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NATURE AND CHARACTER IN THE NOVELS OF WILLA CATHER

By JOHN DITSKY

Obvious as is the presence of Nature in the novels of Willa Cather, few readers have attempted to restore what must have been Cather's system, conscious or not, of treating the relationship between Nature and individual character. The elements which constitute Willa Cather's employment of the Nature-man relationship are expressed typically (if briefly and concisely) in the poem entitled "Prairie Spring," which appears by way of foreword to *O Pioneers!*:

Evening and the flat land,
Rich and somber and always silent;
The miles of fresh-plowed soil,
Heavy and black, full of strength and harshness;
The growing wheat, the growing weeds,
The toiling horses, the tired men;
The long, empty roads,
Sullen fires of sunset, fading,
The eternal, unresponsive sky.
Against all this, Youth,
Flaming like the wild roses,
Singing like the larks over the plowed fields,
Flashing like a star out of the twilight;
Youth with its insupportable sweetness,
Its fierce necessity,
Its sharp desire;
Singing and singing,
Out of the lips of silence,
Out of the earthy dusk.

As rare in its Whitmanesque freedom as it is correspondingly indicative of the seriousness of Cather's revealed concerns, this poem suggests a triple division of Cather's use of the Land: as

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embodiment of history or witness to the past (here, in the unvarying figures of the "toiling horses" and the "tired men" posed in stark relief against the "eternal, unresponsive sky"); second, as source of hope and reflection of human dreams (Youth whose "fierce necessity" and "sharp desire" resemble the warmth of the rose, the brilliance of a star, the song of a lark); lastly, as shaper of individual character, especially in terms of orientation to Art (the synthesis of the other two: the moral process by which the "strength and harshness" of life upon the land inevitably yield to the "insupportable sweetness" of the near-inexpressible song).

What follows is an attempt to trace the development of this constant triple division through the body of Cather's novels, with some suggestion of the ultimate value and meaning of such usage.

I

Willa Cather's use of the land to embody history or serve as witness to human activity is not fully developed in *Alexander's Bridge*, and one has little difficulty in maintaining that the novel's flaws are at least partly traceable to her failure to assimilate Nature to her purposes. Perhaps because Cather was consciously writing a Jamesian novel, her employment of Nature is conventional; significant action and language are ordinarily prefaced by glances at the landscape and consultations of the heavens. Cather hardly gets past ordinary pathetic fallacy. Yet the fragility and impermanence of human endeavor, the idea that balance and order in life are subject to the constant vibration of a universe bent upon discovering flaws, are most clearly and purposefully set forth in the notion of *bridges* — both that of the title and Alexander's first suspension bridge, which Mrs. Alexander associates with her marriage:

"We were married as soon as it was finished, and you will laugh when I tell you that it always has a rather bridal look to me. It is over the wildest river, with mists and clouds always battling about it, and it is as delicate as a cobweb hanging in the sky. It really was a bridge into the future."¹

1 Willa Cather, *Alexander's Bridge* (Bantam edition, New York, 1962), 14. All other page references which appear in my text are to the standard hardcover Houghton Mifflin and Knopf editions of her novels.

Yet Cather is clearly using a scheme or system of Nature-images, however conventional, even in this first of her novels.

In *O Pioneers!*, Cather discovers Nature within herself, and in later works leaves it only at her artistic peril. As the poem already quoted implies, the land witnesses the apparent futility of its first settlers' efforts to make a real impression upon it. "None" of the settlers' houses "had any appearance of permanence" (3-4), because the "wild land" had "ugly moods": "Its Genius was unfriendly to man" (19-20). But Alexandra reads promise in the land, and sets her face towards it "with love and yearning" (65). Her attitude makes all the difference: "The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman" (65). Thus the land is, for Alexandra, the means of recapturing youth (125-126), living the concentrated lifetime (258-259), and entering oneself in the chronicles of its futurity (307-309).

Thea Kronborg in *The Song of the Lark* carries Cather's understanding of the land's historical function even further. Beset by reminders of her region's relatively recent pioneer past, and by the threat of reversion to wildness or savagery, Thea experiences a remarkable epiphany in Nature on a visit to a pioneer trail site in Wyoming. "She told herself she would never, never forget it. The spirit of human courage seemed to live up there with the eagles" (69). And in a later moment, Thea finds in the Indian cliff-dwellings of Panther Canyon "a voice out of the past, not very loud, that went on saying a few simple things to the solitude eternally." People akin to eagles, like the pioneers and Indians, have left behind them on the ground their wheel-ruts and "bits of their frail clay vessels, fragments of their desire," and it is in their spirit of harmony with a "geological world" "indifferent to man" that the conscious individual must act (370-408).

It is the specific sight of the Midwestern landscape that produces the narrative of *My Antonia*, "not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made" (7-8). Seemingly the source of story, the land releases tale after tale; its embodiment of history is total and permanent, although human capacities to interpret its meanings vary. The picnic scene finds Antonia and Jim staring at the fantastic emblem of a magnified plow upon a magnified sun; "heroic in size," it is a prediction

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of *Antonia's* return to the land, her momentary dissatisfactions reconciled in an acceptance of the land's purposes (232-245, 369-372).

