

Dispossession and Redemption in the  
Novels of Willa Cather.

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# Dispossession and Redemption in the Novels of Willa Cather

by ANN W. FISHER-WIRTH

*"Man was lost and saved in a garden."*

—*Willa Cather, Death Comes for the Archbishop*

*Death Comes for the Archbishop* is an anomaly in Willa Cather's fiction. Massive, serene, and luminous, it is scarcely a novel at all; it lacks the novel's defining feature, psychological development and change. Nor does the book have much conflict. Moments of danger in the present

end as soon as they begin.[1] Episodes of suspense or terror in the past come to the reader contained and made safe by means of a framed narration.[2] The crises in Jean Latour's long struggle to create and control his diocese are briefly reported but take place primarily off-stage.[3] Nevertheless, despite its lack of drama, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* repeats and transforms the central concerns of Cather's psychologically complex and conflict-ridden earlier fiction-concerns with possession and loss, with fall and redemption. The novel grows in particular from Cather's four other finest works, with which it forms a sequence: *My Ántonia* (1918), *A Lost Lady* (1923), *The Professor's House* (1925), and *My Mortal Enemy* (1926) (omitting *One of Ours*, published in 1922). *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) is both a culmination and a reversal of these earlier novels.

On December 27, 1922, Willa Cather and her parents were confirmed in the Episcopal Church by Dr. George Beecher, Bishop of Nebraska. This was partly a social gesture on Cather's part; Episcopalianism was newly established and very fashionable in Nebraska. But partly, too, it was a reflection both of Cather's increasing conservatism-her increasing desire to fill her life with tradition and ritual-and of her intensifying spiritual longing for a haven, a sanctuary, something to set against what she was coming to see as the tragedy of human experience: the cruelty, anguish, and bleakness of life and love in the world.[4]

Cather's writing always betrayed a keen sense of loss. At the center

of her fiction—particularly in the works I am concerned with here—is the story of the Garden and the Fall. The lives of most of the major characters enact a recurrent tragic pattern, a pattern of dispossession, exile, and longing. For Jim Burden, Niel Herbert, Marian Forrester, Godfrey St. Peter, Tom Outland, and Myra Henshawe, adulthood is a time of failure, disappointment, dejection, sexual guilt, or sexual sterility; their lives seem summarized either by Robert Frost's line "Nothing gold can stay" or by Emily Dickinson's "A loss of something ever felt I." Part of this pattern involves the characters' search for the moment or act that constitutes their origins: either a timeless moment of wholeness, an Edenic moment shortly preceding exile, or a moment which, viewed retrospectively, plunges the character into time and guilt and itself marks the beginning of the Fall. Then, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather echoes and reverses every single one of these moments of origins. To recognize this is to see how fervently Cather wants to affirm the possibility of redemption. "Man was lost and saved in a garden," the Bishop thinks near the end of his life, quoting his "fellow Auvergnat, Pascal" (267).

Jim Burden's life powerfully enacts the story of dispossession. He comes to Nebraska at age ten and on his first morning there has an experience of bliss and plenitude as he sits with his back against a pumpkin in his grandmother's garden. "Nothing happened," he remarks. "I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more" (*Ántonia* 18). But the rest of the novel records his inexorable movement

away from that moment. He leaves the garden at the outer edge of the settled prairie for Black Hawk, Black Hawk for Lincoln, Lincoln for New York. He passes from childhood to the repressions and confusions of adolescence, to the sterility of adulthood; as the novel's Introduction tells us, he ends up unhappily married, childless, a lawyer for one of the great railroad companies that so avidly develop—that is to say, obliterate<sup>[5]</sup>—the open prairies. During the course of the novel, he has what seem at first to be two additional Edenic moments, but one—with the hired girls down by the river, just before he leaves Black Hawk for Lincoln—is marred by thoughts and talk of death, loss, and sexual confusion; and the other—with *Ántonia* and her children in the orchard—is marred by the knowledge that the garden he stands in, rich with apples in its triple enclosure, is not his home but hers. Homeless, he travels restlessly from West to East and East to West, and makes a home at last only in art that immortalizes "the precious, the incommunicable past" (372), recording the story of the woman who has never been "my *Ántonia*."

