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In the Name of the Self: *Cather's The Professor's House*

by ALICE HALL PETRY

EVER since its publication in 1925, Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* has been a source of confusion and bafflement for its commentators. David Stouck writes that the book "has puzzled literary critics more than any of Willa Cather's other novels," while David Daiches attempts to pinpoint the source of the enigmatic quality of the story by noting that "the full meaning of the professor's crisis and its resolution is never overtly examined, and a note of deliberate mystery remains to the end."¹ That mystery is particularly palpable in the novel's final paragraph, which records the professor's response to his near-asphyxiation from gas:

His temporary release from consciousness seemed to have been beneficial. He had let something go—and it was gone: something very precious, that he could not consciously have relinquished, probably. He doubted whether his family would ever realize that he was not the same man they had said good-bye to; they would be too happily preoccupied with their own affairs. If his apathy hurt them, they could not possibly be so much hurt as he had been already. At least, he felt the ground under his feet. He thought he knew where he was, and that he could face with fortitude the *Berengaria* and the future. (pp. 282–83)²

What was the "something" he had "let go," and is the feeling that "the ground [is] under his feet" meant to be ironic or affirmative? One key to understanding that final paragraph—indeed, the entire novel—is the professor's full name: Napoleon Godfrey St. Peter. Ultimately, Cather's handling of that complex name reveals her instinctive understanding of what modern psychology has come to perceive as the interrelationship of a sense of self and religious faith.

The professor's given name, "Napoleon," is insistently *historical*; hence it may be seen as signifying that aspect of the professor's identity which loves historical facts and which cherishes the historical value of family traditions ("There had always been a Napoleon in the family, since a remote grandfather got his discharge from the Grand Armée" [p. 163]). Not surprising for a novel which relies heavily upon paradox and irony,³

1. David Stouck, *Willa Cather's Imagination* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1975), p. 96; David Daiches, *Willa Cather: A Critical Introduction* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1951), p. 101.

2. *The Professor's House* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925). All page references are to this edition. The text and pagination are identical to that of the readily-available paperback edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

3. Although Cather subtly uses irony throughout *The Professor's House*, the point of the book is distorted if one perceives it as an "ironic" novel. Hence the weakness of two of the novel's most recent

the professor had dropped the historically-meaningful given name "Napoleon" when he was a boy in Kansas. There is, thus, an inverse relationship between the repression of his "historical" childhood identity and the nurturing of his career as a professor of history.

"Godfrey" literally means "god-peace."⁴ It is an insistently *religious* name which, at first glance, seems singularly ironic for a man who received no religious training in his boyhood, does scholarly research at home on Sunday morning instead of going to church, and must ask the family's Roman Catholic dressmaker for information on the Magnificat. Having been immersed in history [matters of fact] for some thirty years, the professor has had no time, no apparent room in his life, for the spiritual [matters of faith].

But these two seemingly discrete aspects of the professor's identity — the historical and the spiritual — are beginning to merge with the completion of his monumental eight-volume *Spanish Adventurers in North America* under the inspiration of his alter-ego, the late Tom Outland; and it is the psychically painful process of that merging — a process leading to the professor's "epiphany," as it were, after the incident with the gas stove⁵ — which *The Professor's House* records. As the professor comes to realize, the two orientations (historical fact/spiritual faith) are not antithetical or incompatible: each is grounded in the capacity to transcend discrete facts, to perceive an order and symmetry in the world which may not be readily apparent to someone immersed in quotidian events.