One of Ours develops the possible applications of this aspect of the land to their quantitative peak. Because Claude Wheeler sees Nature's link with history, he comes to face seemingly insoluble problems of land distribution (80). Visiting a cliff-house, he comes as well to long for another country, for "there was no West, in that sense, any more" (117-118). Dissatisfied, he uses World War I as a means of experiencing another land: he requires contact with the moon's dominions to complete his narrow and sunny education: "Life was so short that it meant nothing at all unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows of individual existence came and went against a background that held together" (403-406). In a standard Cather ending, therefore, Claude dies "believing his own country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be" (453-459), in reconciliation with the land.

Captain Forrester in *A Lost Lady* has rooted a dream, his personal history, upon the land; essentially, the Captain sees the West as an attainment of individual dreams jeopardized by a coming generation not possessed of Niel Herbert's knowledge of the land and history. The specific threat to what Captain Forrester stands for, the upstart Ivy Peters, has its physical counterpart in the draining of the beautiful marsh the Captain had preserved. And what holds the declining Captain's attention as he sits in his garden is the naturally-formed red sandstone sundial-pillar; it becomes his grave marker. Thus Cather makes tracts of land as well as objects taken from Nature into emblems of historical change, reinforced by Nature-participation of the older sort — such as the wild night of torrential rains matching Mrs. Forrester's desperate attempt to phone Ellinger (127-136). Strong in its use of the land as mirror of history, *A Lost Lady* encapsules "the very end of the road-making West," a warm place in time where "the embers of a hunter's fire" are dying (168-169).

The building in its title gives *The Professor's House* its first image in Nature-as-history, an unusual one for Cather. But Professor St. Peter is a historian whose Nature-love finds a

work-space in that house within sight of Lake Michigan; from it, lines of novelistic irony lead to the pretentious house being built by the Professor's son-in-law — the future — and to the Indian cliff-houses which center Tom Outland's "Story" — the past. Tom himself becomes a historian on discovering the cliff-city's "immortal repose" and contemplating the land's having saved it (201-215). But Tom's country will not hear him, and he returns to find the results of his careful excavations sold out to a European. Outland protests that the artifacts had "belonged to this country, to the State, and to all the people. They belonged to boys like you and me, that have no other ancestors to inherit from" (242-244). But all to no avail; we waste the past that might "establish" us in time with value of our own. Yet at the end, St. Peter saves himself from dying by recalling his own commitment to history, his own identity: "He was earth, and would return to earth" (262-270). The history-book of Nature lends him stoicism; it lends his novel depth. In comparison, Myra's meditations on her "Gloucester's Cliff" in *My Mortal Enemy* seem slender indeed, a near-abandonment of Nature from which Cather would quickly recover.

Instead of single episodes returning to her favorite scene, the Southwest Indian cliff-dwellings, Cather would now turn over a whole novel to the exploitation of that region's thematic resources. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Bishop Latour finds an identity of region and religion that is profound; coming across a village built below a spring in a place "older than history," he recognizes it as "his Bishopric in miniature" (31-32). Or:

This mesa plain had an appearance of great antiquity, and of incompleteness; as if, with all the materials for world-making assembled, the Creator had desisted, gone away and left everything on the point of being arranged into mountain, plain, plateau. The country was still waiting to be made into a landscape. (94-95)

The rock of Ácoma is "the utmost expression of human need," "the universal human yearning for something permanent, enduring" (97-98), and its people identify with their place of residence for its firming-up of their aspirations, its fixing of their definitions of themselves. Latour is thus ready to confront the sacred place of Indian ritual, a "lofty cavern" which is Nature's great heart and "one of the oldest voices of the earth"

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(127-132). Acquiring knowledge, therefore, of the whole relationship of Indian and landscape, Latour becomes a local success; his major project, a Cathedral, seems in its "kinship" with its setting to "start directly out of those rose-coloured hills — with a purpose so strong that it was like action" (271-273). His career derives its integrity from his respect for the institutions and customs of his people, a respect based on the knowledge that the land is "mother" to the Indian, source of identity and embodiment of history, and most of all "part of their religion; the two were inseparable" (292-296).

Once again, in *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather uses Nature as image of a world in potential state, this time a forest that is "the dead, sealed world of the vegetable kingdom, an uncharted continent choked with interlocking trees, living, dead, half-dead, their roots in bogs and swamps, strangling each other in a slow agony that had lasted for centuries" (6-7). Thus the cluster of human habitations clinging for security to the rock of Kebec share an urgent need to create and cherish history: "All the miracles that had happened there, and the dreams that had been dreamed, came out of the fog; every spire, every ledge and pinnacle, took on the splendour of legend" (95). By coming to represent the Church in the New World, by changing from rock to Rock, it affects and alters and becomes history. The rock is courage and witness of courage for those who, in turning to it instead of what had been abandoned in France, created themselves Canada.

