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THE ECSTASY OF ALEXANDRA BERGSON

By L. BRENT BOHLKE

The character of Alexandra Bergson in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* is a fascinating and complex mixture of many characteristics, the most overwhelming of which might be described as a down-to-earth practicality. She has a certain "Amazonian fierceness," a devotion to hard work and efficiency, an intelligence, a strength of will, and "the simple direct way of thinking things out" (p. 24) like her grandfather. "She had never been in love, she had never indulged in sentimental reveries. Even as a girl she had looked upon men as work fellows. She had grown up in serious times" (p. 205). These talents combine in a level-headed business woman's attitude that leads to her success in the agricultural world of her day. Yet, in addition to this dominant side of Alexandra's personality, there is another, less obvious, part of her character that may be more important and have more influence than would readily be apparent. We are told that she "had to grow up too soon" (p. 17), and that, as a result, there was still a great deal of the child left in her. In the strong and high wall of her common sense there was a slight fissure through which crept the spirit of imagination and mystery. She retained one fancy from her girlhood. It happened most frequently on Sunday mornings—the only day in the week when she stayed in bed late and listened to familiar morning sounds. Cather goes on to describe the reverie in some detail at this point and in one other place in the novel. These descriptions of Alexandra's "fancy" are remarkably similar to the mystical experience described by St. Teresa of Avila and termed by her at various times "Rapture," "Union" and "ecstasy."

Teresa was a Spanish nun of the sixteenth century (1515-1582) who joined the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation in

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1 *O Pioneers!* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), p. 8. All subsequent references to *O Pioneers!* are to this edition.
Avila in 1536. Her first few years in the order were uneventful, with the exception of a brief illness which required her to leave the convent for nearly two years. For the next fifteen years, according to her own account, her own spiritual life was "tepid," but in her forty-first year (1556) she underwent a second conversion and began to experience mystical prayer, accompanied by visions and voices. Later she reformed the Carmelite order, founded several new convents, and wrote down her mystical experiences. She is one of the few Christian mystics who have left a detailed account of such experiences. These are found mainly in two books—her autobiography, *The Life of St. Teresa of Avila* (First American Edition, 1860), and *Interior Castle* (Doubleday, 1961). She has been called "the greatest woman in Spanish history, and one of the greatest in the annals of the world."² Her life inspired such artistic works as Bernini's *Santa Teresa in Estasi* and Crashaw's "A hymn to the Name and Honor of the Admirable Saint Teresa."

Teresa, writing under the orders of her confessor, describes her experience of rapture: "... there comes such a quick and strong impetuosity, that you see and feel this cloud raising itself up, or rather, this strong eagle carries you away between its wings (and this is understood), for you know you are carried away, though you know not whither... Hence it will be necessary for the soul to be much more determined and courageous than she was when in the degree of union, in order to be able to hazard everything, and to abandon herself entirely into the hands of God, and willingly to go wheresoever she shall be carried, though they will take her whether willing or no."³ Cather describes Alexandra's "fancy" in similar terms: "Sometimes, as she lay thus luxuriously idle, her eyes closed, she used to have an illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by some one very strong. It was a man, certainly, who carried

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her, but he was like no man she knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter, and he carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat" (p. 206).

Although Teresa first refers to her transporter as an eagle, she more often believes it to be a man—and a man with virtues remarkably like those of Alexandra's visitor and with the same predilection to the harvest field: "This person, therefore, decided to offer no more resistance than a straw does when it is lifted up by amber (if you have ever observed this) and to commit herself into the hands of Him Who is so powerful, seeing that it is but to make a virtue of necessity. And, speaking of straw, it is a fact that a powerful man cannot bear away a straw more easily than this great and powerful Giant of ours can bear away the spirit." Later, St. Teresa begins to speak of her ecstasy in visual terms, although it is not something that she sees. It seems that she "feels" the vision: "Being one day in prayer, on the festival of the glorious St. Peter, I saw standing very near me,—or to speak more properly, I felt and perceived (for I saw nothing at all, either with the eyes of my body or my soul) that Christ our Lord was close by me. . . . It seemed that Christ went always by my side: but the vision not being imaginary, nor represented in any form to the imagination, I perceived not in what shape He was, though I found, and felt very sensibly, that He was always on my right side. . . . I could not help understanding that He was near me." Likewise, Alexandra's visitor is usually invisible, but she, too, is able to "feel" the vision: "She never saw him, but, with eyes closed, she could feel that he was yellow like the sunlight, and there was the smell of ripe cornfields about him. She could feel him approach, bend over her and lift her, and then she could feel herself being carried swiftly off across the fields" (p. 206).

