackling this question, it may first help to

examine the ways in which Vergil influenced writers of Cather's era in general. In his survey of Vergilian influence in the twentieth century, *Vergil and the Moderns*, Theodore Ziolkowski traces a fundamental split between the tonal and thematic as twin impulses that work towards the survival of Vergil in the 20's and 30's. He writes, "In the final analysis, however, common denominators that transcend national or ideological groupings account for the survival of Vergil in the first half of the twentieth century. These, I believe, can be recapitulated in two related themes: the descent to the underworld and the discovery of history" (238). By the descent to the underworld, Ziolkowski refers to the dark and grave tones of Vergil's works – an essential ambivalence about mankind's capacity for inhumanity, a confused and complex sexuality, and a sense for inherent suffering in the human situation. By the "discovery of history" Ziolkowski refers to a thematic sense of cosmos, of a coherent plan and direction in human history. Scholars today trace in Cather's Vergilian allusions gestures toward both sides of the opposition Ziolkowski sets forth, notes of chaos and cosmos, tone and theme. Some modern readers look upon her classical allusions as fundamentally chaotic – as an echo chamber for primal, instinctive forces. These readers see in these allusions a means to a grave or epic tone. For these readers, the Latin text works as a tonal vehicle, an aesthetic device to lend gravity and depth to her prose, often suggesting emotional and aesthetic undertones that cast her work in a transcendent light. Others mark in these allusions a cosmic or ordering function – a prophetic map of recurrent themes. For these readers, Cather employs Vergilian language more thematically, nostalgically evoking a heroic past

that frames her characters and narratives along archetypal and mythological lines. They see in these allusions the means to recast the local along the lines of epic patterns, claiming for these allusions the power to cast the immediate in a heroic light. Yet for all the clarity of the dichotomy Ziolkowski lays out for the use of Vergil in modern literature, there remains a myriad of other approaches to Cather's allusions. Many also read Cather's nods to Vergil in a more political light, tracing in these passages evidence of nativist's nostalgia for bygone days. Some will even read these allusions under a gendered lens, detecting in Vergilian allusions the impotent longing of characters like Jim Burden to escape a threatening present. Paradoxically, however, the most sound readings of Cather's allusions admit doubt and celebrate ambiguity. Many, after a rigorous reading of Cather's language, find that her allusions defy reduction and point not to tone or theme, chaos or cosmos, past or future, but both, hearing in her allusions to Vergil ambivalent murmurs of something else – something harder to name or define. These readers see classical language pointing to more vague intuitions of Platonic common denominators in the human experience writ large. With such wide-ranging responses to Vergilian language in Cather's texts, it seems appropriate to first survey the spectrum and efficacy of such varied lenses before discussing the artistic purpose such allusions play in her major novels.

Donald Sutherland typifies those who read in Cather's allusions a tonal purpose. In his article, "Willa Cather: The Classical Voice," he explores the manner in which Cather absorbs intuitively a Virgilian sensibility and voice. He explains that

though Cather was no scholarly Classicist, she had the ability to both apprehend and express a mysterious Virgilian musicality, what Sutherland terms “the essential expression” of Virgil’s poetry. He asks:

If something very like the essential expression of an aria can be caught and strongly felt by a listener who has no idea of what key it is in, what metric, or what the intervals are, can the essential expression of a Latin poem be caught by a reader who has only an approximate knowledge of its grammar, upon which not only the literal meaning but the rhetorical effect greatly depends? A good deal is lost on him, of course, but perhaps not the essential expression; he misses many details of the style but perhaps not the style itself, the substance or hang of it. (158)

While Sutherland makes several interesting points about Cather’s ear for rhythm and how it might suggest an affinity with the Roman poet, much of his talk of “original vibration” and “fervid melancholy” are too speculative to offer truly satisfying answers to questions about how Cather read. Moreover, while it is tempting to agree with Sutherland’s intuitions about the musicality of her prose, there seems to be more at work here than philological guesswork and passing musical mimicry. Cather deserves credit as a reader who possessed more than an “approximate knowledge” of Virgilian texts and one should credit the intentionality of her allusions, along with their careful arrangement in her novels, as part of a much more sophisticated artistic program than Sutherland affords her. In short,

Sutherland reads Cather's allusions with great sensitivity to tone and mood, but in the end he sees her use of Virgilian texts as "allusion in passing", geared more toward sonorous than any thematic effects.

In contrast to Sutherland's reading of allusions as tonal, one finds in John J. Murphy's work on Cather more concern for the thematic implications of Vergilian language in the novels. In his important study *My Antonia: The Road Home*, Murphy recognizes in Cather's allusions an effort to echo ancient literature as a means to enhance universal notes in her own prose – to express through her own characters essential and "universal yearnings" (7). In Murphy's reading, Cather works through allusions to filter details of a local Nebraskan landscape through the lens of classical tradition. Far from mere window dressing, in this view allusions constitute the window through which one reads the pioneer experience of these characters. In this spirit, Murphy lays out the episodes in the novel as crafted reflections of Vergil's text - a thematic mirror of the *Georgics*. Thus in the first book of *My Antonia* Murphy recognizes in Cather's depiction of hard work and seasonal change a reflection of the first book of the *Georgics* with its focus on the hard won cultivation of nature, shedding light on both texts as an extended metaphor for the cultivation of a hard won human self-discipline overcoming the threat of passions. In this same pattern, Antonia's idyllic family life mirrors the ideal balance between rustic and urban life styled in the second book of the *Georgics*. Murphy recognizes in the conflicts caused by sex and death – namely Wick Cutter's attempted rape of Antonia a parallel to the sex and passion curbed by enlightened husbandry in the Third *Georgic*. Finally he

draws further parallels between the epyllion of Orpheus and Eurydice embedded in the song of Proteus and the music of blind D'Arnault embedded within Jim Burden's narrative. Beyond these thematic echoes, Murphy even sees Cather as explicitly adopting "techniques shared with Virgil" (42), including a prevalence of set pieces (anacoluthon), parallel and interweaving themes, the suggestive use of mythology, and "kaleidoscopic imagery" (42-43). In Murphy's study, Cather is completely Vergilian. She filters her narrative details through a classical lens – a lens which "illuminates the universal significance she saw in her frontier material" (16).

Whether or not Cather filters the Nebraska prairie through a Virgilian lens to the degree that Murphy claims, her allusions certainly add a larger, mnemonic import to the experiences of Jim, Antonia and others, and, importantly, these allusions are intentional. More than Sutherland's vaguely intuited tones, Murphy repeatedly evokes memory as central to Cather's conscious artistic program, and there is a promising link to Vergil in this gesture. For in like fashion, the Roman bard cites memory as the key that turns his art too. Elizabeth Sergeant quoted Cather as saying, "Life began when I ceased to admire and began to remember" (107). While this famous line marks a shift in consciousness from a journalist's objective reportage to a novelist's subjective recollection, Cather utters these words with clearly cosmological tones – "Life began." In this context, it is reasonable to read her idea of memory in an epic light. For Cather, the move to remember is not simply a midlife career choice but an invocation of the Muses – according to Hesiod and classical mythology the daughters of Zeus and Memory. For the epic poet, to invoke

the muses is to invoke both divine inspiration and memory, and Cather seems to enroll herself in this tradition. It is worth noting (and it is surprising that Murphy never highlights this), that in the *Aeneid* Vergil too evokes a curiously mnemonic muse when he writes, "*Musa, mihi causas memora*" (*Aeneid*, I. 8). Unlike Homer and other epic predecessors, Vergil calls on the muse not simply to record in admiration the heroic exploits of a bygone age but specifically to "remember through me the causes." In this sense, Murphy's work points to a crucial affinity between the two writers, yoking them both to a shared muse of memory and an artistic program that strives to synthesize both the heroic past and the personal present.

Other critics, like Paul Olson, follow Murphy's lead in recognizing in Cather's allusions an intentional and formulaic means of depicting plains experience in a heroic light, but add to this a program a redemptive quality. For Olson, a Virgilian lens can both highlight the heroic in the local and elevate the paradigms of these local characters for ages to come. As Jim Burden hymns Antonia's beauty and goodness, he casts her as an Aeneas figure, capable of founding a new mode of living. Olson sees Cather's epic mode working towards two purposes. He explains, "This is, of course, half of the epic purpose in Virgil – to memorialize the universal and true as the heroic in the particular form in which history offers it to human memory. The other half of it is to show how Destiny has led the hero to take hold of its design and to carve out a pattern of life laid out before by transcendent powers in order to rescue an old or create a new civilization" (280). Thus Olson would have Cather bring the Virgilian muse to Nebraska in order to highlight the heroism already in

action and to celebrate a Georgic society that might flourish once again in its destiny as a new Eden of the American prairies.

While Olson argues persuasively about Cather's redemptive purpose in her classical allusions, pointing out that by virtue of this epic mode the author underscores the natural, heroic mettle of "the defeated, the women, the tramps, the plow jockeys" (285), these figures are both heroic and tragic. By pushing too hard the redemptive nature of these allusions, Olson misses the sense of eternal return Cather invests in these passages. Yes, Virgilian words may serve to reanimate the dead ruins of Chaco Canyon by virtue of the resemblance to the epic past, but they also serve to highlight that this resurrection will only fade again. As the setting sun highlights the plow as a revised incarnation of Aeneas' shield, it is important to note that the sun will set and the plow will rust. Cather does not simply recall to reconstruct but to mark the cyclical peaks and valleys of human struggle.

Along the same lines as Murphy, Mary Ruth Ryder, takes a strong archetypal tack but her reading of classical allusion serve a feminist approach. She claims for such allusions not the nostalgic suggestion of a bygone era but structuring principles that serve to highlight Antonia, not Jim, as "a cultural signifier of all that we value of the classical western tradition" (117). Ryder reads in Cather's Virgilian allusions a map of Antonia's character development from "repository" for Jim's youthful epic heroism to her own rising status as epic heroine and transcendent magna mater figure. Thus Ryder echoes Blanche Gelfant and others who mark in



Jim's gravitation to the Georgics an escapist move - a mark of unreliability and impotence. In contrast to Jim's failure, she elevates Antonia's sexuality and fecundity. But where others dismiss Burden's classical allusions, Ryder retains from her description of Antonia a mythical figure that embodies and thus preserves old-world values, "vitality, integrity, courage, and endurance"(117). Thus Ryder claims as Cather's purpose "a search for the permanent and the enduring, for values more lasting than bronze, as Horace would say"(117). Ryder cleverly traces out in Jim's narrative an inability to retain control of his status as epic author. As intriguing as this reading is, Ryder is more secure in her claims for Cather's purpose and notions of "the permanent and enduring" than most scholars more sensitive to the author's feel for the fragility of language.

In stark contrast to Ryder's archetypal readings, John N. Swift, in his article, "*My Antonia* and the Politics of Modern Classicism", reads Vergilian allusions under a far more political lens. Focusing on Jim Burden's use of Vergil, he reads these allusions and Cather's classicism in general as a process performing three functions: first it nostalgically reframes and valorizes Jim's experience; second, it works to sanitize it, repressing messy sexuality; third, it rewrites his experience in accord with a new narrative of origin, replacing the modern immigrants' "squalid past" with a idealized "drama of antique life"(111). Swift makes a strong case for reading the context of American modernist classicism in this nativist light, as he draws selectively on the words of philologists of the era.

Yet the problem with this stilted reading of Cather's Vergilian allusions is that nowhere does Swift draw on Cather's own words. Surely there flies in the face of Swift's assumptions about this latent nativism Cather's own nostalgia for the Bohemian women whom she loved to listen to as she grew up. What of the Russian tales? What of French symbolist poetry? What of the reference to Coronado that precedes the image of the plow? There is much in Cather's works that does not fit Swift's version of the intellectual climate. If the classical nostalgia of university presidents and cultural conservatives of the day smack of nativist penchants for classical purity in a homogeneous, American society, there is no reason to assume this automatically of Jim Burden's or Cather's views. Swift himself recognizes an inconsistency when he points out, "More interesting finally is the extent to which the domination of the classical ideal *failed* or was at least incomplete or unconvincing in *My Antonia* and its successors" (117). So convinced is Swift of this nativist spirit of Cather's classicism, that he insists on reading *Antonia* as a haunting Bohemian irruption into a world of white marble. He writes,

In the closing metaphor she re-offers Jim a cultural parentage to set against Greece and Rome: her Bohemianism, now for the first time deliberately understood as a primary language, as the shaping structure of 'common things'. Where Lena had earlier reacquired meaning for Jim in embodying, fleshing out, a Virgilian epigraph, here Antonia herself provides the gestures and paradigms that confer meaning on experience. And unlike the austere vocabulary that Jim takes from Virgil, the language that Antonia teaches is of

the body, the material world, of labor, production and reproduction, and sexuality.(118)

Here Swift sets an artificial, austere Vergilian world held up by the nativist voices of stuffy philologists like Gaston Cleric against the organic, Bohemian heroism embodied by Antonia. Swift is too concerned with retaining a binary opposition that simply does not exist. The “classical” values of President Hibbing and Calvin Coolidge are not necessarily that of either Cather or of Virgil – one a native of the prairie who loved to listen to the tales of immigrant women, the other a poet who spoke openly of “labor, production and reproduction, and sexuality” in the very work which frames Cather’s narrative. There is no inherent reason why these two paths to the past – one northern, one southern European must be opposed and not complementary. While Swift perceptively depicts the classicism of the times in general brush strokes, there is no reason to assume Cather fell victim to the same tendency to read culture in terms of exclusionary, binary oppositions of “us” and “them”. It is easier and more accurate to read Antonia “like the founder of early races” – original in a more expansive way.