Lucy Gayheart is another maverick among Cather's novels, a late attempt to capture the milieu and the success of her early works. But its heroine is opposed to "history," and burns herself out like a flare, and the land has no record of her but three light, swift footprints in an old sidewalk threatened by flowers and weeds — an effect as impermanent as "a shower of spring raindrops" (226-227). Lucy has seized her day, and after her death Harry glances referentially at the stars of "eternity" and decides that "time had almost ceased to exist; the future had suddenly telescoped out of the past, so that there was actually no present" (220). Late into her career, Cather's concern with the land as embodiment of history of witness of man's acts has led her, with little change in the actual means employed, to an obsessive preoccupation with time and its effects.

So that it is unsurprising when *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* returns Cather to a Virginia setting, making a cycle of sorts of her career. The theme of slave versus free is reinforced in the specific and history-bearing properties which are the novel's backdrop; Cather traces the history of the Dodderidge property (like Faulkner) up to the point at which the book opens (26-27). Further, the mill property where Sapphira's husband lives in retreat and exile is an old structure that reaches both backward in time and outward into Nature, and there the miller's relationship with Nancy enjoys relative security and freedom. And there are other locales in the novel of an explicitly history-related sort; essentially, however, Willa Cather's final novels show a weakened technique of using Nature to embody human history.

We have not, then, been discussing the use of Nature in any but the most pertinent historical senses — *not*, therefore, those involving land-presence which is either accidental or necessary in no truly meaningful way, nor those in which historical details are supplied more for the sake of a dubious authenticity than as integral components of structure and movement. Cather's use of this historical aspect of Nature's relationship to character is, in summary, relatively consistent, though there is some loss of interest in the device towards the close of her career. Here concept of the theme shows a duality of development: first, the weaker and more ordinary strain (and here plainly the lesser one, for many authors regularly use it, though seldom progressing beyond the simple pathetic fallacy) in which the land amplifies action, placing the accents and providing the terminal punctuation; second, the stronger and more typically American form in which Nature frames history, giving it extension and depth, tying it to epic and myth, and making it seem a part of an orderly, purposeful sequence of events proceeding towards a definite end. Cather performs her most engaging sleights of hand with this device, yet most noticeable and readily discards it when she wants her novel *démeublé*.

II

The second aspect of the Nature-character relationship in Cather's novels involves futurity in much the same way as the first concerned pastness. In Cather's fiction the land frequently

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appears either as source of or as springboard to the recognition and realization of hopes and dreams; conversely, the land may also reflect disappointment or hopelessness. Essentially, however, it is a matter of Nature functioning as mirror (or rabbit-hole) for the inner person seeking to make his image visible to the outer.

For all of its devotion to the topic of imperial ambition, *Alexander's Bridge* evidences little working of Nature in this hope-and-dream sense into the actual fabric of the novel. It is as though Nature were present only conceptually, *externally* it might be claimed: as part of the conceit which motivated the writing of the book itself. I refer to the image of the Bridge itself, the connection which conquers chasms, at the heart of Bartley Alexander's reduction of existence to metaphor:

there was a lover in the world. And always there was the sound of the rushing water underneath, the sound which, more than anything else, meant death; the wearing away of things under the impact of physical forces which men could direct but never circumvent or diminish. Then, in the exaltation of love, more than ever it seemed to him to mean death, the only other thing as strong as love. Under the moon, under the cold, splendid stars, there were only those two things awake and sleepless; death and love, the rushing river and his burning heart. (94-95)

But by the time of *O Pioneers!*, Willa Cather was arguing the possibility of triumph in life by means of accepting Nature's truths as lesson and guide. Perhaps the simple discovery of her proper setting gave Cather the ability to show her Alexandra what her Alexander could not see, the chance of creating her own future there of its materials. Nature gives her a vision of the "law" that justifies her great "operations"; she receives a "sense of personal security," "a new consciousness of the country," "almost a new relationship to it": "Under the long shaggy ridges, she felt the future stirring" (70-71).

Personifying the land as a sleeping giant finally awakened, Alexandra credits it with having made her prosperous by "working itself" and giving her riches merely for "sitting still" upon it — that is, by remaining in one place and working (116). Moreover, the book uses this figure of the giant to convert the notion of death into simply another aspect of the land's eternal futurity. The life-in-death theme is introduced first as a mystery in a dream of Alexandra's, and then solved; embodying

unconscious desires, the dream concerns an unrecognized man, "yellow like the sunlight" and having "the smell of ripe corn-fields about him." Because Alexandra's usual response is, in effect, a cold shower, she shows implicit recognition of the dream as a sexual fantasy. But as she ages, the dream's more passionate aspects drop away, and the dream lover becomes "a strong being who took from her all her bodily weariness." Eventually, she learns that her lover is also Death (206-207, 282-283). It is the land itself rewarding those who work upon it with redemption from suffering.

This presentation of a dream-mystery of the land functions as eventual rationalization of the land-imaged passion of Emil and Marie, for earthly lovers show "always the same yearning, the same pulling at the chain — until the instinct to live had torn itself and bled and weakened for the last time, until the chain secured a dead woman" (248). The rule which emerges: one either accepts the rule of Nature as law, in which case he shares Alexandra's "security," or one finds his own rule of Nature within oneself, in which case one experiences the "sweetness" of passion and resultant pain. Nature herself is a spur to the expression of secret desires: "There are always dreamers on the frontier" (301).