In her younger years Alexandra reacts to her experience with

5 Teresa, Life, p. 287.
disgust and anger (we will discuss this reaction more fully later), but as she advances in years she seems to accept the vision and also receives some benefit from it: "As she grew older, this fancy more often came to her when she was tired than when she was fresh and strong. Sometimes, after she had been in the open all day, overseeing the branding of the cattle or the loading of the pigs, she would come in chilled, take a concoction of spices and warm home-made wine, and go to bed with her body actually aching with fatigue. Then, just before she went to sleep, she had the old sensation of being lifted and carried by a strong being who took from her all her bodily weariness" (p. 207). Teresa, too, describes her occasions of Mystical Union as happening at times when it seems difficult to describe the state of mental and physical clarity, "I call it drowsiness, because the soul seems to slumber, being neither thoroughly asleep, nor thoroughly awake." Also, Teresa derives benefit similar to Alexandra's from her mystical experiences: "Its effects are so manifest, that one cannot doubt it augments the vigor of the soul, since our Lord took away all her bodily strength, though attended with such great delight, in order to leave her still greater strength."

The descriptions of Alexandra's "fancy" that we have discussed thus far are taken from the account of her fortieth winter. We have seen an initial and early disgust mellow into a warmer and beneficial acceptance of the experience. However, in her forty-first year her brother Emil and his beloved, Marie, are murdered by Marie's husband. This event greatly upsets Alexandra, and she begins acting so strangely that Ivar, her handyman-advisor, and Signa, her house-girl, are upset. After she has visited the cemetery during a thunderstorm they care for her and put her to bed. "As she lay alone in the dark, it occurred to her for the first time that perhaps she was actually tired of life. All the physical operations of life seemed difficult

6 Teresa, Interior Castle, p. 97.
7 Teresa, Life, p. 165.
and painful. She longed to be free from her own body, which ached and was so heavy. And longing itself was heavy; she yearned to be free of that” (p. 282). Teresa also experienced that feeling. She, too, was aware of that longing. But Teresa understood the real meaning of that yearning better than did Alexandra, and she spoke to it:

It sometimes happens that, when a person is in this state that you have been considering, and has such yearnings to die, because the pain is more than she can bear, that her soul seems to be on the very point of leaving the body, she is really afraid and would like her distress to be alleviated lest she should in fact die. It is quite evident that this fear comes from natural weakness, and yet, on the other hand, the desire does not leave her, nor can she possibly find any means of dispelling the distress until the Lord Himself dispels it for her. This He does, as a general rule, by granting her a deep rapture or some kind of vision, in which the true Comforter comforts and strengthens her so that she can wish to live for as long as He wills.  

Alexandra has no means for dispelling her distress until she is alleviated not by a rapture or a vision—but by both!

As she lay with her eyes closed, she had again more vividly than for many years, the old illusion of her girlhood, of being lifted and carried lightly by some one very strong. He was with her a long while this time, and carried her very far, and in his arms she felt free from pain. When he laid her down on her bed again, she opened her eyes, and for the first time in her life, she saw him, saw him clearly, though the room was dark, and his face was covered. He was standing in the doorway of her room. His white cloak was thrown over his face and his head was bent a little forward. His shoulders seemed as strong as the foundations of the world. His right arm, bared from the elbow, was dark and gleaming, like bronze, and she knew at once that it was the arm of the mightiest of all lovers. She knew at last for whom it was she had waited, and where he would carry her. That, she told herself, was very well. Then she went to sleep (pp. 282-283).

As Teresa’s mystical experiences continue, she is better able to talk of them and describe them. She describes her later visions in a number of places. She says that Christ appears to her in a manner that might be likened to a flash of lightning. The image is so overwhelming and so glorious that she thinks the imagination will retain it throughout eternity: “I speak of

In her later years, Teresa began having a number of different visions about many subjects and people. Besides the vision of the Lord mentioned above, she also had another vision that recurred and that later inspired Bernini:

Our Lord was pleased that I should sometimes have the following vision: I saw an angel very near me, on my left side, in a corporeal form, which is not usual with me; for though angels are often represented to me, yet it is without my seeing them, except by that kind of vision of which I have already spoken. But in this vision, our Lord was pleased I should see the angel in this form. He was not tall, but rather little, and very beautiful; his face was so inflamed, that he seemed to be one of those glorious spirits who appear to be all on fire (with divine love). He might be one of those who are called Seraphim, for they do not tell their names; but I see clearly, that in heaven there is so great a difference between some angels and others, that I am not able to express it. I saw that he had a long golden dart in his hand, and at the point there seemed to me to be a little fire; I thought that he pierced my heart with this dart several times, and in such a manner that it went through my very bowels; and when he drew it out, it seemed as if my bowels came with it, and I remained wholly inflamed with a great love of God. The pain thereof was so intense, that it forced deep groans from me; but the sweetness which this extreme pain caused in me was so excessive, that there was no desiring to be free from it; nor is the soul then content with anything less than God. This is not a corporal but a spiritual pain, though the body does not fail to participate a little in it, yea, a great deal. It is so delightful an intercourse between the soul and God, that I beseech His goodness to give some taste of it to him who may imagine I do not tell the truth.10

9 Ibid., p. 186.
10 Teresa, Life, pp. 263-264.
The sexual connotations and images are obvious and have been pointed out by many previously. William James went so far as to say that "her main idea of religion seems to have been that of an endless amatory flirtation—if one may say so without irreverence—between the devotee and the deity." Although the sexual relationship is implied in the other visions and is easily conjured up by the mere use of the terms "rapture," "ecstasy," and "Union," it is made quite explicit in this description. The sexual imagery in Alexandra's "fancy" is not quite so graphic, but it is there. She yields herself up to being carried away by a man who smells like "ripe cornfields" and is the strongest and largest and swiftest man she has ever known. And after the episode is ended she reacts with a kind of puritanical distaste: "After such a reverie she would rise hastily, angry with herself, and go down to the bath-house that was partitioned off the kitchen shed. There she would stand in a tin tub and prosecute her bath with vigor, finishing it by pouring buckets of cold well-water over her gleaming white body which no man on the Divide could have carried very far" (p. 206). As she grows more accepting of the vision over the years she is strengthened by its occurrence, and finally, when she sees her transporter she realizes that he is "the mightiest of all lovers" (p. 283). This recognition leads to the renewed courage and new vision in Alexandra that provide the novel's conclusion. After this intense rapture and vision, Alexandra makes a trip to Lincoln to visit Frank Shabata in prison. When she returns, she tells Carl that she would like to go with him to Alaska in the spring... but not "for good." She talks to him of the land and its passing, temporal ownership, and her timeless kinship with it. When Carl asks her why she is talking of such things she replies:

"I had a dream before I went to Lincoln—But I will tell you about that afterward, after we are married. It will never come true, now, in the way I thought it might." She took Carl's arm and they walked toward the gate. "How many times we have walked this path together, Carl.

How many times we will walk it again! Does it seem to you like coming back to your own place? Do you feel at peace with the world here? I think we shall be very happy. I haven't any fears. I think when friends marry, they are safe. We don't suffer like—those young ones.” Alexandra ended with a sigh (p. 308).

Alexandra has received the exact benefit one should receive from her “fancy,” at least according to St. Teresa: “Rapture is a great help to recognize our true home and to see that we are pilgrims here; it is a great thing to see what is going on there, and to know where we have to live; for if a person has to go and settle in another country, it is a great help to him in undergoing the fatigues of his journey that he has discovered it to be a country where he may live in the most perfect peace.”

One leaves Alexandra with some assurance and the hope that in another country she found that peace and that one day she would return to her “true home.”

Now, of course, the question arises, “What are we to make of all this?” Did Cather model the “fancy” of Alexandra Bergson upon the accounts of St. Teresa of Avila’s “ecstasy”? Is Cather trying to imply some Christian basis for her tale of the pioneers? Evelyn Underhill, commenting on Teresa’s visions says: “It seems, then, that this swift and dazzling vision of Divine Personality may represent a true contact of the soul with the Absolute Life—a contact immediately referred to the image under which the self is accustomed to think of its God. Obviously in the case of Christian contemplatives this image will most usually be the historical Person of Christ.” Miss Underhill’s comment may be helpful in understanding the connection between Teresa and Alexandra. One would be greatly stretching a point in trying to explain the ecstasies of Alexandra Bergson as Christian mystical experiences, or by identifying the “mightiest of all lovers” as the transcendent Christ, for while the experiences are similar and both figures are godly or “god-men,” Alexandra’s Christian piety is, from all appearances,
far removed from that of Teresa of Avila. No, the similarity is much more basic than that. Both share in the universal mystical experience that transcends denominations or even religions. It is this experience that Cather uses, if any, from the writings of St. Teresa. The image under which the self of St. Teresa is accustomed to thinking of its God is definitely in the form of the historical person of Christ. The image of God of Alexandra Bergson’s self is much closer to the soil, much more tied up with the cycle of seasons, the good, brown earth, the yellow wheat and rustling corn. Her heart hides down there, “Somewhere, with the quail and the plover and all the little wild things that crooned or buzzed in the sun” (p. 71). When Alexandra sings her old Swedish hymn it is not to a transcendent God, but a very immanent one, that “Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it” (p. 65).