Less confident in proposing a definite artistic program in her analysis of classical allusions, Joan Acocella finds in Vergilian allusions the vestiges of fundamental patterns in human experience - a mystical participation in Platonic ideals strongly suggested but never defined. While Acocella sets out to survey Cather’s critical reception in the decades between 1910 and 1970, she achieves far

more in her volume *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism*. Herein Acocella offers a sound and clever response to feminist criticism that appears to take the unreliable narrator trope too far. For Acocella the famous “thing not named” refers not to lesbian sexual anxieties but to the heart of an aesthetic mystery that informs Cather’s artistic program. Drawing on Cather’s exposure to French symbolist literature, Bernice Slote’s collection of Cather’s thoughts in writing, and the author’s own words in the “Novel Demeuble,” Acocella explains, “If there is one theme that Cather in her mature work, states more often than any other, it is that the most important truths about life can never be spoken, only hinted at”(13). The “thing not named” then stands for “some ineffable emotional truth lying between the mind and the world” (12). In this light, Vergilian language in Cather’s novels reveals a mystical, Platonic sensibility – truths suggested rather than explicated. Acocella thus blends biography, reception theory, and good, old-fashioned common sense to deliver a study that offers significant insights into the methods and measures of her art. Acocella enjoins critics today to read with a “loyalty to Cather and hope of finding not just a confirmation of one’s politics but something else”(73).

In this spirit then Acocella proceeds to deliver her own reading of Cather’s mysticism. She sees Cather as an idealist, one who “believes that behind what is essentially the disaster of life there exists some order, some realm of meaning, that explain and dignifies our lives, turns them from a disaster into a tragedy”(81). Acocella vigorously supports this idealism, pointing to repeated instances of Platonic allegory, her use of lighting, and symbols that evoke Christian and Platonic

idealism. Acocella does not trace out classical patterns as strict aesthetic parallels or as an archetypal sign system pointing to any set program but rather as the pointed repetition of a gesture towards the absolute. In Acocella's treatment, Vergilian allusions work to set up anaphoric repetition that reinforces a tragic beauty in the recurrent destruction and dissolution that her characters experience. She explains of these allusive echoes, "It happens all the time, Cather seems to say, and by saying so, she only makes it more heartbreaking, because she makes it into a principle" (89). In her empathetic reading of Cather, Acocella succeeds in reclaiming Cather's role as a formidable female writer, but by exploring the "tragic sense" in her fiction she also lays bare important insights into her use of classical allusions. For Acocella Cather does not evoke Vergil because she or her "unreliable narrator" must mask latent sexual impulses but because she is striving to say something about humans striving to live as exiles in very difficult circumstances. Thus Acocella sheds clear light on Cather's motivation to employ such Vergilian allusions. She suggests through these passages an aesthetic of tragic beauty that is hard to define but readily felt.

Karen Simons follows Acocella's lead and articulates this aesthetic not only as tragic but as redemptive. In her well-researched essay, "Remaking the Georgic Connection: Virgil and Willa Cather's 'My Antonia'", Simons provides a sound review of the scholarship on Georgic influences and echoes in Cather's work. Drawing on classical philology of David Ross, John Halperin and Richard Jenkyns, she importantly distinguishes between the pastoral and georgic modes, the pastoral

aligning itself with *otium*, leisure and the georgic with *labor*, toil, Thus Simmons moves the conversation beyond attitudes, which render Cather's allusions as simple "pastoral" nostalgia. Simmons sees the Georgic allusions as a lens that "magnifies the people and places of rural Nebraska" (526). She reads in both Virgil and Cather a shared "golden quality", showing things to be simultaneously both ordinary and special, mundane and epic. In Simons words, "In the same way that the plough is magnified by the sun, the people and places in Jim' rural past assume heroic proportions against the light of classical literature" (534). For Olson, Miller and Simons, then, the Georgics provides a background against which the ordinary is illuminated, magnified, and appreciated as epic in its own right.

Unlike others, however, Simons takes an important additional step. She notes of Jim's (and Cather's) allusions, "In the end, this classicism is neither 'nativist' nor 'masculinist', nor merely nostalgic. It enables him to reveal Antonia's heroism, significance, and permanence. She is no longer one obscure, infinitesimal life but a figure who always has existed and always will exist" (538). In this important step, Simmons begins to trace out the sense of the cyclical and eternal return in these allusions. It is this aspect of Cather's allusion – its sense of recurrence- that I hope to explore in three of her major novels below.

### Chapter III: My Antonia – Shooting Off and Digging Deep

Before analyzing the role and significance of Virgilian allusions in *My Antonia*, it pays to consider the method and aims of Cather's allusive style more generally. As a modernist writer fascinated with the epic past, Cather adopts ancient language and figures of speech for her own novel and non-traditional ends. As Paul Olson explains, Cather does not imitate the formulae of older poems but rather creates "nonformulaic methods of presentation appropriate to the heroism of peasant peoples, of women, and of minority groups: methods which are yet recognizably related to those of the older heroic literature and which are appropriate, powerful, and pay deference to the tradition" (265). Bernice Slote terms this nonformulaic method as a "style of mingled allusiveness and symbolism over a groundwork of fixed, related metaphors" (35). Where other modern writers employ classical allusions to suggest thematic patterns or structures of experience or as a tonal device to lend bathos, for Cather, classical literature, and the texts of Vergil in particular, provide the means of opening in her own narrative nodes or portals through which the present and the past interpenetrate or collapse. In all of her novels, Cather employs this "mingled allusiveness" both by specific literary allusions (Vergilian passages) and by Vergilian devices (namely ecphrasis and anacoluthon). What marks the novel genius of her allusiveness is that she activates Vergilian language neither casually nor in strictly formulaic patterns but at select, scattered moments in her narratives fashioned like windows to open narrative space through which the tone and themes of the past are let in to interpenetrate the modern text.

In Cather's hands, Vergilian allusions and narrative devices open the present to the lamp of the classical past and illuminate the local figures of the Nebraskan plains, Mesa Verde or of Isle of Quebec City as at once local and idiosyncratic but at the same time broadly human and heroic. Moreover Cather adds a complexity to these allusive moments. While Vergilian passages and devices allow for moments in which historical time miraculously collapses and ages unite, Cather opens these windows only briefly before closing them, reminding her readers of both the heroic gravity and the tragic ephemerality of human achievement. In that sense, not only does she inject Vergilian allusions and devices into her fiction, but she invests her work with a Vergilian spirit too.

Cather introduces maybe her finest novel *My Antonia* with just such an allusion in these prefatory words, "*Optima dies . . . prima fugit*" – the best days are the first to flee. With the rise and fall of this phrase, Cather evokes the Roman bard Virgil even before the narrative begins. While many are quick to cite these lines from Virgil's *Georgics* as a harbinger of classical themes to come, few note that in citing the *Georgics* here and returning to this quotation, Cather creates both a fragment (note the ellipsis) and an echo or recursive ring pattern. Surely this is uncommon to repeat one's prefatory inscription in the course of one's narrative as often as Cather does here through her own voice, then Gaston Cleric's, then Jim's. So too, when the narrator adds "My" to the portfolio cover's "Antonia," in that moment of writing he or she echoes or recreates Cather's title and the words we will hear again and again from the mouths of Jim and Mr. Shimerda. From the beginning, the



novel is framed in intriguing ways – a narration of a narration, yes. But more than that it deliberately seems to create fragments that recur, rings within rings – conscious echoes between the past and present.

The effect resembles a narrative strategy Cather employed consciously decades later in *Shadows on the Rock*. In her letter to Wilbur Cross concerning this later novel, Cather explains that she used an intentional fragmentation of her narrative to capture a feeling of Quebecois culture: “There another age persists . . . . It is hard to state that feeling in language; it was more like an old song, incomplete but uncorrupted, than like a legend. The text was mainly anacoluthon, so to speak, but the meaning was clear” (On Writing 15). The traditional epic device anacoluthon is an intentional interruption in a narrative – literally a non sequitur, a disruption of the normal course of syntax or plot. In this deliberately fragmented, disjointed and allusive opening, Cather enjoins the reader, as Vergil does with fragments of Hesiod, as Cather does with fragments of Vergil, and as Jim does with fragments of Antonia’s story, to make sense of the parts, to fill the gaps, to synthesize and complete the message that another age might “persist” in the present.

The syntax of the following passage in the introduction bears out this intentional resonance. As the narrator relates Jim’s act of passing off the manuscript, he recalls Jim saying:

“I didn’t arrange or rearrange. I simply wrote down what of herself and myself and other people Antonia’s name recalls to me. I suppose it hasn’t any

form. It hasn't any title, either." He went into the next room, sat down at my desk and wrote on the pinkish face of the portfolio the word, 'Antonia'. He frowned at this a moment, then prefixed another word, making it "My Antonia". That seemed to satisfy him. (6)

One can trace in this passage two important points to Cather's artistic program. First, we witness here a sense of creation and recreation at work. Prior to the primary creative act of naming, the text exists as a chaos of raw memory – what Cather might term "an incomplete air . . . a series of pictures remembered rather than experienced" (*On Writing* 15). Antonia is merely a vague shape, a penumbra of a character not yet defined. This "pink faced portfolio" is personified but has no form, no title. It is only the raw stuff of something hovering between memory and fiction. Only when Jim inscribes upon this shapeless void "My" do the series of remembered events take shape as the narrative to which we turn the page. This act of naming gives title, form and cosmos to the chaos, much as an initial cosmological naming might.

Cather also lends to this folder an oddly universal air. The pink-faced portfolio we are about to read promises to capture what of "herself," "myself" and "other people" Antonia's name "recalls to him." Note how Antonia serves as a primary source from which Jim will come to know again Antonia, himself and "other people." Thus the force of the generalization "other people" universalizes the role of this memory. With the verb "recalls," Jim also suggests that from the memory of

Antonia will spring a knowledge of self and others recaptured. Her story will cast a wide net into deep waters of a universalized human past.

At once this oddly universal portfolio evokes the past, but it also extends to the present and future. For the modern reader too, in reading this passage, contemplates the title, "My Antonia" twice, as a recurrence, a reenactment of the title of the novel he or she has picked up. Thus Jim's act of naming the novel is reenacted again and again as each reader comes to the text in his or her own time. Thus the raw stuff of "Antonia" becomes perpetually "our Antonia," a figure of the past continually recreated in the act of reading her. From the onset, Cather will use Vergilian allusions not simply to play a nostalgic note but to bind character, narrator, writer and reader in a shared human role of creator driven by the impulse to give "form" to that which is not "arranged," to find cosmos in chaos, to find permanence in the ephemeral.

Yet this eternalizing impulse is imperfect. Many scholars throw Jim's words in the introduction back in his face here, pointing to his inscription of "My Antonia" on the folder as an act of forced, patriarchal domination by an unreliable, romantic narrator. Blanche Gelfant refers to Jim here as a "disingenuous and self-deluded narrator" (60), further claiming that to read Jim as a reliable narrator is to misread *My Antonia* entirely. Keith Wilhite, in his recent article, points out that for all of Jim's insistence on lack of form and his failure to "arrange or rearrange," the story that follows is quite coherent and highly organized. He notes that, given this contrast,

It is possible to read the well-ordered novel that follows as nothing less than a total transformation of the original manuscript: the self-serving act of inscribing “My Antonia” gets displaced by the unnamed narrator’s highly sophisticated, literary novel, *My Antonia*. Or not. We simply cannot know, and this doubt or invitation to skepticism is really the only thing the introduction affords the reader. (273)

Wilhite recognizes in this contrast between texts a “pervasive instability” that opens up both Jim and Antonia’s stories to more honest assessment. Wilhite makes an important move here, casting an imperfect and human unreliability on all stories in the novel to follow. While various voices will strive for authenticity, reliability, and a sense of permanent truth, they will all fall short due to their very human imperfections of varied and limited perspectives. Inasmuch as this is both a successful enterprise and a failure shared by the narrator, by Jim, by Antonia, and by any narrator preceding them from time immemorial, this decentered narrative reliability frames such a novel perfectly for its imperfections.

Cather then would have us appreciate this text, like Virgil’s *Georgics* or *Aeneid*, as a work that at once participates in the stream of an eternal epic tradition but creates its own ripples that diminish ineluctably. As a modern author, she strives to make a mark with a different type of epic, celebrating an original, high plains heroism and experimenting with non-linear narrative strategies, but she also strives to participate in the spirit of Virgilian epic to create an artifact destined to

fade in the face of the eroding force of time and mortality. She works to create a center that will fasten but never hold. As Bernice Slote says of her writing on art:

The dominant impression of Willa Cather's several hundred pieces is that of brilliance, vigor, and buoyant youth; of energy and keen desire. Yet in a great many comments – perhaps more than one expects from even the universal anger of youth, one hears an elegiac tone compounded of the ordinary rituals of primitivism . . . and what may be more personal – a recurring melancholy, a sense of loss in the sad ironies of life. (33)

Cather uses classical allusion in just this spirit of primitive and personal ritual. She evokes the past not simply to add a depth dimension or an epic flavor, nor simply to cast Jim in a paternalistic light, but to collapse time, to illustrate how human beings engaged in finite lives at the same time reach for the infinite in “brilliance” and “vigor” again and again only to lose that brilliance again and again. In both their success and failures, Cather uses epic allusions to remind us of the eternal pattern of heroic growth and tragic decay.

Even from very early in the novel, classical allusions suggest more than nostalgia. While many are quick to trace the obvious Homeric echoes of an ancient, wine-dark sea in Jim's vision of the Nebraska prairie, it is also worth noting that there is a crescendo of energy in these allusions that often builds like static electricity to spark moments of anacoluthon in which Jim sees in an irruptive flash past, present and future all contained in a lasting and eternal image – what Joseph

Urgo terms “shooting out into eternities” (191). When Jim first encounters the high plains, he sees a “great prairie the color of wineskins”(16) and “wine-colored grass” (19). He hears of Old Hatta who “sang songs to the children”(29) in the Bohemian homeland, and the one remaining, pale green insect – last of his kind, who “began to sing for us – a rusty little chirp” (29). He beholds the “whole prairie . . . like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed”(30), the hour of day that “always had the exultation of victory, of triumphant ending, like a hero’s death” (30). All of these reminiscent images work in sequence to build a thematic and allusive energy that sparks him to interrupt the present narrative and to look back to his first walk with Antonia over that same landscape with an oracular insight, “How many an afternoon Antonia and I have trailed along the prairie under that magnificence! And always two long black shadows flitted before us or followed after, dark spots on the ruddy grass” (30). Here Jim addresses the reader in a dreamy anacoluthon, travelling back in time with the present perfective “have trailed”. The “two long black shadows “always” flit and, we are left with the oddly ambiguous “before us or followed after”. The tense and ambiguous direction of the shadow serves to cast the memory out of time, neither after nor before but “always.” As he recalls these memories in sequence, Jim the classically educated narrator, consciously or unconsciously invests this series of pictures with an epic energy. One might say he sees or remembers Homerically. More than that, however, as he remembers in this Homeric spirit, the force of the allusive energy seems to charge his vision and spark him to recognize in these moments recollected a sense of the eternal – past, present and

future conflated in the image of two shadows flitting across wine-dark grass, pointing neither forward nor backward but both.