The frontier dreamers in *The Song of the Lark* may express themselves differently, but their longings and sufferings still proceed from such notions as Doctor Archie's that the glorious Colorado night pleads that "there ought to be something better to do" (6). When Thea responds to Wunsch's tirade about the shallowness of American women by going out to the sand dunes in a state of "passionate excitement" to think, the result is the understanding that she must leave (99-100). Cather again uses the image of the star to suggest human destiny; the "big clock" which is the ordered universe runs by "little wheels and big," people destined to do great things and those destined to help them (154-156). Though much in this novel, such as Ray's accidental death, rests upon contingency, Cather effectively moves Thea to Chicago by means of it; her favorite painting is itself a picture of harmony between the land and human striving (249), and she knows that though one must leave the land to attain oneself, one must also develop according to the same Nature's plan. On her Panther Canyon visit, Thea ap-

proaches her own character-potential, having suddenly "filled out her own shadow" (405). And though the ultimately successful Thea says that all her dreams are of Moonstone, she means more than nostalgia; all her life has been a searching in Art for what she knew as a child in Moonstone, "a rich, romantic past" of constant association with Nature, a constant unfolding into beauty preordained as a flower's (549-552).

My Antonia brings a certain irony to Cather's use of Nature to image dreaming, as though she wished to avoid a predictable patterning in her work; yet Antonia herself learns from Nature, and her career is only the infusion of old dreams into a new country. The picnic emblem of the plow against the sun is, of course, Antonia's Tarot card if she could but read it. Yet even in turning away from the land, by risking her future in a throw of the heart, Antonia fulfills her personal destiny: to be a type of earth-mother, a "rich mine of life" who lends herself to "immemorial human attitudes" of universal truth (353).

One of Ours concerns the finding of purpose by a man who, bored and frustrated, feels he will never be a full participant in life; the land's role is to present arguments for hope and faith in the future. Discontented with a land-tie that centers around property ownership, Claude uses the land at last to bury "a great deal of discontent in its dark furrows," planting it with "what was fermenting in him" (78). The bleakness of the land comes to represent the starkness of a reality where materialistic men have made real life on the land impossible. He retains his hope in the future, but has no idea where to fix it (101-103). He has a flash of intuition that some men are doomed to "unappeased longings and futile dreams"; these "children of the moon" represent a whim of Nature (207-208). Even while re-treating to his timber claim, Claude lets "his imagination play with life" (212), but once he has enlisted, he finds the land "large and rich" (243, 255). But the dislocation of being shipped over to France gives Claude back his ideals, his lost youth, and he dies having had his faith in the land restored, along with lost innocence: "they were the ones who had hoped extravagantly, — who in order to do what they did had to hope extravagantly, and to believe passionately. And they found they had hoped and believed too much. But one [his mother] knew, who could ill bear disillusion . . . [but was now] safe, safe"

(458-459).

It is the rise and fall of the town of Sweet Water that mirrors the career of Captain Forrester in *A Lost Lady*; his toast of "Happy days!" makes "life seem so precarious, the future so cryptic and unfathomable" (50-51). But in an almost-classic example of Cather's extension of simple pathetic fallacy into a doctrine of Nature as symbol of futurity, Niel nears the Forrester home to surprise Mrs. Forrester on a morning with "an almost religious purity about the fresh morning air, the tender sky, the grass and flowers with the sheen of early dew upon them." But when Niel discovers that Ellinger has spent the night at Mrs. Forrester's, the roses he has picked for her become "prickly" and fit for throwing away: the day, and with it his "aesthetic ideal" of fair Woman, is gone forever. Niel sees that Mrs. Forrester is like the land, its offering of hope now in the hands of exploiters, and that "all those who had shared in fine undertakings and bright occasions were gone" (166-167). *A Lost Land* could serve as subtitle.

Similarly concerned with despair is *The Professor's House*, where Professor St. Peter's dreams are temporarily fulfilled in the ideal student Tom Outland, and the sight of Lake Michigan rekindles childhood enthusiasm in the Professor. But Tom's mesa is the real locus of hope in the novel, "the sort of place a man would like to stay in forever" (189). The conclusion of the novel is a testing of Outland's theory of the land, for St. Peter discovers that "first nature could return to a man, unchanged by all the pursuits and passions and experiences of his life" (267). Thus Tom's final revelation, the doctrine of the invincible Will, has the twofold effect of giving one the strength to go on living despite Death's appeal, and the maturity of learning to live without happiness or even "passionate griefs." The mesa-people have bequeathed the ability to live without delusion: "He thought he knew where he was, and that he could face with fortitude . . . the future" (282-283).

In *My Mortal Enemy*, Cather inverts her usual practice, and follows a series of deceptive signs in Nature by the conclusion that she promises only Death, or the hope of Death. Thus Myra learns to "live" on "the bitter smell of the sea" at her cliff site (80) because the spot enables her to complete her penitential ritual. She longs for the "dark and silence" that heal one's

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final "wound," especially the silence that is like "cold water poured over fever"; and when she dies, it is in holding an ebony crucifix on her "Gloucester's cliff," waiting for the "forgiving time" that is dawn (86-89). Obviously, Cather's employment of Nature here — in her attempt to circumvent despair at the time when life broke in half for her — is exceedingly complex and, in its ultimate reliance on mystery and felt promise, sacramental.