It was Outland himself who first came to this realization. Originally he had perceived the cliff dwellings as a series of relics of purely historical value and interest. Hence his dismay that the ultimate repository of historical fact, the Smithsonian Institution, had no interest in his findings, and his anger that his partner Rodney Blake had sold these artifacts to a German dealer. But after returning alone to Blue Mesa, Outland comes to see that the purely historical "value" of the cliff dwellings is nil. What

commentaries: David C. Stineback's "Willa Cather's Ironic Masterpiece," *Arizona Quarterly*, 29 (Winter, 1973), 317-30, and Thomas F. Stryczak's "The Ambiguities of Escape in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*," *Studies in American Fiction*, 14 (Spring, 1986), 49-61. For instance, regarding Roddy Blake's sale of the Cliff-Dwellers' artifacts to the German merchant, Stryczak argues that Tom's "words reveal an unconscious complicity with [Roddy's] betrayal" (p. 56). To argue this requires a serious distortion of the spirit of *The Professor's House* and a denial of the non-ironic implications of the epiphanies.

4. George R. Stewart, *American Given Names: Their Origin and History in the Context of the English Language* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), p. 130. Meredith R. Machen argues that the name recalls Godfrey of Bouillon, who wrested control of Jerusalem from the Saracens during the Crusades. See "Carlyle's Presence in *The Professor's House*," *Western American Literature*, 14 (1980), 277.

5. Machen acknowledges that Outland experiences a religious epiphany, but does not recognize that the professor does also. Further, Machen's notion that Outland "see[s] life more positively" than the professor reflects a misunderstanding of Cather's handling of chronology in the novel. Most of *The Professor's House* shows Outland *after* his epiphany on the mesa; no wonder he seems to have a positive outlook. But as Book II makes clear, prior to the epiphany he had been distraught and disillusioned. By the same token, Books I and III focus on the professor's mental state *before* his epiphany in the attic and he, too, seems distraught and disillusioned. Cather leaves it up to the reader to visualize the serenity of the professor's life after the epiphany he experiences during the last few pages of the novel (cf. Machen, "Carlyle's Presence in *The Professor's House*," 276, n. 9).

matters is that the *history* the dwellings embody conveys a *spiritual* message:

I remember these things, because, in a sense, that was the first night I was ever really on the mesa at all—the first night that all of me was there. This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole. It all came together in my understanding, as a series of experiments do when you begin to see where they are leading. Something had happened to me that made it possible for me *to co-ordinate and simplify*, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. It was possession. The excitement of my first discovery was a very pale feeling compared to this one. For me *the mesa was no longer an [historical] 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. It had formerly been mixed up with other motives; but now that they were gone, I had my happiness unalloyed. (pp. 250–51, emphasis added)

After the psychologically-devastating visit to Washington and the bitter estrangement from his “family,” Roddy Blake, Tom has finally merged the historical and the spiritual: in effect, he has experienced a positive epiphany on the mesa. With his feet now planted firmly on the ground in this physically-elevated locale, Outland finds that he can pursue his studies with preternatural speed and comprehension. Further, he finally acts on his lifelong dream to attend college, where he does the insightful research which leads to the famed Outland aircraft engine.

For Outland, the merging process had been precipitated by traumatic interactions with Washington bureaucrats and Roddy Blake; the process had culminated in an epiphany while he was alone atop the mesa. For the professor, the process begins at home in Hamilton, amidst traumatic interactions with his family and colleagues; and the professor seems to realize instinctively that, as with Outland, an epiphany will occur only if he is alone and at a physically-elevated location. Hence he gladly sends his wife off to France with the Marselluses and moves into his attic study. Perhaps not even conscious that what he desires is an experience comparable to the one Outland recorded in his diary, the professor clearly longs for a transcendent peace comparable to the one he had derived from writing his eight-volume history. The process of researching and writing about the Spanish exploration of America had required the co-ordination and simplification of a multitude of disparate or even contradictory facts; and without being able to articulate it (he terms his vast project “fun” and a “great pleasure” [p. 33]), the professor had for three decades been deriving a surrogate *spiritual* peace from writing an *historical* work. In retrospect, therefore, the “professional” name of “Godfrey,” far from being ironically inappropriate, is paradoxically quite appropriate: for thirty years, the professor had derived his “god-peace” from his *Spanish Adventurers in North America*. But with the monumental scholarly study completed, he finds that his temporary, surrogate source of “god-peace” no longer exists: he must find true spiritual peace by coming to terms with himself as a complete person, rather than as just “the professor.” This undertaking involves resurrecting the “self” which existed before he had his professional career and family: little Napoleon. And indeed this