We see this same method at work in the well-known snake episode. Again, while many are quick to point out the classical or biblical allusions here, they often miss how Cather uses allusions to set up narrative moments that seem to perforate past, present, and future. Again, Cather takes great pains to build an allusive energy prior to this episode. Antonia and Jim borrow their spade from Russian Peter, a figure who, like Hatta, tells stories from the old country. The air is “clear and heady as wine”(31). The sunflowers here, “transformed into brown, rattling, burry stalks” (31) also recall the early stories of sunflower roads and Mormon migration, but with a suggestion of decay and regeneration. These stalks will bury themselves and regenerate next spring. Jim also emphasizes the digging going on here: “Antonia suggested that we stop at the prairie dog town and dig into one of the holes. We could find out whether they ran straight down, or were horizontal, like mole holes” (32). When Jim meets his adventure, the two are “examining a big hole with two entrances”(32). Cast in the light of the allusive details above, this hole takes on the aspect of Vergil’s underworld in the Aeneid with its two gates. Here, in a landscape so concerned with digging: the badger, the burrowing owls, the prairie dogs, Jim encounters a colossal snake “lying in loose waves, like the letter ‘W’”(33). When he kills the snake, its body “kept on coiling and winding, doubling and falling back on itself”(33). The “loose waves” serve to link this episode to an epic tradition of seafaring and lend to this snake a leviathan aspect too. It is both maritime and

chthonic. Note too that Jim feels “seasick” after killing the snake (33). The “W” also works both up and down in equal measure, and may point self-referentially to Cather herself. The author, in penning this tale, enters the waves and currents of that tradition, pointing to her seafaring Homeric and Vergilian antecedents. Most striking however is the atemporal aspect of this serpent’s death throes. Note how the snake “kept on coiling and winding, doubling and falling back on itself”. The action, cyclical in nature, keeps going and does not end. The doubling too suggests that Jim’s adventure here reduplicates others. Certainly one can catalogue a myriad of such victories of heroes over serpents. It comes as no surprise then that Jim hangs the serpent on the windmill at home (35). The point is not to identify this as an allusion to Ovid or Apollonius, Homer or the Old Testament but to recognize that under Jim’s narrative memory this adventure takes on the aspect of multiple earlier tales. He labels himself as one of “many a dragon-slayer”(35). Cast in this light, Jim’s adventure perforates the present, depicting not only the ephemeral trials of gritty frontier life in the recent past of immigrants’ Nebraska but also digging down vertically to earlier strata of tales that run in parallel archetypes.

Jim casts not only his own actions in this eternal and heroic light but those of others too. Recalling Otto’s Christmas decoration, Jim relates, “They had been sent to him year after year, by his old mother in Austria. There was a bleeding heart, in tufts of paper lace; there were the three kings, gorgeously appareled, and the ox and the ass and the shepherds; there was the Baby in the manger . . . Our tree became the talking tree of the fairy tale; legends and stories nestled like birds in its



branches" (54). Again we see stories and artifacts transported like Virgil's *penates* from the "old world" to the new, archetypal figures that take on a transformative effect, working to reenact older patterns of experience in the modern age. Otto's grandmother sends these figures to him across the ocean but also across time, "year after year". With their inclusion, the cedar tree Jake has carried into house becomes legendary, recreating both Biblical nativity and the Norse fairy tales. Bernice Slote recognizes this Christmas tree of the Burdens as an allusion to the tree of Ygdrasil in Norse mythology, under whose branches "browsed all manner of animals; among its leaves every kind of bird made its nest' and whose leaves 'told strange stories of the past and the future'" (36). The tree here suggests a collapse of time both reaching back to the epic past and forward to the future. Thus the allusion serves to lend an eternal aspect to the scene in the Burden's home.

Yet this eternal aspect is maculate. In the very next lines, Jim remarks, "I can see them now, exactly as they looked, working about the table in the lamplight: Jake with his heavy features, so rudely moulded that his face seemed, somehow unfinished; Otto with his half ear and the savage scar that made his upper lip curl so ferociously under his twisted moustache" (54). As Jim relives this moment, however, the idyllic does not hold. While Otto, by composing this scene, participates in archetypal narratives, he, like Jim, must come back from the ideal to the real. Jake's "unfinished" features and Otto's "half ear" and scar all point to a sense of incompleteness and division. Not long after this, both figures, in spite of their heroic qualities, will disappear, bound for the harsh violence of another frontier, and Mr.

Shimerda will kneel at this tree days before he incurs his own mortality. Again we see Cather work through allusion to create an epic tone that builds to an anacoluthon, perforates time and bridges epochs only to dissolve. For soon after this idyllic Christmas Eve celebration, Cather will disrupt the harmony of this syncretic idealism when Shimerda takes his own life.

This suicide prompts several characters to confront mortality with narrative that hearkens to myth and legend. After this gentle man's tragic suicide, a young Jim struggles to make sense of Mr. Shimerda's afterlife in terms of the specific doxology proffered by his grandfather and the Shimerda family. Anton Jelinek, who "came to us like a miracle"(66), strides into the house in the fairy tale garb of "felt boots, a wolfskin coat, his eyes and cheeks bright with cold" (66), and he recounts his story of delivering sacrament to wounded soldiers. He relates, "We have no sickness, we have no fear, because we carry that blood and that body of Christ, and it preserve us" (67). While the story seems fanciful, Jim admits, "We listened attentively. It was hard not to admire his manly faith" (67). Otto Fuchs too relates "story after story: about the Black Tiger Mine, and about violent deaths and casual burials, and the queer fancies of dying men."(70). The name of the mine and the utterance of dying men lend to these tales too an important gravity. Jim himself responds by inventing and remembering his own stories: "I knew it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda, and I wondered whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country . . . Surely his exhausted spirit, so tired of cold and crowding and the struggle with the ever-falling snow, was resting now in this quiet

house”(64). More importantly Mr. Shimerda’s presence also enkindles memories of stories of Bohemia told to him by Antonia. Jim recaptures stories of Mr. Shimerda’s friends, music, the forests of Bohemia, the theft of wood, and a mysterious white hart that lived in the woods. He recalls, “Such vivid pictures came to me that they might have been Mr. Shimerda’s memories, not yet faded out from the air in which they had haunted him”(64). They take on a sense of permanence here. The man is dead but they are so “vivid” that they might still be *his* living on in Jim’s mind. While the memories of life in Bohemia are individual, specific to personal experience, and fanciful, these tales echo archetypal themes – heroic trials, fabulous creatures, miraculous immersion in and emergence from a land of the dead. And they achieve a vivid but imperfect permanence in the mind of the imperfect narrator whose tales will in turn visit readers in posterity.

In fact, Cather seems to highlight the dubious nature of these stories precisely to celebrate their spirit. Note that Cather frames these memories and figures in the language of dream and visitation. The vivid pictures from Antonia’s stories of her father “came to [Jim]” – as if Mr. Shimerda were angelic, passing on a wisdom or message to posterity. So too Anton and his stories “came to us,” bringing a superstitious but vital rereading of religious doctrine. Recall that when Antonia would tell stories to the Harling children, Nina Harling “interpreted the stories of the crèche fancifully, and in spite of our derision she cherished a belief that Christ was born a short time before the Shimerdas left that country”(108). This celebrated unreliability serves to bind these narratives together as a corpus of tales that share

a common and crucial spirit – a faith in narrative to hold up against the harsh suffering of reality. What is important to Cather is not the accuracy of religious text or the reliability of the teller but the ubiquitous motivation to tell such stories. The mythic comes in all shapes and sizes – and from all sorts of narrators. Joseph Urgo explains this value in Cather’s artistic program: “She was not a believer in any particular theology or political program or cause. It was the phenomenon of belief that fired her imagination, whether manifest as patriotism, Catholicism, racial hierarchy, talent, ambition—whatever it was that moved people to something particularly fine.” (187).

This appreciation for the “phenomenon of belief” over the truth of particular doctrine bears out later when we see Jim distill these earlier memories and stories of Mr. Shimerda’s suicide into “something particularly fine” in his speech and in the novel itself. We hear of Mr. Shimerda’s inspiration to Jim years later in his valedictory speech. We hear from Mrs. Harling, “You didn’t get that speech out of books”(138), but Cather gives us no hint as to its topic of the specifics or its sources. He tells Antonia that “he dedicated it to him” (138), but he never elaborates on this. Lena’s comments too shed little light here. She teases him, “What made you so solemn? I thought you were scared. I was sure you’d forget”(138). Antonia tells him that the speech made her think of her father, but we never hear what elicits that reaction. Cather oddly conceals to reveal here – she conceals the theme and text of the speech to reveal what is more important than the words on the page – its original impulse.

When Jim reflects on Mr. Shimerda's burial site years later, he depicts a heartbreaking scene that elicits the beauty of this imperfect pursuit for understanding. Out of a present, Jim interrupts the narration of the funeral and leaps abruptly to a time decades later, when the "open-grazing days were over, and the red grass had been ploughed under and under until it had almost disappeared from the prairie" (74) to reflect on an image that stands eternally against this seasonal "ploughing under and under." He reflects on this site where Mr. Shimerda sleeps still:

The road from the north curved a little to the east just there, and the road from the west swung out a little to the south; so that the grave, with its tall red grass that was never mowed, was like a little island and at twilight, under a new moon or the clear evening star, the dusty roads used to look like soft, grey rivers flowing past it. I never came upon the place without emotion, and in all that country it was the spot most dear to me. I loved the dim superstition, the propitiatory intent, that had put the grave there; and still more I loved the spirit that could not carry out the sentence – the error from the surveyed lines, the clemency of the soft earth roads along which the homecoming wagons rattled after sunset. Never a tired driver passed the wooden cross, I am sure, without wishing well to the sleeper (74).

From Mr. Shimerda's final resting place comes an image that stands symbolically for man's unceasing efforts to express the ineffable. The roads here do not intersect, but

“curve a little” to swerve tangentially around this mysterious little space. This “tall red grass” that earlier echoed Homer’s wine-dark sea is “never mowed” and smacks of epic immortality, and the “little island” stands perpetually under a “new moon or clear evening star”. “The dead here, is a “sleeper”, dreaming under this “new moon” like an Endymion figure. But as much as this island seems to suggest a Phaeacia of sorts – a spot of immortality - it can only be approached, not reached. And this is to be celebrated, not condemned. The beauty of the spot lies precisely in its imperfection – “the dim superstition, the propitiatory intent . . . the spirit that could not carry out the sentence.” Here it is not Jim or Antonia or Cather gaining a privileged glimpse of the eternal but the common surveyor who participates in an epic spirit and errs as only a human can. Again, Cather tends to dig up and accumulate a series of epic allusions that build and gesture towards the eternal, but celebrate a beauty found not in its achievement by grandiose individuals but in the collective spirit of its imperfect and tangential pursuit.

While Cather uses allusions as a series of images that build to anacoluthon and profound moments of reflection, she also uses allusions to create ecphrastic openings that work to collapse past present and future. Ecphrasis is, by definition, one artifact’s speaking out on another artifact– a poem speaks to or describes a sculpture, a play refers to a play, etc. Like anacoluthon, ecphrasis constitutes an interruption in the narrative, but more than a simple disruption, ecphrasis often works to create a receding space by embedding one artifact or narrative within another. For example, in Book II of Vergil’s *Aeneid*, the hero recounts finding the

temple of Juno in Carthage and seeing there in relief sculpture the events of the Trojan War. As he reads his war experiences depicted in the sculpture, the weary soldier and the reader are absorbed in the tale told on the temple walls and Vergil has successfully conflated two narratives separated by chronological time but through ecphrasis yoked synchronically in the text. It is no wonder that a writer fascinated by graphic arts and the stage as Cather was would avail herself of ecphrasis as a potent narrative strategy.

Cather uses ecphrasis in just this way, framing art within art, narrative within narrative to pierce the present with the mythical. Take the curious figure of blind d'Arnault. While he is invested with several Homeric qualities too, he particularly evokes Vergil's depiction of Orpheus. In Vergil's *Georgics 4*, the Roman poet frames the book with the story of Aristaeus, a heroic farmer who lost his bees in his pursuit of Eurydice. Into this frame Vergil inserts the story of Orpheus. In parallel fashion, Cather inserts into the exact center of the novel the figure of blind d'Arnault. Murphy sees in this parallel a signifier of unsatisfactory love relationships. He writes, "The genesis of both d'Arnault's piano playing and Orpheus' song is loss or incompleteness: Orpheus is deprived of Eurydice and d'Arnault of complete manhood . . . d'Arnault's compensation through the piano duplicates Jim's compensation through the memory of unsatisfactory love relationships" (42). But such a reading elevates sexual gratification above artistic creation. While d'Arnault may not consummate a physical relationship with his white master's daughter, Murphy ignores the implied satisfaction and heroism of

making music, creating song. Cather writes, "As piano-playing, it was perhaps abominable, but as music it was something real, vitalized by a sense of rhythm that was stronger than his other physical senses" (114). His vital rhythm "stronger than his other physical senses" here redeems imperfect physical technique and seems to argue for a reading that goes beyond the physical. If we take this passage on its metaphorical merits, we see the parallels. D'Arnault has lost certain physical powers but gained something essential and eternal just as in Virgil's *Georgics*, Orpheus loses Eurydice but he has, in the process, descended and emerged from the underworld endowed with the capacity of an archetypal artist.