Therefore Cather contrives the merger of Nature-faith and conventional religion, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is a major success at least partially resulting from the merger. By accepting the land he has been assigned, Latour moves through an effective integration of the cardinal virtues to an earthly success. So that when his assistant Father Vaillant considers miracles to be the sort of dramatic change that is suited to such a "savage country," Latour counters with another definition: miracles are the refining of one's perceptions of the everyday (50). Such redefinition permits a corresponding and childlike return to the Nature-interpretation of an innocent mind; favorable auguries appear in clouds of doves, in seeds, snow, and moonlight.

Like Latour's Cathedral, the rock in *Shadows on the Rock* involves a respectful and religious transformation of Nature that is permitted or authorized by a corresponding internal change in a person or persons: a realignment of the human heart. When the change has not yet occurred, the land seems hostile, unpromising (47), but the incoming fog creates a transitional state in which the people of the rock feel "cut off from everything and living in a world of twilight and miracles" (61-62). But like the little beaver-figure that Jacques adds to the Christmas crèche, or like little Jacques himself in relation to his wayward mother, the hope of New France redeeming the Old promises to turn the whole of snowy Québec into "one great white church," "the actual flowering of desire" (112, 136-137). So that the substitution of Pierre Charron's strength for the Count's totally Old-French authority, like Cécile's eventual bearing of four sons ("the Canadians of the future, — the true Canadians"), represents the human actualization of a promise encapsuled in a part of Nature (278-279).

The complication of thought in *Lucy Gayheart* is most inter-

esting: instead of dreaming towards a harmony with Nature, Willa Cather's Lucy seeks action without reference to Nature; driven by ambition and desire, she senses kinship with the cold stars, which on account of their distance and apparent lack of warmth have traditionally been symbolic of intellectually-driven human Will in American literature. Creating her own artificial springtime, Lucy is defenseless against its actual ironic arrival (102). If Lucy is a sort of "star," then earthly Nature can only measure her distance from normal "reality." Yet she finally realizes that "if Life itself were the sweetheart," she could recapture her joy with Sebastian without his presence — by seeking the "splendours" of life on earth. The realization comes with the assurance that Nature has confirmed her personal Will-philosophy (183-185). But there is a price to pay: her frantic and fatal lust after cold finally kills her, like a flame-drawn moth, as she plunges through the ice while skating and drowns (197-199). "Along with all the fine things of youth, which do not change" (223-224), Lucy has receded into the distance, and like many other Cather characters has her accomplishment in sustaining Nature's timeless values confirmed in final dreams of youth.

Most of the characters in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* — excepting the physically and symbolically house-bound Mrs. Colbert — are capable of appreciating Nature: Colbert delights in his simple existence, finding that the land restores his vigor; Nancy finds that her fright vanishes when she enters the flower garden she feels to be the world's loveliest spot (192, 196-197). But Cather's limited use of Nature-as-hope here is interestingly complicated and ambiguous, like the deliberate mixing of effects during description of the aftermath of emancipation (283-291). This complexity is a tribute to Cather's maturity of vision, but it also proves that the device I am discussing did not lose its meaning for Cather when she used it less often.

Moreover, Willa Cather never ceased using Nature-imagery to express hope and futurity for her characters, but her ideas of what hope and the future do in fact represent did indeed change. Her early novels move in terms of ideals, external standards in pursuit of which her characters are motivated. But after the "breaking of the world in two," or thereabouts, she is apparently a good deal less interested in what the future holds

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in store for anyone; rather, she is intent on showing the discovery of traits which justify existence *within* the self, on thinking in terms of reconciliations rather than successes, and on avoiding commitments as to the probable condition of very much of the future. Her rather Nietzschean ideas of the invincibility of the Individual Will create a fascinating tension with her gradual movement towards conservative religious beliefs; only in Nature, of course, is this unstable mixture briefly joined. Still, these shifts are not of any radical variety, and represent replacing of emphases within a remarkably consistent lifetime vision.

III

In developing Nature-imagery as an index of character-definition, especially in terms of an orientation to Art, Willa Cather made only tentative steps forward in *Alexander's Bridge*, and that in the stark conception of the central character we have already noted. Alexander is described as extraordinary, a figure of such physical and intellectual strength that he epitomizes the phrase "tamer of rivers" (7). He is what Lucius Wilson calls him, a "natural force," and in the struggle with Nature that his career represents he is a desperate thrusting of force against Force, bridge against River (12-13). But the Alexander-bridge is a flawed edifice; overreaching, it already threatens to fall, its cracks already apparent (9). The garden of his innocence lost to him forever, he can only contemplate the effects of his Sin (83). The River is Death, the Bridge Love; and though the two loves of Alexander's life may offer moral alternatives, they do not affect the inevitability of the structure's destruction. In his last moments, however, he accomplishes something of a self-redemption: drowning, he despairs; briefly glimpsing light and gasping breath, he regains the determination to correct his life and "recover all he had lost." And though he dies by mischance after all, it seems "perfectly natural": "when a great man dies in his prime," his mind "may for a long time have been sick within itself and bent upon its own destruction" (106). By this final irony, Nature completes her work of Art in Alexander.