*A Lost Lady*, Cather's great study of carnal guilt and carnal beauty, begins with a literal fall. Ivy Peters, the novel's psychopath, has blinded a female woodpecker. Trying to catch it to put it out of its misery, twelve-year-old Niel Herbert falls from a tree, breaks his arm, and is rescued by the enchanting Marian Forrester, a mother/Muse figure with whom he soon falls more or less in love. The rest of the novel, seen through Niel's eyes, chronicles Mrs. Forrester's fall through a series of men: from her husband Captain Forrester, a man of godlike calm, a man like a tree or a mountain; to her first lover, the virile, wolflike Frank Ellinger; to her

second lover, the loathsome, reptilian Ivy Peters. It chronicles as well her husband's fall from nearly mythical vision and power as one of the early pioneer founders of the Burlington railroad, to physical incapacity, near poverty, and death; and the fall of the morning world, the rose-filled marshes and open prairies, along with the rise of men like Ivy Peters. Then, in a movement that is echoed and reversed at the end of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the narrative moves back in its final pages to search out the moment of origins in an even earlier literal fall. Marian Forrester invites a group of town boys to dinner in an effort to teach them social graces and after dinner tells them of the time long ago when she first met Captain Forrester. Hers is a story of woundedness, of pain and need that issue in human love. A beautiful young woman, already marked by sexual scandal, she fell in that long-ago time from a cliff in California and landed in a tree with both legs broken. Captain Forrester found her, carried her to safety, cherished her, wed her, took her home to his gardens in Sweet Water. And there she began her long, slow fall again.

Desolation pervades *The Professor's House*, a novel that describes not only the loss of paradise but also, and more terribly, the loss of desire itself, of what Cather calls the ability to conjugate the verb "to love" (264). Godfrey St. Peter, a middle-aged professor at a midwestern university who is feeling the bleakness attendant upon completing his life's work—a vast history of the Spanish explorers—and whose own family relations are increasingly fraught with jealousy, fatigue, and tension,

turns in a season of spiritual destitution to thoughts of the most gifted student he ever had, a young man named Tom Outland. Long before, Tom had appeared out of a mysterious past in the Southwest, had entered the professor's garden one day bearing priceless Indian artifacts and a pocketful of turquoises, clear and blue as the desert skies. He had become the Professor's student, had become engaged to the Professor's beautiful daughter Rosamond, had invented a gas that promised to revolutionize aviation, and—in a semisuicidal gesture, before he could marry the daughter or develop the invention—had gone off to die in the First World War. Now, years later, the Professor reads Tom's diary, and in the inset "Tom Outland's Story" we learn that Tom's despair was the result of his discovery of Blue Mesa. For just a moment, this abandoned and untouched Indian settlement slept above him in the crystalline air, in the "calmness of eternity" (201); once he told his secret, however, he set in motion the chain of events that brought about the depredation of the city and his own fall into sorrow. Musing upon Tom Outland's life, Godfrey St. Peter concludes that for him, too, the truth is that "he was solitary and must always be so" (265). There is the moment on the mountain, and the endless fall. Tom dies young; the Professor survives his own near-suicide to gaze without hope or delight at a darkening future.

Though these three novels describe a Fall or a series of Falls, there is also in each one an alternate vision: a powerfully presented natural mode of being, or—rare in Cather's fiction—a note of *felix culpa*. Jim Burden, of course, shares his novel with Antonia. Fecund, spontaneous, nurturing, not so much sexual as maternal, she is Cather's greatest