What is more important than d'Arnault's physical sexuality and Orpheus' loss of Eurydice is their shared heroism as liminal figures who make the perilous voyage beyond the veil of tears. The d'Arnault story abounds with such liminal language and imagery. Recall that when he first heard the piano playing, Samson d'Arnault "put one foot over the window sill and straddled it" (115). His mother told him that she would give him to the master's mastiff (an obvious Cerberus figure) if she caught him "meddling" (115). After falling and hitting his head on an open window, he is "led back" by Nellie. The point is he descends and returns a musical protégé in overtly Orphic terms.

Cather also weaves into the description of d'Arnault imagery and diction drawn directly from Vergil's *Aeneid*. In Book 6, at the very midpoint of the twelve-



book epic, Aeneas approaches the Cumaean Sibyl's cave, seeking prophecy and advice. Vergil describes the cave:

*Excisum Euboicae latus ingens rupis in antrum,*

*Quo lati ducunt aditus centum, ostia centum,*

*Unde runt totidem voces, responsa Sibyllae.*

*Ventum erat ad limen, cum virgo "poscere fata*

*Tempus" ait, "Deus, ecce deus!" (VI. 42-46).*

There is a vast cave, cut out from the flank of the Cumae's hill

From there rush a hundred entrances, a hundred mouths

Whence rush as many voices, the response of the Sibyll.

They had reached the threshold, when the priestess said,

"It is time to ask your destiny. Behold the god, the god is with me".

While D'Arnault may not consummate a physical relationship with Nellie, he did "go back to [the piano's] mouth, began at one end of the keyboard and felt his way down

into the mellow thunder, as far as he could go . . . and coupled himself to it as if he knew it was to piece him out and make a whole creature of him”(114). The term “mouth” implicitly links the piano to the notion of a cave, and renders D’Arnault’s groping from one end of the piano “down into the mellow thunder” a descent to a source, echoing Vergil’s Cumaean cave with its underground mouths, later called the “attonitae magna ora domus” (6. 53) – the great mouth of the thunderous house. Clearly there are sexual undertones to d’Arnault’s childhood encounter with the piano, but the language here echoes the Cumaena sibyl’s union with Apollo and points to successful consummation and integration not with a sexual partner but with a larger source. D’Arnault emerges as an Orphic figure after , “his young mistress led him back to the piano”(115), and from that point on he goes on to play “barbarously and wonderfully”, bringing his imperfect but vatic powers across time and space to Black Hawk, Nebraska.

Having invested d’Arnault with the significance of these allusions, however, Cather does not lend any profound gravity to d’Arnault’s music. The music of the Black minstrel does not deliver any grand prophecy. Having built up the allusive depth of this figure, Cather points simply to the relief and pleasure his music provides. At the conclusion of his impromptu concert, Jim relates, that he walked home with Antonia, and “We lingered while at the Harling’s gate, whispering in the cold until the restlessness was chilled out of us” (117). Yet the muted dissipation after this central event should not surprise. The ecphrastic moment in which d’Arnault delivers his art within Cather’s artifact, plays up not a grand epic message

but the simple pleasure of art in the midst of the cold monotony of small town life. Again, Cather uses Vergilian language and ecphrastic descriptions for nontraditional means, highlighting the heroism of artistic expression at once profound by virtue of its shared heritage with figures like Orpheus, Homer and Vergil but at the same time humble and imperfect.

And d'Arnault's ecphrastic placement in the middle of the text speaks to the gravity and insignificance of Cather and Jim's role as narrators too. As Keith Wilhite notes:

The Blind d'Arnault story reminds the reader that Jim is engaged in a private act of remembering what he claims no mastery or expertise of and that he has no pretensions towards literary value. We might say that, like d'Arnault, Jim plays 'barbarously and wonderfully', from memory, trying to write his way back to himself and a sense of "at-homeness" in his still unfamiliar new world"(280).

Wilhite is right to point out the flawed nature of this remembering. Jim does not claim for his private act of remembering any eternal, literary value. Likewise, d'Arnault, while his arrival and music is tinted with vatic tones, provides important but only temporary relief to the monotony of Blackhawk life. Yet that has a heroism of its own.

In her allusion to Vergil's Orpheus in the *Georgics* and to the Sibylline cave of the *Aeneid*, Cather invokes not just an echo of an earlier text, but a recurrent and

cyclical pattern of experience shared across the ages – from ancient past to old New Orleans to the present of the Nebraska prairie. Note that d’Arnault’s visit is book-ended with a cyclical sense of suffering. He is “the one break in the dreary monotony of that month [March]”(111), and even after the excitement of his visit, Jim, Antonia, and others are left to linger at the Harling’s gate, “whispering in the cold until the restlessness was chilled out of us”(117). Yet in the next chapter, when spring breaks, Jim relates, “The Harling children and I were never happier, never felt more contented and secure, than in the weeks of spring which broke that long winter” (117). It is not in the height of summer but in the moment of transition, the break and movement from the dead of winter to the life of spring, that Jim finds the greatest joy. At every turn, winter begets spring, cold begets warmth, and the tragic begets the beautiful. It is no surprise that in a Nebraska novel those themes of fertility and the seasonal cycle should stand prominent. What is intriguing is the manner in which Cather entwines those seasonal cycles with instances of ecphrasis and allusive depth.

Cather repeatedly marks this pattern of monotony and irruption with other, more homespun ecphrastic moments to underscore the heroism of art. Just as the Orphic d’Arnault breaks up the “the great fact” of winter, in the doldrums of late winter, Antonia too breaks into Jim’s narrative to deliver a “new” story - the story of the tramp who throws himself into a threshing machine. Antonia describes the tramp in oddly timeless terms. She relates, “The sun was so hot like it was going to burn the whole world up. After a while I see a man coming across the stubble, and

when he got close I see it was a tramp. His toes stuck out of his shoes, and he hadn't shaved for a long while, and his eyes was awful red and wild, like he had some sickness. He comes right up and begins to talk like he knows me already" (108). The apocalyptic sun casts the tale in a mythic light, and the tenses vacillate oddly between past and present – "After a while I see a man . . . he comes right up and begins to talk like he knows me already". Antonia locates the event in the past but in her retelling she renews it for her audience. Within this epic context, she identifies this mysterious stranger by only a few curious objects, "They couldn't find no letters, nor nothing on him, nothing but an old penknife in his pocket and the wishbone of a chicken wrapped up in a piece of paper, and some poetry"(109). The "penknife" suggests both cutting and writing. The "wishbone of a chicken" links the tramp to d'Arnault who as a child hung onto a "chicken-bone"(113), and the poem, we learn, is "The Old Oaken Bucket". This bucket of Samuel Woodworth's verse clearly evokes a plumbing of the past. The "old oaken bucket, the iron-bound bucket, the moss covered bucket that hangs in the well" in the speaker's nostalgic memory plunges to the "white pebbled bottom" and draws up "truth overflowing". Moreover the narrator begins this poem, "How dear to this heart are the scenes of my childhood/ When fond recollection presents them to view!" The bucket then serves to yoke Woodworth, Cather, Jim, Antonia, the Tramp, d'Arnault, Virgil, and countless other human beings who have both read and spoken with a view towards exhausting the "white pebbled" depths with their own mnemonic bucket. In this ecphrastic moment, Cather implicates folk songs dug out of the pocket of a strange

tramp, fireside tales told by Antonia, the memories of a nostalgic Jim, Cather herself and Virgil, all plumbing the well of memory for truth and beauty.

Again, however, this unity is fraught with tragic endings. Woodworth's poem ends, "The tear of regret will intrusively swell, / As fancy reverts to my father's plantation, / And sighs for the bucket that hangs in the well". The act of reaching for truth and beauty is at once celebrated and tragic. It is significant too that the tramp throws himself into a threshing machine. The manner of his death implies a cycle. A man is cut down in the process of cutting down vegetation. While he dies abruptly and violently, he lives on, of course, in the memory of Antonia and by extension in the memory of those who listen to her closely – both the Harlings and Cather's readers.

We see this sense of death and return on the other side of the d'Arnault episode too. When, in the mist of summer, Jim discovers Mrs. Yanni the itinerant dance instructor, Cather frames the visits to the dance pavilion in curiously orphic language. First, Mrs. Yanni herself suggests a Persephone figure, "always dressed in lavender with a great deal of black lace, her important watch chain lying on her bosom" (118). The black lace in conjunction with the dark shade of her parasol, the Vergilian purple, and the watch chain all suggest a visit to an underworld. Note too that her husband is a "harpist", recalling at once both d'Arnault and Orpheus. Like Orpheus, Mr. Yanni's music breaks "the silence that "seemed to ooze out of the ground, to hang under the foliage of the black maple trees with the bats and the

shadows”(119) In this setting, Jim sees the elders of his town, who would have life stand still in the face of youth’s need for adventure, sitting “like images on their front porches” (119) while the youth “tramped and tramped” the board sidewalks northward to the edge of the open prairie, south to the depot, then back again to the post office, the ice-cream shop, and the butcher shop”(119). The tramping action here links Jim to the tramp – both to the ecphrastic depth he invokes and his journey to and from death. Jim’s own recursive path – northwards to the marginalia of the prairie edge and back to the hermeneutic post office, the frigidity of the ice-cream shop, and the carnality of the butcher shop – brings him to reenact himself this carnival journey to an underworld. Later Jim will say of this scene, “It was at the Yanni’s tent that Antonia was discovered”(124). But Cather does not give us an agent here. Antonia is simply “discovered”. In light of the orphic myth, this lack of agency binds Jim, the narrator, and the reader as coincidental authors, engaged in a shared descent into the well of memory to recover “their” Antonia. Again, Cather uses classical allusion and ecphrastic moments – moments where art irrupts into art – to yoke characters and authors, past and present, in a shared enterprise, lending to all these stories a shared sense of the archetypal.

One can find this same sense of yoking narration in the sword episode as well. Here Jim, far from isolated and unreliable, narrates the story of a farmer digging up a sword from the age of Coronado to Antonia, Lena and Tiny. He recounts that a farmer had tilled up a “metal stirrup of fine workmanship, and a sword with a Spanish inscription on the blade . . . ” (146). While the girls are

impressed with Jim's historiography (he was "right, the teachers "were wrong"), Cather lets her readers see only two things: one, the artistry of the relic – its "fine workmanship " and the identity of the artist as Spanish – "the inscription on the blade" and "the name of the Spanish maker" of the sword and an abbreviation that stood for the city of Cordova" (146). As Jim recalls these things, the memory serves to spur this group of youths to contemplate the history of the region, the humanity of "a broken heart", and the setting sun.

This passage, however, also carries with it distinct Vergilian echoes. This sword uncovered by a generic farmer recalls a strikingly similar event depicted in the *Georgics*. Mourning the violence that had stained the last century of Roman history, Vergil writes,

*Scilicet et tempus veniet, cum finibus illis*

*Agricola, incurvo terram molitus aratro,*

*Exesa inveniet scabra robigine pila,*

*Aut gravibus rastris galeas pulsabit inanes,*

*Grandiaque effossis mirabitur ossa sepulcris. (Georgics 1.493-6)*

And perhaps there will come a time when in those lands a farmer, having toiled at the earth with curved plow will come upon javelins eaten away by rusty mold, or with heavy boots will kick empty helmets and wonder at the massive bones dug out from upturned graves.



Note the similarity here of the javelins to the sword. Both are rusty. Jim and Charlie have to polish it before the name is visible. And like the Spanish sword, these javelins evoke wonder. The farmer “mirabitur” – will wonder at the “grandia ossa”, the great bones. Likewise these “grandia ossa” evoke bodies of superhuman or mythical stature, just as Coronado’s legend lives on in the stirrup of one of his men. One can note too the emphasis on digging. These are found in “sepulcris effosis” – graves dugout. The farmer has had to dig down to find the relics of the past, but he *will* come upon this relic, “inveniet”; he *will* wonder, “mirabitur” at these bones. The tense is significant, pointing to the future discovery and wonder this artifact will instigate and inspire. Thus Virgil’s relic points at once both backwards and forwards to time immemorial and the future unknown.

In this allusive light, Cather’s artifact too opens up the present, distant past and future as part of a recurring cycle, bringing the audience to contemplate humanity in a larger sense and to view frontier life in a more artful way. To Jim’s claim that “Coronado died in the wilderness of a broken heart”, Antonia responds, “More than him has done that”(146). This specific sword, like other ephrastic artifacts in Cather’s works, serves to illuminate the immediate suffering of Mr. Shimerda and other immigrants as part of larger patterns of human experience. Thus her allusion to the Georgics here frames both the legendary suffering of Coronado and the immediate trials of Nebraskan immigrants as part of a larger heroic and tragic tradition. As Paul Olson explains, “Cather frequently sees the westering experience through Virgil’s eyes, and in her case the concern is for how

cultures are built, how life can be made artful for the individual and collectivity”(276).

Having established an epic mood to the scene with the allusive story of the conquistador’s sword, Cather then directs this epic vision to one of the most memorable scenes in Cather’s entire corpus, the plow set in distinct relief against the setting sun:

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 growing pale, and that forgotten plow had sunk back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie. (146-147)

Against the backdrop of the Coronado story, we have a reversal of Isaiah here. The sword has been artfully beaten into plowshare. More than the biblical echo, this image has strong classical associations as well. Mary Ryder recognizes the obvious echo to the shield Vulcan forges for Aeneas in Vergil's epic. Ryder too notes the inversion of sword and plow, but she reads this in terms of Antonia's sexuality and a narrative competition between Antonia and Jim. She explains, "Cather's 'epic' was designed to explore female ascendancy, quite in contrast to the values of a culture founded through men waging war. Instead of focusing on the expansionist quality of epic, Cather focuses on stability and rootedness"(115). The elevation of plow over sword seems clear. Yet to point to a plow as a signifier of "female ascendancy" ignores the traditional, classical association with plow and phallic symbol entirely. While Cather certainly celebrates in the figure of Antonia the agrarian spirit, Ryder's insistence on reading Jim as unreliable and sexually insecure leads her reading astray.