“original, unmodified” self (p. 263)—a primitive self akin to the cliff-dwellers, as E. K. Brown aptly notes⁶—arrives while the professor is alone in the attic of his old house:

The Kansas boy who had come back to St. Peter this summer was not a scholar. He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water. Wherever sun sunned and rain rained and snow snowed, wherever life sprouted and decayed, places were alike to him. He was not nearly so cultivated as Tom's old cliff-dwellers must have been—and yet he was terribly wise. He seemed to be at the root of the matter; Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths. He seemed to know, among other things, that he was solitary and must always be so; he had never married, never been a father. He was earth, and would return to earth. (p. 265)

The merging of young pre-career Napoleon and middle-aged career-minded Godfrey into a psychic whole at spiritual peace requires the symbolic death of his purely professional self. The professor does nearly die from asphyxiation in his attic study, but is rescued by the spiritual center of the novel, Augusta, whose “natural acceptance of death in the midst of life” helps make possible his return.⁷ The “something” he had “let go” by experiencing his symbolic death was his career-based identity or, more precisely, his attitude that true peace could come only from the nurturing of his professional self (particularly research and writing) and, concomitantly, the rejection of the more elemental self signified by the boy Napoleon. The “new,” post-epiphany professor is oriented towards *life*—including, as life does, the acceptance of death as part of a natural sequence, a grand pattern—not suicide; as Augusta points out, he had tried to save himself (p. 279). Moreover, he is spiritually stable: for the first time since the completion of the *Spanish Adventurers*, “he felt the ground under his feet” (p. 283). No wonder he sees his “temporary release from consciousness” as having been “beneficial” (p. 282).

The metaphor of feeling “the ground under his feet” is neither negative nor ironic; and the fact that Cather uses such an earthy metaphor to convey an affirmative spiritual experience points to the significance of the professor's last name, “St. Peter.” John H. Randall argues that “since [the professor] regards history as the source of all value, it becomes for him a kind of heaven. As a historian, he is like the original St. Peter who holds the keys to the kingdom of heaven much as his namesake holds the key to history.”⁸ However, I agree with Barbara Wild that Cather is drawing heavily upon the relationship between Christ and St. Peter.⁹ In the gospel according to St. Matthew, Christ says to his disciple Simon Bar-Jona, “. . . you are Peter [*Petros*], and on this rock [*petra*] I will build my

6. E. K. Brown, *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* [completed by Leon Edel], (New York: Avon Books, 1980), p. 184.

7. Frederick J. Hoffman, *The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade*, rev. ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 189.

8. John H. Randall, *The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 209.

9. Barbara Wild, “‘The Thing Not Named’ in *The Professor's House*,” *Western American Literature*, 12 (1978), 267 ff.

church . . . ' (Matt. 16:18).¹⁰ Drawing upon the Peter/rock pun and the paradoxical Christian tenet that "the Church" is simultaneously literal and symbolic, a physical building and a set of beliefs, Cather is able to suggest that the professor comes to realize that he must build his own "Church," and it is upon this note that the novel closes. As Meredith R. Machen has noted, the professor has finally concluded that, to quote Diogenes Teufelsdröckh in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, " 'Faith is properly the one thing needful.' " ¹¹ But before the professor could reach this conclusion, he had to undergo an identity crisis (compare Christ's giving Simon Bar-Jona the new name of "Peter") and experience the symbolic death of the self he knew best, for, as the passage in St. Matthew continues, " ' . . . whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it ' " (Matt. 16:25). As Stouck points out, this assertion—"the oldest paradox of the Christian faith"¹²—is precisely what Outland came to realize in his epiphany on the mesa. Built of stone, the buildings in Cliff City are as rock-hard, as elemental, as well-ordered as the "visible" and "invisible" Church that Christ had in mind. No wonder the cliff dwellings appeal so powerfully to both Outland and the professor, who realize instinctively that "art" (including enduring, well-designed buildings, plus imaginative, well-ordered history books) is synonymous with "religion": " 'Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had' " (p. 69).