exemplar of natural being. Jim's is the story of a Garden and a Fall, but *Ántonia's* is the story of an abiding Garden. Known only through Jim's narrative, she yet surpasses and eludes it, for her mysteries are not Edenic but Eleusinian. In *A Lost Lady*, Cather presents not an alternate mode of being but rather a final reversal of feeling. Niel, who has judged Marian Forrester harshly and withdrawn his allegiance from her when he discovers her affair with Ivy Peters, comes in this most emotionally mature of Cather's novels to realize at last that the beauty Marian Forrester represents is inseparable from carnality, from the body. Cather comes close to forgiving, even affirming, sexuality in this novel. Having lost her, Niel learns to value Marian Forrester: "When he was dull, dull and tired of everything, he used to think that if he could hear that long-lost lady laugh again, he could be gay" (71). And finally, even in *The Professor's House* there occurs a note of *felix culpa* in the person of Louie Marsellus, the worldly and rather showy Jew who marries Rosamond St. Peter, gains access to Tom Outland's invention, and develops it into a fortune. He begins as the novel's antihero but comes to suggest a heroism counter to Tom's and possible in the postlapsarian world, based as it is not on purity and solitude but on emotional generosity and sexual love-what Louie himself calls the "fantastic unreasonableness" of passion (170). His love, not Tom's, makes Rosamond, the "rose of the world," bear fruit; by the end of the novel she is pregnant, but-so deep is the book's despondency, its stoical acceptance of life without delight-the knowledge of new life affects St. Peter not at all.

*My Ántonia, A Lost Lady, and The Professor's House*, then, offer

counterthemes, however muted, to the theme of dispossession; *My Mortal Enemy* does not. This novel bears, I think, the most direct relation to *Death Comes for the Archbishop*: I believe that through her identification with Myra Henshawe, Cather burns herself out.<sup>[6]</sup> This underrated novel, with its exquisite presentation of sexual passion, is the cry of a soul in torment. It is also Cather's most courageous-or most desperate-attempt to affirm life as intensity, as freedom, defiance, and drama. Greatly in love, the young heiress Myra Driscoll defies her uncle, elopes with Oswald Henshawe, and is disowned; one moment of origins in *My Mortal Enemy* is that legendary moment when, as narrator Nellie Birdseye comments, "Love went out of the gates and gave the dare to Fate" (17).

Another moment of origins, easily overlooked the first time through, occurs during the funeral of Myra's uncle, John Driscoll. The description of the funeral is important, for in this passage we see an expression of the desire to cheat death of its victory, a desire which within a year issued in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. "I myself could remember his funeral," Nellie Birdseye says, "though I was not more than six years old when it happened." Driscoll's financial support of the church is amply repaid, on his death, by the opulence of the occasion: the high altar blazes with candles; the choir is filled with masses of flowers; and Mass is celebrated by the bishop and "a flock of priests in gorgeous vestments." Then, in a splendid gesture of enclosure, "when the pall-bearers arrived, Driscoll did not come to the church; the church went to him. The bishop and



clergy went down the nave and met that great black coffin at the door, preceded by the cross and boys swinging cloudy censers, followed by the choir chanting to the organ. They surrounded, they received, they seemed to assimilate into the body of the church the body of old John Driscoll. They bore it up to the high altar on a river of colour and incense and organ-tone; they claimed it and enclosed it." Indeed, as Nellie says, it seemed as if John Driscoll had "escaped the end of all flesh; it was as if he had been translated, with no dark conclusion to the pageant, no 'night of the grave' about which our Protestant preachers talked. From the freshness of roses and lilies, from the glory of the high altar, he had gone straight to the greater glory, through smoking censers and candles and stars" (*Mortal Enemy* 18-19).

Myra's life is marred by poverty and jealousy; giving all for love brings her bitter disappointment. In a final splendid gesture, she dies alone at dawn, a runaway once again, on a wild headland overlooking the Pacific Ocean.<sup>[7]</sup> The pain that brings her to this point is nearly overwhelming. Nor, since its cause is ineffable, can it really be articulated. Myra herself says, "I should have stayed with my uncle. It was money I needed. We've thrown our lives away" (75)-but she would have been no happier had she sacrificed love to stay with old John Driscoll; her account of her own life seems insufficient. Nellie Birdseye comes closer when, remembering Myra listening to the "Casta diva" aria from *Norma*, she thinks of that "hidden richness in her," that "compelling, passionate, overmastering something for which I had no name" (48).