Both readings ignore the artistic and temporal aspects of this scene. Note the collective experience of this image. Yes, Jim narrates here, but Cather highlights the plural agency: "Presently we saw a curious thing"; "We sprang to our feet"; "In a moment we realized what it was"; "Even while we whispered about it, our vision disappeared". Antonia, Jim and the other girls all clearly share in this vision. To read this in light of a narrative or sexual competition between two dueling voices ignores the patently collective nature of this vision and participation in the epic spirit of the moment.

Olson too recognizes this as an allusion to Vergil's Aeneid, but chooses to read the image of the plow as a Georgic "emblem of the country's future"(283), seeing the plow as a sign of a new ascendancy of an agrarian culture over and against a militaristic and urbanized age – the plow as harbinger of a "victorious garden"(283) to come. This seems right. Yet Olson's reading also seems to read the scene too historically, ignoring the familiar echoes of earlier reactions to such epic figures and images. The whispering here recalls the earlier shared reactions to d'Arnault's orphic playing. After hearing the music, Jim relates, "We lingered a long while at the Harling's gate, whispering in the cold until the restlessness was slowly chilled out of us" (117). Likewise when, in the bleakness of winter, Jim reflects on their collective "hunger for color," he recalls, "Without knowing why, we used to linger on the sidewalk outside the church when the lamps were lighted early for choir practice or prayer-meeting, shivering and talking until our feet were like lumps of ice. The crude reds and greens and blues of that colored glass held us there" (106-107). Note how Cather yokes this lingering talk to a shared and common craving for music, religion, and art. We have seen this wondering and whispering reaction to epic image before and we will see it again in contexts completely devoid of competitive sexuality or of agrarian nation building.

Such readings also ignore the atemporal thrust of Cather's epic allusions. Cather also goes to great lengths to alert us to the simultaneous permanence and ephemerality of this image. The plow appears as a figure "suddenly" and is "exactly contained within the circle of the disk" for only a moment before "the forgotten

plough had sunk back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie”(147). For all of the undeniable Vergilian tone (be it Georgic or Aeneid) this image appears suddenly and is magnified in an epic light for a moment, only to disappear quickly. Yet Cather is playing a trick here. Through the act of reading Jim’s narration, the reader remembers the “forgotten” plow, its “littleness” and greatness both magnified and diminished repeatedly as the novel is read and put down, remembered and forgotten. There is no clear cultural program or ultimate gendered narrative victory here, only a reenactment of timeless patterns of memory and oblivion, tilling and harvest, ascent and descent shared by these characters, these authors, these poets and farmers from time immemorial.

When considering Jim’s epic vision, it pays to consider Jim’s vision of Lena both in youth and in college when his classical education taints his vision. When Jim first dreams of Lena in his Blackhawk years, he does so in decidedly mythological terms.

One dream I dreamed a great many times, and it was always the same. I was in a harvest field full of shocks, and I was lying against one of them. Lena Lingard came across the stubble barefoot, in a short skirt, with a curved reaping hook in her hand, and she was flushed like dawn, with a kind of luminous rosiness all about her. She sat down beside me, turned to me with a soft sigh and said, “Now they are all gone, and I can kiss you as much as I like”. (147).

Blanche Gelfant reads here a “surreal image of Aurora and the Grim Reaper as one”(150). We might add to this Virgil’s image of Venus in *Aeneid* 2. The goddess, disguised as a Thracian huntress, exudes a similar luminous rosiness. Gelfant notes of this dream:

This landscape of harvest and desolation is not unfamiliar; nor is the apparitional woman who moves across it, sighing and making soft moan; nor the supine young man whom she kisses and transports; It is the archetypal landscape of ballad, myth, and drama, setting for *la belle dame sans merci* who enchants and satisfies, but then lulls and destroys. She comes, as Lena does, when the male is alone and unguarded. (151).

Gelfant analyzes this passage brilliantly, but when she examines Jim’s recollection of this dream, she mistakenly imposes on this later version of the dream a sense of avoidance and censorship. Jim, relates, “As I sat down to my book at last, my old dream about Lena coming across the harvest-field in her short skirt seemed to me like the memory of an actual experience. It floated before me on the page like a picture, and underneath it stood the mournful line, ‘Optima dies . . . prima fugit’”(175). Gelfant emphasizes what is missing in the recollection of this dream: Jim “represses the shocks and stubbles; keeps Lena in her short skirt, but replaces the sexual ambivalence of the vision” (151). While this passage contains undeniable sexual undertones, Jim’s dreams are not only sexual. Cather strives to emphasize not simply a Freudian repression but Jim’s recognition of the dream as a vision that

participates in archetypal patterns like the ones he encounters in his studies. The short skirt is remembered (not avoided) as he rereads the dream framed by Virgilian echoes. Gelfant reads this frame as negative, but there is nothing in Cather's tone to suggest this. Gelfant notes, "Now his memory can deal with fantasy as with experience: convert it to an image, frame it, and restore it to him retouched and redeemed. Revised the dream loses its frightening details"(151). Yes, there are threatening or anxious aspects of Jim's earlier, adolescent dreams. Yes, the later recalled dream is framed by classical texts and rendered less threatening in its details. But there is no reason to assume this reframing derives from a neurotic or narcissistic regression. To read it this way is to deny the vitality in reading one's experience as part of larger, archetypal human patterns. Jim is not fleeing sexuality as much as he is recounting years later how he learned to read personal experience allegorically. As Joan Acocella explains of Cather's characters "Again and again they compare their experiences to legends or Virgil or Pilgrim's Progress or old woodcuts, seeking the pattern behind the instance"(82). In this light, the reaping hook suggests both the particular anxieties of an adolescent and the larger pattern of death and renewal. Thus Jim uses classical allusions to suggest both the temporal concerns of a young man coming of age in Nebraska and the persistent concerns of poets wrestling with mortality through the ages.

When Jim leaves Black Hawk and immerses himself in his studies of classical texts, ironically, the timeless epics only deliver a keener sense of his personal, ephemeral experience. The dynamics of thought here are complicated but revealing

if one reads Jim's experience in his study in these months as a developing epiphany. He explains, "While I was in the very act of yearning toward the new forms that Cleric brought up before me, my mind plunged away from me, and I suddenly found myself thinking of the places and people of my own infinitesimal past. They stood out strengthened and simplified now, like the image of the plow against the sun" (168). As Jim first strives to immerse himself in the grave and impersonal texts of Dante and Vergil, the act of reading distant epics only returns him to figures of his immediate personal history. Jim first articulates this tendency with regret. He reflects, "I begrudged the room that Jake and Otto and Russian Peter took in my memory, which I wanted to crowd with other things" (168). He sees these two worlds, the ancient and modern, as ruptured, divorced from one another. Jim dwells on the two experiences as binaries opposed. Yet he acknowledges that the epic poetry illuminates the personal somehow – "strengthened and simplified." As Karen Simmons points out, "The poetic tradition provides a backdrop against which the small things can be appreciated. It provides a larger context for individuals, making them part of something complete and entire"(534). Still, Jim does not yet recognize that connection between plow and sun, individuals of his youth and literary archetypes. His youthful experiences still only inform his studies "in some strange way" (168).

As Jim reflects on Vergil's experience, and on Cleric's experience, in more personal terms, however, Jim arrives at a major epiphany about the relationship between art and experience and the roots of all poetry. He reflects on a particularly



profound lecture Cleric had delivered on Vergil's thoughts about poetry and home in the *Georgics*.

I turned back to the beginning of the third book, which we had read in class that morning. "Primus ego in patriam meam mecum . . . deducam Musas"; "for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country" . . .

Cleric said he thought of Vergil, when he was dying at Brindisi, must have remembered that passage. After he had faced the bitter fact that he was to leave the *Aeneid* unfinished, and had decreed that the great canvas, crowded with figures of gods and men, should be burned rather than survive him unperfected, then his mind must have gone back to the perfect utterance of the *Georgics*, where the pen was fitted to the matter as the plough 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."

We left the classroom quietly, conscious that we had brushed by the wing of a great feeling, though perhaps I alone knew Cleric intimately enough to guess what that feeling was. (170)

The two readers, Cleric and Jim, collapse here syntactically and spiritually as Jim relates Cleric's thoughts as his own, the two unified in this empathetic contemplation of the Roman poet, sharing through millenia an elegiac sense of imperfection and of place.

Spurred by this “great feeling,” Jim soon makes his own descent to an underworld of memory to mine a great realization. He next finds Lena Lingard at his doorstep, dressed significantly in a black suit and black lace hat with “pale blue forget-me-nots” (170). After the two childhood friends reflect on the figures of their youth and Lena “fades down the dusky stairway” (173), Jim reflects, “Lena had brought them all back to me. 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. I understood that clearly for the first time. This revelation seemed to me inestimably precious.”(173). These two moments of “great feeling” and revelation” must be read as concomitant experiences. Jim realizes through both episodes that the epic is informed by the personal just as the personal is illuminated by the epic.

Jim’s reflections on Antonia reveal this truth: epic poetry and small town stories render little lives significant as they are continually re-enacted and shared. While Jim’s life working for the railroad is one of itinerant travel, linear and unsettled, perhaps devoid of significant familial relationships, he finds in the wash of his own infinitesimal past moments of near permanence. As he catalogues in his memory images of Antonia, he realizes, “She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true” (226). In Jim’s epic or mythical vision, Antonia is no small life wiped out by the oblivion of the time and the prairies but a figure who stands Platonically as a form of ineffable continuity precisely because her story has been and will be reenacted. The final notes of the

novel bring this home. Jim reflects, "Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, incommunicable past" (238). The force of Vergilian allusions highlights this sense of recurrence and provides a backdrop that strengthens Cather's characters, but it also complicates them. As the epigraph reminds us, "Optima dies . . . prima fugit", these best days, these ideal and even immortal days, are the first to flee. The sun sets behind the plow, summer brings fall, and both word and memories fade, but they do so again and again, and in their dissolve they persist, both infinitesimal and infinite.

#### Chapter IV: *The Professor's House*: Plying Quietly in Vergilian Waters

While it is tempting to divide Cather's work into phases: the prairie novels, the middle years, the later novels, such divisions are largely artificial. From her earliest years in Red Cloud to her later years in Paris, Cather sustains a remarkably consistent program. As Stephen Tennant remarks, "Cather's art is essentially one of gazing beyond the immediate scene to a timeless sky or a timeless room in which the future and the past, the unspoken and the unknown, forever beckon the happy reader (v). In her early stories, in her poems, in her critical writing and in all of her novels, this happy reader finds Cather using classical allusions – and Vergil in particular, to bind the transient to the permanent. Nowhere can one see a more deliberate and effective effort to collapse and unite the infinitesimal and the infinite than in *The Professor's House*. In a letter reflecting on this novel, Willa Cather related the layered form of her narrative to Dutch landscape painting. She wrote:

But in most of the interiors, whether drawing room or kitchen, there was a square window, open, through which one saw the masts of ships, or a stretch of grey sea. The feeling of the sea that one got through those square windows was remarkable, and gave me a sense of the fleets of Dutch ships that ply quietly in all the waters of the globe. (*On Writing*, 30-32).

Recent critics have read into this passage everything from a boast of cultural literacy to a forecast of post-colonial concerns for the commodification of Native artifacts.<sup>1</sup> Few, however, have recognized in this passage a clue to her allusive strategy. As such a window into her art, the last sentence here bears closer scrutiny. As she brings her reader to focus on the fleets of Dutch ships, she subtly shifts tenses to the present. The ships here “ply quietly in all the waters of the globe,” transcending the past experience of viewing the painting and persisting into the present tense moment of her writing and beyond to the future reading of her text. The image is at once specific and global, fixed and expansive.

Thus Cather provides a valuable clue to her technique in this passage. She does not work simply by ironic opposition, exposing calculated rifts in a broken post-war world so much as by interpenetration. By embedding Vergilian passages in Tom’s story and by embedding Tom’s story in St. Peter’s, Cather creates windows within windows through which she might let in the classical past and allow mythical time to penetrate and persist in historical time. Bernice Slote remarks of Cather’s craft, “As we see in Willa Cather’s pages, the kingdom of art is poised, with intricate balance and mingling, between two other worlds. The artist may look to the kingdom of heaven, and sometimes the gods come down; but on earth he is caught in time, living at once in two worlds and with two selves, a duality even the gods

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Reynolds reads this passage as “more useful as art criticism or as testimony to Cather’s cultural knowledge than as a gloss on narrative construction . . . almost as if she were gauchely demonstrating the range of her knowledge outside literature. (147). Sarah Wilson reads into this passage reference to a “distinct national school or art” that projects concerns with the manner in which “often ahistorical ideas of the past undergird conceptions of nationality”(573).

could find hard to divide" (66). While one can read *The Professor's House* in terms of a narrative framework that resembles the indigo bracelet or the Anasazi city plan or by a variety of other mechanisms, recognizing such frames is an empty pursuit if one does not recognize within the frames points of intersection between texts where time and space collapse. In this novel too, Cather's points of Vergilian allusions offer nodes by which to explicate her "intricate balance and mingling" between the mythical and the modern. In these instances of ecphrasis, we can continue to trace such moments of interpenetration between where characters "live at once in two worlds".

In Book I of *the Professor's House*, "The Family", Cather introduces Godfrey St. Peter as a man reluctantly dragged into the present while he desperately clings to the past. Against the crass materialism of his family and the accelerating modern age, St. Peter yearns to preserve the more noble and self-sustaining past. As Leon Edel remarks, "He is a Gallic epicure, isolated, like his garden, in surroundings to which he cannot ever wholly belong" (202). For both St. Peter and for Tom Outland, encounters with ancient literature and artifacts provide ephemeral moments that grant transcendent glimpses of eternities but ultimately leave these figures discouraged by the contrasting shadows of the mundane world around them.

When St. Peter recalls first meeting Tom Outland, Cather weaves multiple intertextual echoes between the *Aeneid*, Tom's story and the Professor's own actions. As the professor interviews the young man in his garden, he learns that Tom

has not received a formal high school education but has studied Latin. Tom explains his education:

“I read Caesar and Virgil, the Aeneid.”

“How many books?”

“We went right through.” He met the Professor’s questions squarely, his eyes were resolute, like his voice.

“Oh, you did.” St. Peter stood his spade against the wall. He had been digging around his red-fruited thorn-trees. “Can you repeat any of it?”