In *O Pioneers!*, the character known as "Crazy Ivar" shows Alexandra, through his "peculiar religion" of Nature, an ex-

treme (thus, saintly) example of living in harmony with Nature, and its effects (34-38). Through her "faith in the high land," Alexandra herself achieves a sort of holiness on Nature's religion: "You feel that, properly, Alexandra's house is the big out-of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best" (65, 84). Emil and Marie are a willful contrast to Alexandra, who has lost the chance for Art by committing herself to work, but she is the better "artist" for it: "Her mind was a white book, with clear writing about weather and beasts and growing things. Not many people would have cared to read it; only a happy few" (203-205). That the wasting of young lives is neither more nor less than the blind and prodigal outpouring of Nature's treasures, therefore, is clear enough at last to one whose labors are at the end neither lost nor deprived of life, passion, or Art, but are received into Nature's "bosom" and redistributed as part of "the shining eyes of youth" (307-309).

Moonstone, whose very name suggests wish or hope, is the setting for *The Song of the Lark*, but the irony of Thea Kronborg is that she must leave the land to find it within herself; her affinity for the land is an inheritance from her parents (124-125), but it is Ray who helps her assess her own attitudes towards the past and the land in order to prepare herself (with his help) for a future of total commitment to Art. It is, she learns, a process of rebirth, or of giving birth to the self (221); gifted with a singing ability that has the sudden beauty of a "wild bird" (237), she transfers her idealization of herself to the artistic representation of human-in-Nature which is the painting of the book's title (247-249). Similarly, Dvorák's *Ninth Symphony* adds to her knowledge of Art's relationship to Nature (251), and while bathing in Panther Canyon she has an intuitive glimpse of Art as "an effort to make a sheath, a mould in which to imprison for a moment the shining, elusive element which is life itself" (378). What is more, the courage of the cliff-dwellers becomes the courage of Thea as artist as she watches an eagle in flight (399). Her real success, even in Europe, is measured by such signs as Doctor Archie's reaction to her singing — "buck fever" — and Spanish Johnny's worship; she herself is aware of "the inevitable hardness of human life" and the memory of Moonstone as elements in her artist's disposition (498-500, 554, 564-565, 572-573). Thea is Willa

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Cather's tough epitome of the artist reared by Nature.

My *Antonia*'s heroine, on the other hand, has ambitions which are scaled-down versions of Thea's, with scaled-down assets to match. With her rich brown eyes, skin, and hair, Antonia is marked as one of the land's own children, recent immigrant though she be (23). What Jim and Antonia share, and what therefore predicts the eventual state of Jim's character, is their mutual abandonment to Nature's moods. Thus they experience several varieties of prairie epiphany, beginning with the "sudden transfiguration" of fall afternoons which presages Antonia's triumph over circumstance, the "exultation of victory" promised by the prairie sky (40). Jim's slaying of a gigantic snake whose "abominable muscularity" and "loathsome, fluid motion" sicken him and seem to be "the ancient, eldest Evil" (45-50) not only affirms his manhood in the sight of Antonia, but has implications for their Edenic state as well: since the novel is most concerned with Antonia, Jim's role would seem to be that of would-be Adam who, by saving Antonia, creates an obligation in her. By coming from a corrupt world she insists is superior to the New, Antonia brings original sin into Paradise: her family bears a symbolic curse (of being tainted, European?) that appears in her brother's defects and her father's miserable suicide; and Antonia's failure to accept her new life results in her "sin" in the world's eyes, and the scaling-down of her dreams. Yet if she be an Eve-figure, epic mother bearing certain flaws, she is a Mary-figure as well, for she brings with herself the redemption from her own error when she learns of the need to accept Nature's direction. (One recalls Renaissance poses of Mary crushing the snake, "justifying" Eve as promised.) By slaying the snake within the self, she redeems herself in Jim's eyes and pays him back by saving his idealization of the land. Blessed by the heavens' "two luminaries," their later meeting quickens the old friendship and seems to restore their younger selves (322-323). While Antonia must settle for poetry and music on the simplest level, and is denied Jim's sort of fulfillment, her final state is a sort of "poetry" in Nature's book.

Nature's function in *One of Ours*, I would suggest, is what saves the book from being the broken-backed things it appears to be. For Claude Wheeler is one of those characters who,

growing away from the land intellectually, retain their love for it in their hearts (67-69). The War is thus a diversion from his own failure to reconcile the split within himself, and his own inability to "take hold of [life on his own terms] with both hands, no matter how grim it was" (84-85). This inability extends to his marriage, for he feels himself in his rejected masculinity "like Adam in the garden" in Enid's presence, pathetically trying to cover himself (157-159); yet he marries her anyway, perversely, and is driven back to Nature by the woman who feels sexuality to be a punishment "for Eve's transgression, perhaps" (207-210). Once enlisted, Claude's attitude towards the land begins to improve even as his own thinking about Art-in-life deepens; and at the end of his life, Nature and intellectual ideals are reconciled as Claude's confidence in his own manhood is restored (419-420). At this point in her career, Cather is clearly fascinated by moral paradox — man's ability to "gain" even while "losing" in the eyes of conventional people.