Myra dies alone with "my mortal enemy" (95). Such, Cather seems

to say, are the wages of passion, for Myra's mortal enemy seems to be both her husband-who loves her devotedly-and her own desirous spirit and body.[8] Myra has gone forth, away from home, church, and father; consumed by "two fatal maladies" (74), she is at liberty to suffer and to die. John Driscoll, in contrast, creates a haven for himself. Headstrong and ruthless like Myra, he nevertheless stakes his fortune on forms of safety and closure, and Cather comes perilously close, in the passages I have quoted, to suggesting that with sufficient belief and sufficient fortune donated to the church, John Driscoll can escape death. Myra is Cather's heroine-but the cost is too great, the discoveries too painful. Out of Myra Henshawe's defeat Cather creates Jean Marie Latour; out of the agony of *My Mortal Enemy* she creates the luminous calm of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

The heart of this book, then, is Cather's meditation on Last Things. What is the way to live, since one must die? What is the way to avoid Myra Henshawe's torment? In her essay "On *Death Comes for the Archbishop*," Cather comments that its title came from Holbein's *Dance of Death*.<sup>[9]</sup> The reference is revealing, for in this series of woodcuts upon the medieval theme, the Bishop alone goes to his death with serenity, humbly following Death across a landscape which, in its simplifications, resembles the landscape of Cather's novel. There is his flock, frightened and scattered; he has been a faithful pastor. There are the church on the hill and the setting sun, which accrue rich symbolic value for Cather. And across this landscape, as much at one with his death as the setting sun, moves the dignified, patient Bishop.

Jean Marie Latour dies with similar poise. At the end of a long, rewarding life he dies peacefully "of having lived" (*Archbishop* 269), surrounded by friends, in the shadow of the artifact which will enclose him and immortalize him, his Cathedral. As he lies dying, his thoughts circle back to his life's moment of origins. As in *A Lost Lady*, the narrative of this moment has been delayed; but whereas there we learn of a Fall, here we learn of a Fulfillment. The moment comes to Cather from her primary source, William Joseph Howlett's life of the "pioneer priest" Joseph P. Machebeuf (who is represented in the novel by Father Vaillant). Howlett mentions the moment only in passing; but Cather, by placing it in the dying Archbishop's memory, by allowing her whole novel to build toward it, underscores its importance. Latour remembers the morning he and Joseph Vaillant ran away from their families and village to sign up as missionaries to the New World; as he remembers Vaillant's anguish, he drifts out of his dying body to enter that long-ago moment: "In reality the Bishop was not there at all; he was standing in a tip-tilted green field among his native mountains, and he was trying to give consolation to a young man who was being torn in two before his eyes by the desire to go and the necessity to stay. He was trying to forge a new Will in that devout and exhausted priest; and the time was short, for the *diligence* for Paris was already rumbling down the mountain gorge" (299).

As in *My Mortal Enemy*, Love goes out the gates and gives the dare to Fate. Here, however, the bid is for sacrifice, celibacy, discipline,

redemption; in this moment the priests are born into their missionary endeavor and die to the fallen world. Leaving their homes, they journey to a terrifying landscape, a hell of "countless canyons and arroyos, fissures in the earth which are sometimes ten feet deep, sometimes a thousand" (7). But though their earthly journey seems to be an exile, faith enables them to dwell in the realm of origins. This is the significance, for instance, of the cruciform tree before which the Bishop worships at the beginning of the novel. Lost in the desert, nearly dead of thirst, concerned for his mission, Latour comes across this tree that sanctifies the landscape. He commends himself to Christ and then, as if by miracle, stumbles upon a tiny settlement called *Agua Secreta*, a garden by the side of living waters.

Thereafter, with few exceptions, the Bishop moves at ease upon the earth, creating the shapes of redemption out of this vast inimical wilderness: a diocese, a cathedral, a garden. He acts but does not change; his experience in time attests not to exile and loss but to centeredness and possession. Even his parting from Vaillant causes him only a few moments of loneliness; briefly he indulges in human reflections, "such reflections as any bachelor nearing fifty might have" (255). But as soon as he turns away to the solitude of his own room, he seems, in Cather's words, "to come back to reality, to the sense of a Presence awaiting him." His solitude becomes a "perpetual flowering," for his human needs are met by "Her who was all the graces; Virgin-daughter, Virgin-mother, girl of the people and Queen of Heaven: *le rêve suprême de la chair*" (256).