The boy began, “*Infandum, regina, jubes renovare dolorem,*” and steadily continued for fifty lines or more, until St. Peter held up a checking hand.”

Excellent. Your priest was a thorough Latinist. You have a good pronunciation and good intonation. Was the Father by any chance a Frenchman?”

Yes, sir. He was a missionary priest, from Belgium.”(96)

While Levy and Lake read in the allusion to *The Aeneid* simply a “sad tale” that serves to identify Tom with Aeneas later in the novel (15), they fail to read several important inter-textual cues in this passage. The Vergilian line quoted here indicates far more than the straightforward telling of a sad tale. Translated more literally, it reads, “You ask me, O queen, to *renew* unspeakable grief” (italics mine). At first

holding back, Aeneas utters these lines when the Carthaginian queen Dido asks him to recount his experiences of the war in Troy. The verb “*renovare*” – to renew, or make new again – serves to collapse time in Aeneas’ narrative. As he begins to relate to his Carthaginian audience the horrific events of the Greek assault on his crumbling homeland, Aeneas will immediately slip into the present tense to tell his story<sup>2</sup>, effectively reliving the events of the war. For him and his immediate audience, these events are made new again by their telling. In this moment, Vergil too is echoing Odysseus’ narration of his travails to the Phaeaceans in the Homeric epic, collapsing the distance between Hellenic and Augustan ages. In like fashion, when Tom Outland quotes these lines, he too “renews” the ancient text, activating and participating in this longstanding narrative tradition.

Cather hints at this intersection and collapse of historical time in the passage above. When asked how much he read, Tom responds, “We went right through”, ironically punning on the interpenetration of historical and mythical time. It is worth pointing out too that as Tom recites Aeneas’ war story, this foreshadows his own experience of the war to come. Note too that Tom enters the novel through St. Peter’s garden, carrying a “canvas telescope” from which he will pull forth ancient, cliff-dweller pottery and offer it to Mrs. St. Peter (110). The garden itself suggests a frame and the canvas telescope suggests in its material and function the potential

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<sup>2</sup> The first lines of Aeneas’ narration, “*Fracti bello fatisque repulsi/ ductores Danaum tot jam labentibus annis/ instar montis equum divina palladis arte/ aedificant, sectaque intexunt abiete costas;/ votum pro reditu simulant; ea fama vagatur*”(II. 13-17). The verbs here are all present in tense. Translated literally, “Shattered by war and driven back by fate, the Greek leaders, as some many years slipped past, by the divine inspiration of Pallas Athena, build a horse like a mountain in stature, and they cover its ribs with pine logs split; they feign votive offerings for a return journey. This is the story that wanders.”(my translation).



for art to reach both forward and back. In this light, it is worth highlighting another curious echo in this allusion. Tom's recitation of the Aeneas' story is itself a flashback, a narrative remembered by St. Peter.

Associating Tom and St. Peter with these ecphrastic passages and the penetration of mythical time, Cather clearly marks Tom and Godfrey's values and vision as distinct from the material concerns of St. Peter's immediate family. While St. Peter visits with his embittered son-in-law Scott McGregor, the topic of Tom comes up. Scott remarks:

“You know, Tom isn't very real to me any more. Sometimes I think he was just a — a glittering idea.”

Scott's remarks rather troubled the Professor. He went up two flights of stairs and sat down in his shadowy crypt at the top of the house. With his right elbow on the table, his eyes on the floor, he began recalling as clearly and definitely as he could every incident of that bright, windy spring day when he first saw Tom Outland. (94-95)

In Cather's narrative “reality” here depends on memory. Where Scott fails to realize Tom mnemonically, St. Peter, like Aeneas will “renew” his Trojan past by narrated memories, succeeds in bringing Tom back to life by narrating his memory of Tom's arrival in Hamilton. Second, St. Peter's physical actions serve to conflate him with Aeneas. Immediately prior to the hero's narration of Troy's fall, Vergil relates, “*Inde toro pater Aeneas sic orsus ab alto*”(II. 2) – “Then, having risen from the high banquet

couch, father Aeneas began [to speak]”. Vergil mysteriously blends height and depth here. Aeneas rises (orsus) but from “*toro . . . ab alto*”. The anastrophe here (the inversion of normal word order – *ab toro alto*) highlights the dual nature of the word “*alto*”, meaning both high and deep, suggesting both elevation of Aeneas’ heroic status and the depth of his experience of the tragic on the high and deep seas. Here he rises to speak but descends into his past experience to draw forth his tale. Likewise, St. Peter both ascends two flights of stairs only to sit down and descend with his eyes and thoughts towards Tom’s memory. Moreover the office, cast in the gloom of these Classical gestures, becomes a “shadowy crypt” where St. Peter looks to meet Tom again in the underworld of his memory.

Thus at this stage of the narrative, Cather has constructed by her allusions to *The Aeneid* a dynamic opposition between two worlds – between what Mircea Eliade might term “sacred and profane time”(23). Where Scott, warped by material envy of Louie Marsellus’ wealth and situation, represents a failure of memory, Louie too is judged severely by Vergilian allusion. Jeremiah Mead points out the ironic contrast between the Marcellus in Book VI of the Aeneid, an honored heir of Augustus struck down in the prime of life and the materialistic Marsellus:

Louie’s surname both clinches the association and calls attention to the differences between Tom and himself, between the true Marcellus and the usurper; the Roman and the Modern; the idealist and the materialist; the adventurer of the range and the adventurer of the market; the prewar, remembered hero and the postwar, present man. Consider the spelling of

Louie's name. In place of the hard Latin C is the serpentine S; the stressed syllable now is "sell," and that is what Louie does best. (24)

In the contrast between St. Peter and his sons in law, the ancient and the modern, those who can or cannot navigate memory and narrative successfully, we can trace Eliade's dichotomy of the sacred and profane. Eliade writes, "In imitating the exemplary acts of a god or of a mythic hero, or simply by recounting their adventures, the man of an archaic society detaches himself from profane time and magically re-enters the Great Time, the sacred time"(23). Only in Cather's text, it is not "the man of an archaic society" who re-enters sacred time but the modern figure who can wield in a mechanical and materialistic modern world the synthetic forces of memory and imagination.

In "Book I, The Family", Cather has laid out this dynamic, but St. Peter, still only suggests the potential for such heroic identity. Depressed by his interview with Crane and the crassness and envy infecting his family and community, St. Peter reflects:

The university, his new house, his old house, everything around him, seemed insupportable, as the boat on which he is imprisoned seems to a sea-sick man. Yes, it was possible that the little world, on its voyage among all the stars, might become like that; a boat on which one could no longer look up and confront those bright rings or revolution. (131).

Ground down by the modern world, St. Peter, once able to "confront those bright rings," has become trapped in the profane world.

As Cather moves to “Book II, Tom Outland’s Story”, she breaks away from the traditional narrative trajectory and presents Tom’s story as anacoluthon – a topaz standing freely as its own artifact. Here too Cather lets Vergilian language penetrate Tom’s narrative, leading him to fleeting moments of transcendence. The reader recognizes this familiar language of the cosmos in Tom’s epiphany on the Mesa. Here he moves out beyond the profanity of Washington and the commodification of the Anasazi culture and experiences the sacred, expressed in intertextual terms. He relates, “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 a possession . . . For me the Mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion. I had read of filial piety in the Latin poets, and I knew that was what I felt for this place” (226-227). Some critics see this sense of filial piety inspired by the holistic wonder at the Mesa as excessively nostalgic.<sup>3</sup> As Susan Wilson puts it, “Tom’s methods are intellectually unsound, and the language of wholeness in which he expresses them is fraught with irony. The wholeness that Tom conceives severs links to context and community” (585). Wilson assumes that, because Tom does not invoke the Anasazi or other inhabitants in his vision, he lapses into an individual nostalgia that leads to an imperialistic sense of possession of native culture.<sup>4</sup> Such a reading, however, fails to account for the connections Tom does invoke here. He is

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<sup>3</sup> Karen Simons in her article, “Remaking the Georgic Connection: Vergil and Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*”, notes, “Many critics who have considered the novel’s georgic elements in the last twenty-five years have tended to see it as a nostalgic, idealizing pastoral lens” (524). This extends to georgic elements in *The Professor’s House* too.

<sup>4</sup> Reynolds also alludes to historian Richard Slotkins who claims that the myth of a virgin land can lead to the justification of capitalist expansion. (138).

not alone on the Mesa. The “filial piety” he feels orients him to “*pater Aeneas*,” “Mother Eve,” and a host of other transcendent figures enrolled in sacred time whose text and tradition might nourish him. As Timothy Blackburn explains, “In Cather’s modernist aesthetic, to be ‘absolutely true’ to a subject means much more than providing an accurate account of what happened. It can mean connecting to heroic patterns as well as to a figure from popular culture who resonates as something prototypically American and lost, a genial spirit of another time” (140). While to invoke “something prototypically American” can, as Wilson rightly fears, invite such possessive impulses as land grabs and the submersion of aboriginal cultures steamrolled by ideologies like “manifest destiny,” Tom’s discourse here is imaginative, not appetitive. He does not need his archeological journal; instead he looks to “connect to heroic patterns” Roman, Native American and otherwise. As David Harrell points out, “The important point is to see the two worlds not as static and mutually exclusive, the one enshrined in the past and the other condemned in the present but as related points along a continuum that defies the customary limitations of time” (204). As Eliade points out, Tom, and by extension St. Peter, can enter mythical time through imagination and find the past renewed, recreated. Being attentive to the past with this sense of *pietas* sustains these characters in the face of a discouraging modern present.

Moreover, Wilson misreads the notion of “possession” here. When Tom explains, “Something had happened in me,” (227), he abdicates agency. The ensuing “possession” is not active or acquisitive as much as passive and receptive. As Karen

Simons notes of Cather's Vergilian allusion in *My Antonia*, "The ancient poem performs another function for Jim: it provides a lighted backdrop against which 'the places and people of my own infinitesimal past' assume greater stature" (523). The allusions here point not to juxtaposed rifts between utopian and dystopian impulses but rather the will to transcend such rifts, to find in mythical parallels an archetypal consolation.

On the Mesa, Tom now reads with a newly won double sense for the historic and the timeless. He relates, "When I look into the Aeneid now, I can always see two pictures: the one on the page, and another behind that: blue and purple rocks and yellow-green pinons with flat tops, little clustered houses clinging together for protection, a rude tower rising in their midst, rising strong, with calmness and courage – behind it a dark grotto, in its depth a crystal spring. (228) Again Cather's narrative, with its rich pastels, recalls the Dutch paintings and lends to the Vergilian text the quality of the window that opens up to the Mesa. The ecphrasis then works in both directions at once: the Aeneid provides a "lighted backdrop" that serves to illuminate and magnify his experience of the Mesa, and the Mesa too works "behind" the Classical text to illuminate and magnify the experience of Vergil's narration as recurrent.

Like St. Peter, Tom too will lapse from this union with the sacred sense of time. As he concludes his story, "Troubles enough came afterward, but there was that summer, high and blue, a life in itself" (228). This transcendent experience on the mesa, "high and blue" resembles the blue turquoise Tom gives to Rosamond and

Kitty, “two lumps of soft blue stone, the color of robins’ eggs, or of the sea on halcyon days of summer . . . Turquoises, just the way they come out of the mine, before the jewelers have tampered with them and made them look green. The Indians liked them this way” (102). While he cannot remain in the timeless and sacred, the experience and its insights do have a permanence of their own and they can be handed down to others, beautiful on their own merits, and a ballast against the materialism that threatens to color things and people green.

It is this ideal, then, that St. Peter strives to recapture in the third book of the novel, “The Professor”. In this book Cather presents St. Peter, isolated, depressed and morbidly contemplating his mortality, retracing how his life had fallen away from original vitality. In this context, Cather leads St. Peter to draw from ecphrastic moments grave but important truths. While there are in the text only two direct Vergilian allusions in this book, two little blue stones, there remains Augusta, a character whose name suggests Augustan Rome and perhaps a spiritual guide akin to the Sibyl who guides Aeneas through the underworld. While some, like Susan Rosowski, see in St. Peter’s character development a quest for redemption through creative imagination, there is more to St. Peter’s final crisis than a “liberation from within himself dreams that contain archetypal truths”(xii). Just as Tom was not alone on the Mesa, St. Peter is not alone as he confronts death. As Mead notes:

[St. Peter] has a model for survival of this ordeal of passage, Tom Outland himself. Tom, upon learning of the sale of the relics, had undergone a near death of his own: “I remember I sat down on the sofa in Hook’s

office because I couldn't stand up any longer, and the smell of the horse blankets began to make me deathly sick. In a minute I went over, like a girl in a novel. Hook pulled me out on the sidewalk and gave me some whisky out of his pocket flask. (238)

This scene prefigures the Professor's near death in several details: the sofa, the blankets, the deathly odor, the loss of consciousness, the rescuing tug outside to fresh air.

Read in this light, St. Peter is walking in the footsteps of Tom, Aeneas, and other mythical heroes, retracing for himself the archetypal journey to confront mortality and emerge endowed with larger vision.

For St. Peter, however, it is Augusta who pulls him to safety. This fact demands that one read her figure carefully. Disenchanted with family life, St. Peter finds consolation in her presence, "There was still Augusta, however, a world full of Augustas, with whom one was outward bound" (257). The combined unity and multiplicity of her figure in this reminiscence, along with her connection with sewing, reading, religion and death mark her as a living archetype, a manifest spiritual guide for St. Peter. Not surprisingly, we see Augusta also connected to artistic creation and ecphrastic allusion earlier in the novel. As St. Peter and Augusta discuss the origin of the Magnificat, he learns something. When he remarks, "But I thought the Magnificat was about the Virgin?", Augusta replies, "Oh, no, Professor! The Blessed Virgin composed the Magnificat" (84). In this curious exchange, Augusta succeeds in conflating the roles of author and subject. In the course of this



conversation, she has both transformed the Virgin from inscribed subject to author. As the text of the Magnificat implies, the inspired soul magnifies the lord, and the lord magnifies the soul. In this revelation, Augusta also succeeds in rewriting and illuminating St. Peter's work space, "The Professor climbed to his study feeling quite as though Augusta had been there and brightened it up for him. (Surely she had said that the Blessed Virgin sat down and composed the Magnificat!)" (84). In the very next page, St. Peter, in a fit of artistic inspiration, likens himself to Queen Mathilde, another female archetype weaving as author and instructor, in effect androgynously mirroring her:

"Just as, when Queen Mathilde was doing the long tapestry now shown at Bayeux – working her chronicle of the deeds of knights and heroes, - alongside the big pattern of dramatic action she and her women carried the little playful pattern of birds and beasts that are a story in themselves; so, to him, the most important chapters of his history were interwoven with personal memories"(85).