Conversely, *A Lost Lady* concerns the disappearance of ideals from the land, and the resulting effects in Niel Herbert, for whom these Nature-founded ideals center about the Forresters (as their name might well suggest). Niel's dislike of Ivy Peters is initially based on the latter's destructiveness towards Nature, but is sustained by this snakelike character's later, consistently anti-Nature, activities (16-25). Opposed to Ivy's parasitism in Niel's eyes are the Forresters, both the abiding figure of male strength, endurance, and courage who is Captain Forrester, and the flower- and bird-like Mrs. Forrester. Against them, Frank Ellinger brings his savage features and a "muscular energy that had something of the cruelty of wild animals in it"; coveting Mrs. Forrester with "wolfish" glances, he makes love to her in the woods (45-46, 65-68). Thus Ellinger and Peters, lesser creatures both, conspire to bring down Nature's best, and in the process wreck Niel's artistic ideal. Though Niel comes in time to a renewed sympathy for Mrs. Forrester, the book's essential statement also includes his earlier condemnation of her for refusing to "die with the pioneer period to which she belonged" (169-170). At this stage, then, Cather's characters begin to be nibbled away in their pursuit of Art and self-definition by the same external forces that are affecting Nature

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in the world at large.

As has been noted, despair is the flaw that limits the attainments of characters developing throughout this period of Cather's fiction; it is the inhibition to personal growth that most seriously challenges the easy predictabilities of the Nature-religion: the land's self-improvement regimen. In *The Professor's House*, St. Peter himself is one of the land's sons, someone who apparently has learned to cope with urban existence and its demands out of an internalization of Nature's lessons (like Thea Kronborg). The Professor thinks that Art results from the human mind's application of selection to Nature, and even the format of his own great work is Nature-related. He is naturally predisposed to the influence of Tom Outland, evangelist of the land's religion.

Tom's description tallies with what is promised of his character: rugged, manly, sun-darkened; the son of pioneers and foster child of a railroad engineer; an admirer of Indian customs and artifacts; a historian whose natural curiosity has pushed him far beyond formal study's limits; a respector of antiquity who would never sell his findings; a storyteller who enjoys children "as if they were flowers": Tom is the Outland itself (112-115). His reverence for the mesa is matched for an aesthetic satisfaction in the cliff-city itself, built as it was by "people with a feeling for design" (204). This mesa's gifts generally involve self-knowledge, including Tom's moving from "filial piety" through "solar energy" to the study of, among other things, the *Aeneid* (251). Through Outland, later, St. Peter comes to see the distance he has traveled from his own earlier self, which on its return is able to recognize truth with clarity. What saves him in the end from a suicide of acquiescence is the intrusion of the sewing woman, Augusta, who "talked about death as she spoke of a hard winter or a rainy March, or any of the sadnesses of nature." It is in this final realization of Nature's demands of him that St. Peter becomes a disciple of the mesa-dwellers' lessons of fortitude and endurance (272-276, 280-283).

Myra Henshawe in *My Mortal Enemy* is lacking in the stability and direction of most of Cather's other rather single-minded characters, and her affinity for Art conveys this emotionality: she loves drama, music, and poetry — from Heine to

that "dirty old man" Walt Whitman. A "brach" in her uncle's eyes, she finds more and more of his "savagery" appearing in her (95-99). In her frustration, her growing antipathy towards her husband, her readiness to shock the world, her wit, her concern with blood-traits and her capacity for violence ("enough desperate courage for a regiment"), she fulfills the type of the Ibsen heroine: Hedda Gabler comes to mind, and the reaction to the possibility of her suicide — "But people don't do things like that" — seems a deliberate allusion (92). Myra "can't endure," and in this she differs from St. Peter. But in her last days she acquires something of this Nature-virtue; indeed, her thoughts are on Nature and religion. Left alone with her mortal enemy, clearly herself, she appears at the end to have humbled herself to the point of readmission to Nature's serene and renewing movement (119-121).

This rediscovery by Cather of conventional religion's "roots" in Nature, their complementary values, seemingly enables her to get past the period in which her characters developed by Will, only to encounter despair. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*'s Latour is a man "of courtesy toward himself, toward his beasts, toward the juniper tree before which he knelt, and the God whom he was addressing"; like his finding of a cruciform tree in the scene at hand, Latour's progress is one in which he pursues his mission through Nature's dominion in the process of fulfilling himself (88). The process of redemption and renewal provides the moral focus for the novel's treatment of lesser characters within Latour's orbit. And in the business of ministering to his flock, Latour discovers the source of the Indian's religious instinct: "Elsewhere the sky is the roof of the world; but here the earth was the floor of the sky. The landscape one longed for when one was far away, the thing all about one, the world one actually lived in, was the sky, the sky!" (230-235). This enforced upward gazing is the characteristic Latour works into his Cathedral, a thrusting upward into the invigorating, revivifying desert air, whose lightness releases "the prisoned spirit of man into the wind, into the blue and gold, into the morning, into the morning!" (274-276).

Similar in its thematic progressions, *Shadows on the Rock* lacks its predecessor's dominating character(s); in fact, theme rules character to an unprecedented degree in Cather's novels.