It is doubtful that the professor's "Church" will have anything to do with the "organized" faiths of his Methodist mother or Catholic father (p. 30), and there are no guarantees that his seeming "apathy" will not alienate his family (p. 283). But the ending of the novel is nonetheless insistently affirmative. Like Tom Outland, whose epiphany signalled his entrance into manhood and released his full creative powers, the professor—whose own epiphany signalled his entrance into old age and ushered in a sense of peace with himself and his world—is now the spiritually whole "Napoleon Godfrey St. Peter." If he does seem "apathetic" at the end of *The Professor's House*, it is neither because the novel is, as Edel would have it, a failure,¹³ nor because he is fearing death, his "last house."¹⁴ Rather, he is accepting old age and his eventual death, seeing

10. I follow the text of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 1193.

11. Cited in Machen, "Carlyle's Presence," p. 284.

12. Stouck, p. 106.

13. Leon Edel, "Willa Cather and *The Professor's House*," in Irving Malin, ed., *Psychoanalysis and American Fiction* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1965), p. 220: "By merging the insights gained from psychology with the biographical data that gives us clues to the workings of the author's imagination, we are able to render a critical evaluation: we can see the failure of *The Professor's House* as a work of fiction. The professor lives for us as a man who has given up his good fight and takes the world as preparation for the grave. He has retreated into a vale of misanthropy and despair The novel is . . . incomplete because of Miss Cather's inner problems, which did not permit her to resolve clearly the problems of the character she had projected in her novel."

14. Brown, p. 186.

them, thanks to his epiphany, as part of a vast, beautiful pattern created by God. One should bear in mind that “apathetic” can mean “*exhibiting* little or no emotion” as well as “having” none.¹⁵ Spiritual serenity is a very private matter: the Christian joy experienced by nuns and monks may seem quite another emotion to the uninitiated, and certainly the professor has no reason to believe that his family would understand his epiphany any more readily than they would understand his disinclination to move into the new house. He knows his own contentment; that is enough.

Cather’s exploration of the relationship between the integrated self and spiritual faith in *The Professor’s House* is corroborated in theoretical terms by some of the insights of the great Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung. In his *Psychology and Religion* (1939) plus numerous articles and monographs prepared throughout the 1940s, Jung evinced a special interest in “the religious function of the self and the question of the relationship of the God-image to the self.”¹⁶ Jung posited his argument in Christian terms:

. . . as one can never distinguish empirically between a symbol of the self and a God-image, the two ideas, however much we try to differentiate them, always appear blended together, so that the self appears synonymous with the inner Christ of the Johannine and Pauline writings, and Christ with God (“of one substance with the Father”) . . .¹⁷

Even more to the point, for Jung, “Both forms of awareness, psychological experience of the self as well as religious experience, arose on the same basis, that is, *something which was experienced as comprehensive unity and wholeness.*”¹⁸ As Willa Cather articulated in dramatic and symbolic terms, spiritual peace is derived from our perception of unity, order, and organization, our sense of psychological wholeness, in a vast and complex world.

15. *The American College Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1966), p. 57, emphasis added.

16. Liliane Frey-Rohn, *From Freud to Jung: A Comparative Study of the Psychology of the Unconscious*, trans. Fred E. and Evelyn K. Engreen (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1974), p. 274.

17. C. G. Jung, “A Psychological Approach to the Dogma of the Trinity” (1940–41/1948), p. 156; cited in Frey-Rohn, pp. 274–75.

18. Frey-Rohn, p. 275, emphasis added.