Just as in Tom's epiphany on the Mesa, St. Peter recognizes at last, in the light of allusive magnification, the value and even heroism of the "little playful patterns" remembered from his own life and woven into the chapters of his history. While the novel ends not on a simplistic, triumphant note, it does leave St. Peter stoic, bound to Augusta's realism and poised to "face with fortitude the *Berengaria* and the future" (258). The Professor has been beaten down by disappointment and isolation, but he has emerged alive and more self-aware. He is not the same man he

was, and he anticipates a life “without delight” (282) and apathy towards his family. This is dark but not tragic. St. Peter explains that he “felt the ground beneath his feet”, which suggests a knowledge of some truth and a new orientation towards what is elemental – nature, truth, something primitive.

It is tempting to explain away St. Peter’s depression in biographical terms - as the veiled lament of Cather at Isabelle McLung’s marriage and her sense of abandonment. Leon Edel traces a convincing parallel between Cather and St. Peter. Of course, Cather openly draws from her life in her narratives, and it is hard not to think of this androgynous conflation of St. Peter/Queen Mathilde as a little self-referential. Certainly the Professor’s house resembles Cather’s own workspace in Pittsburgh.<sup>5</sup>

Yet the epic allusions and philosophical concerns of the novel point to far larger themes than personal jealousies. Cather posits St. Peter considering death but standing in the height of health. At the end of the novel, he is said to have “had no more thought of suicide than he had thought of embezzling” (282). This begs the question why a healthy man with no thought of suicide dwells to this degree on death. The answer is that Cather is far less concerned with exploring St. Peter’s feelings of morbidity than with setting up the archetypal confrontation with death in metaphorical terms. She goes to great length to depict the study as Platonic cave and Vergilian underworld. The study is dark, cramped, labeled a “shadowy crypt” (94).

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<sup>5</sup> Edel draws a direct parallel between Cather’s home in Pittsburg and the “old house” and between Jan Hambourg’s new house in Ville D’Avray with Louie and Rosamond’s house at Outland. (213).

This cave of a study also resembles the cave in Plato's allegory. During the move in the first phase of the novel, when Augusta comes to retrieve her sewing materials, St. Peter allows her to take the "rolls of patterns, cut out of newspapers and tied with bits of ribbon and . . . notched charts which followed the changing stature of and figures of Misses St. Peter from early childhood to womanhood", but he will not allow her to take the "forms", emblems of Platonic *eidoi*, unchanging and ideal. (22-23). In this same cave at the end of the novel St. Peter sees the fire make a "flickering pattern of light on the wall" (276), reinforcing this Platonic parallel.

Against this backdrop, St. Peter's near asphyxiation takes on the color of a metaphorical descent to the underworlds and return much like that of Vergil's Aeneas. When the Roman hero emerges from the underworld, he significantly comes out through the gate of sleep through the tunnel of false dreams:

*Sunt geminae Somni portae, quarum altera fertur*

*Cornea, qua veris facilis datur exitus umbri;*

*Altera candenti, perfecta nitens elephanto,*

*Sed falsa ad caelum mittunt insomnia Manes.*

*His ibi tum natum Anchises emittit eburna. (6. 896-898).*

There are twin gates of dreams, one of which is said

To be fashioned of horn, by which smooth exit is granted to true dreams;

The other is fashioned of polished ivory

But through this the shades send false dreams to the upper world.

Through this gate of ivory then Anchises sends his son.

So too, when St. Peter emerges, Cather ends her novel on a note that suggests St.

Peter and Augusta mirror the journey of Aeneas and the Sibyl. Upon regaining

consciousness and contemplating his epiphany, St. Peter finds solidity in Augusta's

presence: "There was still Augusta, however; a world full of Augustas, with whom

one was outward bound" (281). The phrase "outward bound" suggests that he and

Augusta resemble Aeneas and the Sibyl emerging outward from the underworld and

bound to found Augustan Rome. And like Aeneas, he emerges from the clear light of

prophecy to the uncertainty of the real world. Cather concludes the novel with this

note, "At least, he felt the ground beneath his feet. He thought he knew where he

was, and that he could face with fortitude the Berengaria and the future" (283). The

ambiguity of the phrase "thought he knew where he was" highlights the uncertainty

of what it is St. Peter has garnered from this experience. He emerges back in the land

of the living, changed but with only a vague insight of what the future might hold.

Here again Cather works through classical allusion to build a sense of grave and

archetypal experience only to return to the realization that these epic moments are

never permanent.

Yet this lapse is by no means a failure. While the Professor's narrative

inevitably returns to the complex and confused modern world, he also returns to "a

world full of Augustas.” While implying ambiguity, this phrase also recalls the grand scope of Cather’s artistry. We might say of Cather – she is not only a modernist author but also a Vergil, a Queen Mathilda, and an Augusta. That is, in the act of writing the author enrolls herself in this same pursuit of the mythical, inscribing herself as both subject and author within the Vergilian tradition. As Bernice Slote explains, “For Willa Cather, personal memory is also the memory of the race. Though she may not have used the word, she dealt with the archetype – the inescapable human experience” (108). In this sense St. Peter, like Cather, shares an identification with the archetype of the intellectual, the artist who pursues the examined life even when it leads to frustration in the gap between the world of ideas and the mundane materialism that surrounds him.

Thus Cather, by recalling Vergilian echoes, themselves deeply framed by both recollection and projection, invests her text with a classical depth dimension that works both backward and forward, with a scope both universal and personal. As Lisa Marie Lucenti explains, “His struggle is, in turn, symbolic of a larger conflict over how to remember or, more particularly, how to re-collect the past so that it becomes part of the present self” (240). As she embeds *the Aeneid* within Tom’s story, and Tom’s story within The Professor’s narrative, and perhaps the Professor’s within her own, she carefully layers multiple narrative strata that lend to her text a sense of mythical magnification. St. Peter and Tom both experience in narrative parallels moments of transcendence, moments when their experience is magnified by the archetypal patterns by classical paradigms, only to return to the temporal.

While these moments do not last, they can be recalled and will continue to inspire and redeem those who read the world in their light. Against the backdrop of a divisive, confusing age, Cather is not lamenting the world “breaking in two” so much as attempting to suture that rupture – even momentarily - through the remembered lives of her characters and their classical counterparts. This imperfect pursuit is itself part of a lasting and inspiring design.

#### Chapter IV: Shadows on the Rock – Flickering Epiphanies

Moreover this pursuit in art to weave order out of chaos, to find strength and vitality in archetypal patterns was a need that Cather seems to have carried with her in full force as she and her novels moved from the Midwest to Quebec. John J. Murphy explains, “*Shadows* reflects the human need for meaningful order as protection against chaos and for a cosmos to sustain the values of that order. The novel is a defense of what Peter Berger refers to as the ‘sacred canopy’, ‘man’s ultimate shield against the terror of anomy’” (Solid Rock 178). One can trace throughout Cather’s novels and her criticism this refrain – art as response to this terror of oblivion, but it is important to note too that the artist weaves traditional figures and devices into her work not simply as a defense mechanism but with the religious thinker’s faith that in art and ritual one can mine transcendent moments that collapse time. Joseph Urgo recognizes this faith in Cather: “One is awed by her habitual attraction, in her subject matter, to strong, enabling systems of belief – so much so that she is often thought to be a ‘believer’. But she was not a believer in any particular theology or political program or cause. It was the phenomenon of belief that fired her imagination” (Cather’s Secular Humanism, 187). Urgo makes an important distinction here between the particular and the universal. In her allusive style, Cather is regularly drawn to patterns in the canopy that emerge throughout history – the rocks, the archetypal patterns to which humans anchor themselves. Yet she dwells as much on the shadows – the ephemerality and illusiveness of the images that we see on these “rocks”. The title of the novel, *Shadows on the Rock*,

clearly recalls Plato's cave analogy and evokes both ends of the spectrum therein, celebrating the desire to apprehend the forms, to get at the permanent truth and stable system, but reminding us of the ephemerality of those forms cast as shadows. The rock too stands not absolute but as an island in a great river that signifies the inescapable flow of time. As a writer, Cather is at once a pragmatist, anthropologist, philosopher and historian. She seeks ideas and images that work, tracing out timeless ideas and images that have fired the human imagination and buoyed the spirits. She traces the common patterns across a wide range of cultures and epochs. She thrills to the capacity of art to bridge disparate ages and provide glimpses of a common light source that casts the shadows that dance before men. And she celebrates that dance of light and shadows on the historically specific walls of the plains of Nebraska, the deserts of Acoma and finally on the Rock of Quebec.

*Shadows on the Rock* begins its concern with time from the first word. Cather opens her historical novel, set precisely in its chronology, "One late afternoon in October of the year 1697" (3). Yet for all the temporal precision, the author also confronts the reader with a gap, a void, much like the window frame Cather points to in her essay, "*On the Professor's House*." Upon first entering the scene, the reader is sutured to the frame of reference of Euclide Auclair, the "philosopher apothecary" who stands on a cliff above and looks down on the St. Lawrence River. Euclide Auclair, his praenomen recalling the Classical past and his familial name marking his ties to Old France, stands at once in the wash of time and above it. Oddly, the reader is presented not with a ship but the absence in the space whence a



ship has departed to France. Here Euclide looks at “the broad, empty river far beneath him. Empty, because an hour ago the flash of retreating sails had appeared behind the green island that splits the St. Lawrence below Quebec, and the last of the summer ships from France had started on her long voyage home” (3). The past perfective tense here – “had appeared . . . had started” forecasts the novel’s concern with the time – specifically the transition from Old World Europe to New World Canada. Yet the visual void is important too. By focusing on an absence, an emptiness, Cather invites both Euclide and the reader to fill this space simultaneously with the present of their own imagination, their own reading, their own story. As the reader is led to visualize the “flash of retreating sails”, they enact a recollection simultaneously with Euclide’s. As Jo Ann Middleton remarks, “Cather demonstrates in this novel that we carry within ourselves the means by which we can extend the limits of measured time: our memories and our imaginations” (50). Cather marks from the outset of this later novel then a familiar and persistent artistic project – to demonstrate how memory and imagination can fill the gaps between ages, casting a light that illuminates seemingly insignificant moments in the flow of diachronic time as events permanent, grave, even epic when seen in the glow of synchronic human experience. As she wrote of this novel herself, “To me the rock of Quebec is not only a stronghold on which many strange figures have for a little time cast a shadow in the sun; it is the curious endurance of a kind of culture, narrow but definite. There another age persists.”<sup>6</sup> Against this backdrop, it is no

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<sup>6</sup> Willa Cather, “On Shadows on the Rock” in *Willa Cather on Writing* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska Press,

surprise that in *Shadows of the Rock* Cather again uses Vergilian allusions to yoke both the temporal and the timeless aspects of the Canadian pioneer experience on the Rock of Quebec.

Cather first alludes to the *Aeneid* when describing the timeless aspect of Notre Dame de la Victoire. For Cecile, on All Saints Day, “All of the stories of the rock came to life for [her]; the shades of early martyrs and great missionaries all drew close about her. All the miracles that had happened there, all the dreams that had been dreamed, came out of the fog; every spire, every ledge and pinnacle, took on the splendor of legend” (76). The solemn ritual of the day allows Cecile to enter mythical time; the legendary past becomes immediately present for her. Yet at the same time, she also recalls historical events – the shelling of the little church that miraculously survives Sir William Phips’s bombardment untouched: “Cecile herself could remember it quite well” (77). In this setting, simultaneously both mythical and temporal, the narrator reflects on the cheerful piety of the Nuns of Kebec and links their cultural import of French Catholicism to Aeneas’s restoration of the Trojan culture in Italy. She explains:

*Inferretque deos Latio.* When an adventurer carries his gods with him into a remote and savage country, the colony he founds will, from the beginning, have graces, traditions, riches of the mind and spirit. Its history will shine with bright incidents, slight perhaps but precious, as in life itself, where the

great matters are often as worthless as astronomical distances, and the trifles dear as the heart's blood. (79)

Against the “suffocating” threat of wilderness on all sides, Cather celebrates in both the Catholic rituals and the domestic rituals to which the Nuns and the Auclair women attend heroic acts of preserving and inflecting French culture. As Merrill Maquire Skaggs reflects, this continuity is itself a kind of miracle: “For Cather seems to contend not only that miracles can develop from such ordinary ingredients as good girls provide, miracles arise from the exceptional as well” (35). One might reverse Skaggs’ argument here and contend equally that the ordinary ingredients of culture building take on significance and are enlarged by the exceptional precisely because they participate in the same timeless pursuit of the miracle of human culture and art. The artificial flower the nuns make resemble the flowers on St. Anne’s cloak that emerge under candlelight. The city on the rock in Quebec resembles “a theatric scene of the nativity” (4) as does the crèche. Vergilian allusion in this novel works to remind the reader that the ordinary ingredients are exceptional in as much as they enact the same human struggles with the same human concerns – to survive, to know oneself, to retain and build something of significance in the bare rock of existence.

While the first half of the novel seems to emphasize the glance backwards to Old France and the preservation of the sacred in inherited rituals, Cather is not simply promoting a nostalgia. Swift writes of Virgilian allusions in Cather’s novels:

“Their orientation is generally nostalgic, towards ‘the precious, the incommunicable past’, but it can also be forward looking and nostalgic simultaneously, as in the conclusions of *O Pioneers! Or Shadows on the Rock*” (Willa Cather in Space, 299). Swift locates this simultaneous movement or pull to both past and present in the allusions to the *penates* of the old world rediscovered within the New World, allusions to the stories of ancient people recovered in the newly voiced narratives of the pioneer. Swift’s important turn is his reading of Cather’s allusion in two directions as opposed to the simple nostalgia that many critics ascribe to her writing. He importantly claims a complexity to Cather’s allusions that takes her beyond the label of “romantic,” redeeming her modernism and identifying an important dual aspect of her use of classical texts.