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Plainly, Cather might have continued to use Nature to demonstrate her concept of character-development here had she wished to, but seems rather to have wanted to treat her theme directly with the rock of Kebec as explicit symbol, and the people who are to become the cultural entity Québec as a more or less united mass "person." As if in deliberate balancing contrast, *Lucy Gayheart* is devoted to "life hurrying forward" in the quest of its heroine for love and Art (24-25). Before the religious Sebastian's romantic death by drowning, Lucy learns what he means to her: devotion to those two qualities of love and Art, eternal joyousness, a "right relation" among things with "the trivial and disturbing shut out," and relief from "excitement and sense of struggle" (75-76). With Sebastian gone, the balance drops out of her life — though his influence lingers. As if by new instinct, she seeks relief in Nature, wandering in the family orchard or out near the Platte (151-157). But the cold and her renewed ambition bring her to the same end as Sebastian, and Cather leaves us the question whether someone who has lived a short lifetime which nevertheless opposed spirit and Will against all things which enslave and oppress the soul (and has communicated that accomplishment to others) has not also turned life into Art (223-227).

Cather's commitment to Nature as index of character-development continues unabated till the end, and *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* follows its predecessor's lead in dealing with the issue of maturation in an atmosphere of slavery's legacy. Race — blood — complicates matters, for Nancy is an important character, and yet she is limited by being no more than a "white man's Negro," an uncritical creation of Cather's typical (for the times) inability to portray characters of mixed parentage with any real depth beyond sympathy for the "white" part of them. Nancy possesses a "natural delicacy of feeling," and is "sickened" by "ugly sights and ugly words" (43-44); she is "free from care, like the flowers and the birds" (67). If she lacks the African Jezebel's identity with another soil, she also lacks the status of even the poorest of whites, and rightly fears Martin more than a snake in the woods, for his privileged station as member of the white propertied class enables him to attack "the foolish, dreamy, nigger side of her nature" (178). It is possible that Cather is speaking Nancy's own estimate of

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herself here, for after her flight and adoption of another land as her own, Nancy's superiority over those white characters whose only qualities were their property rights over her asserts itself. Though Art is largely absent from the novel, self-definition is not: by preserving herself from moral danger, Nancy achieves her self.

Willa Cather thus never make substantial variation in her basic method of character illustration through Nature. Her usual pattern of character development seldom changes: away from the land, then back again (either to the land or what it stands for). She believes in the possibility of heroism and of heroes of the old-fashioned, currently-disreputable, but nonetheless sorely missed kind. The land gives her heroes stature, and her "sinners" redemption. By measuring her characters against the standards of an eternal Nature, she manages to imbue their achievements with undeniable importance and to turn them into models or types of behavior-and-result. Nature makes desire legitimate, and attainment possible. The movement of the individual towards Art is explained by an aesthetic credo based upon Nature itself, making it even possible to live one's life as an art object, to develop such strength of Will that artistic/moral intent becomes actuality.

IV

Throughout the body of her novelistic output, Willa Cather made such regular use of Nature-imagery to convey essential meanings that it is easy to identify the land as a force and presence in the apparent conceptual basis of each of her novels. There are some works, particularly among the shorter ones, where Cather is interested in other primary concerns, but none in which Nature does not play a dutifully vital role. Furthermore, the study of Nature in Cather is also the means of freeing her works of the charge of sentimentality, for the relationship of her characters to one another and to the land is established according to definite, predetermined rules of procedure; and though there are slips in logical planning, errors of judgment, there are never in Cather such examples of theme-straining and excessive pseudo-profundity as embarrass the readers of, say, Faulkner, even while captivating him. For all the contrived effects of *Alexander's Bridge*, at worst, there is still no

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lapse of aesthetic judgment in regard to Nature and its novelistic function. Cather had definite notions as to what the land meant in American life, acted upon those notions, and deserves to be rated according to the validity of her decisions. Until the undeniable rightness of her concept of reconciliation with the land is understood, for example, there can be no valid objection to what appear to be "happy endings" in her novels, unless by those who object to balance in life and art.

As representative of a specific region, Cather holds more attention when her novels are viewed as a body of work with related thematic structures. Her Midwest is a vast territory stretching from the near-Southwest to Québec, from Virginia to Kansas and Nebraska. Its capital is Chicago, its spiritual antecedents Québec and Santa Fe. Only by special leave are visits made to cities outside this great basin of land between the continent's major mountain ranges, and then largely to re-encounter the past and the land within the self. Her vision of man's place in the cosmic scheme ranges in time from the relative assurance to the "Age of Faith" to the sudden shatterings of rural calm typical of the modern Midwest in literature. Yet she has the intelligence to suggest that Faith is not dead, nor the violence a novelty. She is anxious about the future, because she sees about her signs of man's abandonment of the qualities which can make survival bearable: belief, courage, and the acknowledgement of the necessity of harmonizing the inner person with Nature's purposes. But she does not lose hope: Cather bases her conception of man soundly within the larger sense of Nature's abiding presence, and though we make critical distinctions between one phase and another of that conception and that sense, we do not in the process lessen the essential integrity of Willa Cather's vision of man and the land.