Even so, the connection is there. We know that Willa Cather first visited Rome in 1908, and, in all probability, saw Bernini’s chapel and sculpture while there. We know that throughout her life she found a certain fascination in the mystery and spirituality of the Roman Catholic Church. That fascination permeates her writings and shows itself in all kinds of ways, from the futile effort to get a priest for Mr. Shimerda after he has shot himself (My Antonia) to the glorious Solemn High Requiem for John Driscoll (My Mortal Enemy). The Roman Catholic Church plays some part in almost all her major works. We know that the first American Edition of the Life of St. Teresa of Avila was published in 1860, a translation by Canon John Dalton of England. We know that Miss Cather was an avid reader with an uncanny ability to retain and use things she had read years before and that she refers to the Golden Legend, an eleventh century collection of Saints’ lives.

We also know there are a number of other elements in the two works that are similar. For example, Teresa often refers to

14 See also Mary E. Hough, Santa Teresa in America (New York: Instituto de las Españas, 1938), p. 53.
Fray Peter of Alcantara in her writing and gives us considerable description of him. Many of the people of Peter's own day called him mad. He slept no more than an hour and a half a night, and did that in a sitting position. He went barefoot all his life and wore only sackcloth. His body was gnarled: "when I became acquainted with him he was then very old, and his weakness so extreme, that he seemed to be made only of the roots of trees." Fray Peter of Alcantara was a Christian mystic hermit who served Teresa as a spiritual guide and gave her encouragement when she was misunderstood by the people in the city. In these and several other ways he has many similarities to Crazy Ivar in *O Pioneers!* Ivar is a hermit—at least until he loses his land. He has visions or "spells" as he sometimes refers to them. His relationship to the animals, both wild and domestic, is peculiarly Franciscan, as Teresa says Fray Peter's is. Ivar has no bed in his hut, but sleeps in a hammock. After he has moved to Alexandra's place, he has a room in the barn, but sleeps in the loft and arises at four o'clock in the morning. He has never worn shoes on his feet. Ivar is a "queerly shaped old man" like Fray Peter, and he fasts and does penance often. Fray Peter tried to do penance during his entire life. The relationship of Alexandra and Ivar is like that of Teresa and Peter, and Alexandra is also misunderstood by everyone in the city.

In Teresa's *Interior Castle*, writing about the soul, she says, "When it is in this state of prayer, and quite dead to the world, it comes out a little white butterfly." After the murders of Emil and Marie, Cather describes the scene as Ivar found them and concludes by saying (in a paragraph that was later removed in her revision): "Above Marie and Emil, two white butterflies from Frank's alfalfa-field were fluttering in and out among the interlacing shadows; diving and soaring, now close together, now far apart; and in the long grass by the fence the last wild roses of the year opened their pink hearts to die" (p. 270).

16 Teresa, *Life*, p. 245.
Elsewhere in *Interior Castle* Teresa’s thoughts on “Spiritual Betrothal” and “Mystical union” are quite similar to Alexandra’s feelings when she visits Emil’s grave in the midst of a thunderstorm. Both utilize the imagery of the rain to deal with the oneness of all things and the unity they feel with the universe.

In other words, the possibility of a connection is there. But whether it is direct or not, we can retain that universal connection of the mystical experience. Religious or not, both works speak to a part of man that is to be found in all men: “Mystical states indeed wield no authority due simply to their being mystical states. But the higher ones among them point in directions to which the religious sentiments of even non-mystical men incline. They tell of the supremacy of the ideal, of vastness, of union, of safety, and of rest.”¹⁸ That is the journey of both Teresa of Avila and Alexandra of the Divide. And for those who have endured the journey, the destination would seem the same. Alexandra has come from a worker in the fields, to a prosperous, independent farm manager, to a woman willing to give her freedom over to an Alaskan adventurer. Once again, it is a familiar journey, for Teresa says of herself: “From being a gardener, she has now become a governor;...nor does she desire to be the governor of herself, nor indeed of anything...”¹⁹

Spain was fortunate in having received the heart of Teresa of Avila and having given it out again in generations of devotion and piety. The Divide was fortunate in having received the heart of Alexandra Bergson and having given it out again “in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!” (p. 309). And we and future generations are fortunate in that Willa Cather received the hearts of both and gave them out to us again in the saga of *O Pioneers*!

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¹⁸ James, p. 328.