In imagery that captures important iconography of the Trojan past and Roman destiny, Cather looks both back to France and forward to the Canadian future. While not specifically drawing from Vergilian language, Cather weaves into the novel a well known image from the *Aeneid*, made famous not only by the Roman author but by a Berninian sculpture, the image of the Roman hero Aeneas, carrying his aged father Anchises on his shoulder while leading his young son Ascanius by the hand as the three emerge from a burning Troy and move to bring their Trojan culture to a new land and sow the seeds for what will eventually grow as a new tradition in Roman Italy. Aeneas relates this moment in a recollection of this triadic image which conflates three generations:

*Haec fatus latos umeros subjectaque colla*

*Veste super fulvique insternor pelle leonis,*

*Succedoque oneri; dextrae se parvus Iulus*

*Implicuit sequiturque patrem non passibus aequis. (II. 721-724)*

Having spoken these words, I placed on my wide shoulders and neck inclined

A cloak and the tawny skin of a lion

And I bowed down to my burden; little Iulus folded

His right hand in mine and followed his father with unequal strides.

(translation mine)

While the emblematic gesture of carrying the aged past on his shoulders and leading the youthful future forward rings clear, Vergil also adds an allusive twist of his own. The “fulvi . . . pelle”, the tawny skin of the lion recalls the garb of Heracles and his labors from the distant Greek heroic past and the use of the name “Iulus” for Trojan Ascanius points to the Julio Claudian dynasty to come. This kind of passage must have appealed to Cather – a scene wherein the author presents a series of images located at a precise historical moment but pointing both forward and backward to other ages in that same moment. Of course Aeneas is relating this tale to Dido and his Carthaginian audience. Thus Vergil has used allusions to pierce the folds of time,

uniting the present of his storytelling to the distant past of Heracles, the recent past of Troy and the Roman future to come.

In *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather picks up this image and revises it to her own means in the figure of the cobbler Noel Pommier and Cecile. Pommier is a man steeped in the past. He has collected the molds of the feet of famous Parisians and Quebecois both from his father's age in France and his own time in New France, and he relates the death of Robert de la Salle with nostalgia: "That foot will not come back. . . It went too far" (66). Like Aeneas he carries his mother on his back to attend service, to visit Mme Auclair and to share Christmas Eve with Euclide and Cecile. He explains to Cecile, "If there is snow, I will push my mother down in her sledge. If the ground is naked I will carry her on my back" (83). Cather invests Madame Pommier too as an Anchises figure when she arrives at the Auclair's home: "Her son lifted her out in all her wrappings and carried her into the salon, where the apothecary's arm-chair was set for her. But before she would accept this seat of honour, she must hobble all over the house to satisfy herself that things were kept just as they used to be in Madame Auclair's time" (89). Beyond the simple image of filial piety, Cather emblemizes Mme Pommier as a figure that echoes the past of Old France through her association with Mme Auclair, but the author also endows her shuffling officiousness with a heroic stature, aligning her as she does with Roman Anchises.

Missing from the parallel familial image between the Pommiers and the Aeneas of course is the model of Ascanius. Here Cather uses Cecile and Jacques to complete the portrait. She frequently focuses on Jacques's feet and his little steps, recalling the Vergilian passage and his "non passibus aequis". From his little teeth to his little shoes, Jacques is often portrayed in diminutive terms as is the "parvus Iulus". More importantly, Cather often shows Cecile leading Jacques – often in an image that closely resembles Aeneas and Ascanius. Cather highlights this image in a single sentence paragraph, "They went hand in hand up the hill". Note too how Cecile resembles Aeneas when she and Jacques emerge from dinner with the Pommiers:

She put the sled-rope under her arms, gave her weight to it, and began to climb. A feeling came over her that there would never be anything better in the world for her than this: to be pulling Jacques on her sled, with the tender, burning sky before her, and on each side the dusk, the kindly lights from neighbors' houses. If the Count should go back with the ships next summer, and her father with him, how could she bear it, she wondered. On a foreign shore, in a foreign city (yes, for her a foreign shore), would not her heart break for just this? For this rock and this winter, this feeling of being in one's own place, for the soft content of pulling Jacques up Holy Family Hill into the paler and paler levels of blue air, like a diver coming up from the deep sea.

(84-85)

In this transitional moment between daylight and dusk, old world allegiance and new Canadian identity, as she pulls Jacques up Holy Family Hill into “paler and paler levels of blue air”, Cather combines this feeling of climbing through ethereal layers with a sense of diving deep “like a diver” and surfacing. The ethereal and profound images of air and sea cast this simple act of pulling a toboggan in 1697 Quebec as a moment of epic epiphany like Aeneas’ experience, drawing his son from the flames of Troy and undergoing trials by sea before founding a new epoch. The image captures perfectly the role and dilemma of the pioneer/refugees: both Aeneas and Cecile are burdened and bound by the heroic ideals of the previous generations but obligated to future generations to move forward to new horizons. Thus Cather uses the Classical allusions to lend gravity of epic epiphany to this infinitesimal moment and to alert the reader to this turn in Cecile’s allegiance from old world to new.

Later in the text, Cather will introduce several other epiphanies – moments when god or angel reaches beyond the veil and appears to mortals – Jacque’s crèche scene suggests a recreation of the miracle of virgin birth and the miraculous mending of Le Ber’s spinning wheel leap to mind, but more subtle miraculous epiphanies appear regularly as well. One such epiphany is easy to miss. Significantly, on the very evening of the Epiphany when angels visit Jeanne Le Ber and fix her spinning wheel, Antoine Frichette and Hector St. Cyr experience an epiphany too. The same blizzard burying Quebec City entombs Frichette and Father Hector within the sanctuary of a white pine tree. By pointing to Frichette’s mistaken reading of this recitation as “a long prayer” (115), Cather highlights the parallel of these two



remote epiphanies. Note too that Cather depicts their lean-to in terms similar both to the crèche with its “little shelter, made of green fir boughs” (87) and to the Recluse’s cell with its thick walls:

The top was still fresh and green and made thick walls to keep out the wind . . . [the snow] had packed between the needles of that pine top until it was like a solid wall and roof. It was warm in there; no wind got through. Father Hector said some prayers, and we rolled up in our blankets and slept most of the day and let the storm come. (114-115).

One can’t help but recall here Professor Godfrey St. Peter’s study and Cather’s principle that “to make a drama, a man needed one passion and four walls”.<sup>7</sup> The great passion at hand here is the fight for survival and Father Hector’s recitation of the Aeneid. As the angels visit the recluse, Vergil visits the two woodsmen. Evelyn Funda points out, “While the journey is without the fanfare of talking animals or the wonder of ethereal lights, [Frichette’s] and Father Hector’s survival is, nevertheless, miraculous” (71).

Thus the mysterious Indian guide appears and saves the men through the miracle of generosity and human empathy. Funda explains that this rescuing figure, “suggests a heavenly being in disguise to remind the travelers of the ‘mercy of God’ and to assure them that they ‘were pointed right’ (72). While the author does not

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<sup>7</sup> Cather explains in “The Novel Demeuble”, “The elder Dumas enunciated a great principle when he said that to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and four walls” (43).

allude specifically to which Vergilian passages Father Hector is recalling, given the context it is fair to guess that it is Book I of the *Aeneid*, wherein a great storm strikes the Trojans ships and the refugees find safety in the compassion of others. The Indian guide appears to two wandering men much as a disguised Venus appears to Aeneas and his comrade Achates, leading them safely to Carthage and to the temple of Juno where Aeneas will recognize that here still "*Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*" (Aeneid I. 462). – Here too there is compassion for suffering and human woes touch the mind (translation mine). In the wilderness of Quebec, this Native Canadian, whom Frichette "had never seen before", was "glad to give us what he had" (117). Again, Cather lends gravity and depth to the local act by recalling the archetypal past.

Beyond the archetypal richness which the Vergilian allusion adds to Frichette's story of survival, Cather also makes a point of highlighting the nostalgia the text raises for Father Hector. Not only does the classical text frame the events in heroic patterns of experience from the ancient past but it works to raise the specters of personal memory as well. The rhetorician priest explains to Frichette, "That's not a prayer Antoine, . . . that's a Latin poem, a very long one, that I learned at school. If I am uncomfortable, it diverts my mind, and I remember my old school and my comrades" (115). This response to the text recalls Jim Burden's response to Gaston Cleric's lectures on Vergil: "While I was in the very act of yearning towards the new forms that Cleric brought up before me, my mind plunged away from me, and I suddenly found myself thinking of the places and people of my own infinitesimal

past” (168). As Father Hector repeats the Vergilian lines, he too makes both the ancient past and personal past present through memory and imagination. Lorena Wasserman convincingly traces a Bergsonian influence here, noting that for Bergson and Cather, “through memory personal time can be transcended, allowing us glimpses of underlying unity of exterior nature, the single flow of energy beneath apparent change” (229). Thus for Jim, for Tom Outland, for Godfrey St. Peter, for Cather and for her readers, Vergilian allusions work simultaneously on personal and universal planes, as a window within a window at once allowing glimpses of a personal past and of an “underlying unity” in human experience.

This pursuit of an essential unity in human experience leads Cather to work not in simple, Victorian narrative patterns but to adopt a montage technique, overlaying fragments of stories from disparate voices and eras on top of one another to create echoes and overlaps that point to such a unity. *Shadows on the Rock*, for all its emphasis on being “historical” is also perhaps Cather’s most radically experimental work. The abrupt and regular anacolouthonic shifts establishes the narrative as a distinctly modern novel. Deborah Carlin points out that “Anacolouthonic shifts in the texts result not only from the difference in the way stories are narrated, but also from the different kinds of stories themselves that are foregrounded from one moment to the next” (65). Cather repeatedly embeds or folds hagiography and historiography, wilderness adventure stories and classical myths. Most important to her technique is the way these abrupt and jarring narrative fragments play off of one another, the way they fold together and combine

to reveal the universal in the local inflection and the local inflection in the universal. Aeneas and Cecile are both mythical figures and beloved family relations, literary archetypes and founders of specifically Roman and Canadian futures. We glimpse this paradox most clearly when two narrative planes, the mythical and the historical, converge or fold against one another. Carlin notes that the gold flowers in St. Anne's cloak are illuminated only when "the material is doubled up on itself," when particularized history and fiction fold into one another. Throughout the novel, Cather continually folds disparate narrative modes into one another, allowing the reader to apprehend the timeless and the temporary in the candle light.

Like the shadows on the cave wall, the plow framed by the sun on the prairie horizon and the cloak of St. Anne, however, these images are rich but never lasting. In a letter to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Cather likened the process of writing *Shadows on the Rock* to weaving a tapestry tent she could unfold and refold, pick it up and put it back down during the chaos of life on the road<sup>8</sup>. The reader who attends to the Vergilian notes in Cather's novels raises the tapestry with her, folding it and unfolding the dual narrative layers in the hope that the flowers will emerge for them, even if only for a moment, even if those shadows flicker and the light will eventually fade.

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<sup>8</sup> John J. Murphy summarizes this sentiment in his recent article, "Willa Cather's Sheltering Art: Cather's Cathedral and the Adams Factory".

## Conclusion:

In *My Antonia*, Cather brings distinct lines of Vergilian texts, rising from personal and collective memory to serve as a backdrop to the immediate actions on the Nebraska landscape, like the sun casting the signature plow in relief against the glowing sky. In *The Professor's House*, the author "lets in" the ancient texts in ecphrastic moments as through receding windows, inscribing Vergilian texts within Tom's Story, and Tom's story with St. Peter's, etc. In *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather intersperses Vergilian images throughout anacolouthonic series of pictures like threads and images woven into tapestries within tapestries. While Vergilian language enters the present narratives in slightly different forms or media in each of these novels, what remains constant is the sense of depth, a sense of receding space. Whether by specific passages from the *Georgics*, echoes of the *Aeneid* or by parallel allegorical character trials, the Vergilian texts serves to create ruptures within the modern narrative, room for the reader to recognize boundaries between ages and the dissolution of those boundaries.

When one beholds the background architecture in a Roman wall painting, one's eyes are led back through that space to behold buildings, blue skies and ulterior images of another time and space. In that recess the viewer activates that interior image, but that image in turn works to project forward the more immediate image focused in the central frame. This is the effect of Vergilian allusions in all of her novels. Whether through explicit textual allusion or through mere echoes of the

earlier epic text, the specifics of medium matter less than the effect. Thus the function of the receding space is to highlight the embedded nature of narrative. The word text derives from the Latin *texere*, to weave, and Cather very intentionally uses allusions to weave narratives within narratives in all three novels, creating a sense of parallel depth and lending the strength of tradition to the present in all three novels. These allusions then serve to magnify the present and lend it a sense of participation in deeper patterns. The depth of tradition, as we have seen, however, does not merely provide the palliative sop of an affirming nostalgia for the past but a complex and problematic reminder of the tragic sense of life. In this same vein, Deborah Carlin describes *Shadows on the Rock* as a “palimpsest, a manuscript in which we can discover earlier erased writings” (88), noting that the oral tradition of Old France is paradoxically preserved as written text in Cather’s text but in that very translation erased as oral text. In a similar way, all three of these novels open up vacuoles through which the ancient text emerges, but in the very moment these Vergilian notes emerge they are immediately translated into the text they inhabit. And this is apt. Certainly for Jim, for St. Peter and for Cecile there is a sense of loss as well as gain when those Vergilian notes are heard. Just as the Roman wall painting preserved in Pompey also recalls in its preservation the heat of the eruptions that preserved it, so do the Vergilian passages preserved in narratives as disparate as the novels studied here recall the larger erosive forces in life, providing wisdom and direction perhaps but also reminding us of our ephemeral fragility of our own existence.

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