"The supreme dream of the flesh . . ." *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

has been called regressive and escapist; some critics feel it marks Cather's abdication from human conflict and desire and her cultivation of fantasies of safety.[10] Others praise its luminous prose, its deep response to history, its characters and landscape, and call it Cather's greatest work.[11] My own response is mixed. It is a radiant book, less a novel than an act of prayer, an act of centering and composing the self, a ceaseless meditation.[12] Its desire seems the same as the desire of traditional Ignatian meditation, as Louis Martz describes it in *The Poetry of Meditation*: to awaken and direct emotion for purposes of devotion (36ff.). Its structure also loosely resembles the structure of Ignatian meditation, in which the devotee passes from a composition of place to an analysis of the significance of the scene composed, and thence to colloquy, in which the aroused and perfected will expresses its devotion. The episode of the cruciform tree, for instance, constitutes Cather's-and Latour's-composition of place, the creation of a setting appropriate for meditation, a setting that enables the devotee to focus his thoughts upon one aspect of doctrinal truth about the nature of God, the nature of man, and their interrelationship. Nearly dead of thirst, Latour turns his attention from his own anguish to remind himself "of that cry, wrung from his Saviour on the Cross, 'J'ai soif' . . . Empowered by long training, the young priest blotted himself out of his own consciousness and meditated upon the anguish of his Lord. The Passion of Jesus became for him the only reality; the need of his own body was but a part of that conception" (*Archbishop* 20).

Latour's meditation here reaches its own state of colloquy; it also



composes the scene for the book's long meditation. The miraculous sign of the cruciform tree and the subsequent discovery of *Agua Secreta* set the seal upon Latour's further actions; the moment reveals the landscape as redeemed once and for all, and the book spells out the ramifications of this truth. Finally, near the end of his life, Latour enters a state again resembling Ignatian colloquy, a free outpouring of devotion-although in this case, the entity with which he communes seems to be his own inviolable and sacrosanct self rather than a God conceived of as Other and therefore longed for. Thus, colloquy here is not impassioned but serene: "He was soon to have done with calendared time," Cather writes. "He sat in the middle of his own consciousness; none of his former states of mind were lost or outgrown. They were all within reach of his hand, and all comprehensible" (290).

Cather describes *Death Comes for the Archbishop* as "in the style of legend," inspired by the frescoes of the life of Saint Geneviève painted by Puvis de Chavannes. She describes it also in terms of hagiography: "In the Golden Legend the martyrdoms of the saints are no more dwelt upon than are the trivial incidents of their lives; it is as though all human experiences, measured against one supreme spiritual experience, were of about the same importance."<sup>[13]</sup> One of the book's beauties is the way in which, lovingly and calmly, Cather depicts the world *sub specie aeternitatis*. Soup, bells, mules, the birth and death of civilizations-all have their place in the order.

However, particularly when one compares the Bishop with the



Indians, whose presence becomes increasingly important in the book, it is difficult at times to tell whether Latour represents the bliss of self-surrender in devotion or the opposite bliss of fantasies of the omnipotent self. As he nears death, for instance, Cather writes, "More and more life seemed to him an experience of the Ego, in no sense the Ego itself" (289-90).<sup>[14]</sup> In a way this resembles the mystic's "cosmic consciousness," as Karl Shapiro describes it: like the mystic, the Bishop enters a "state of moral exaltation [and] enhanced intellectual power," experiencing "elevation, elation, and joyousness, and a conviction of immortality" (31-32). But the Bishop's state of mind differs importantly from the mystic's in that his bliss derives not from "a sense of identification with the universe" but rather from a sense of the absolute indestructibility of the self. Paradoxically, then, the Bishop seems to aggrandize precisely the state of consciousness opposed to cosmic consciousness: the "consciousness of oneself as distinct from all other objects and beings in the universe" (Shapiro 31).

It is, of course, difficult to distinguish the serenity of connection to the universe from the serenity of fantasies of omnipotence-and it is true that near the end of his life Latour feels deep accord with the Spanish martyrs whose way prepared his own, with the Navajos, with the clear blue desert air that "whispered to the ear on the pillow, lightened the heart, softly, softly picked the lock, slid the bolts, and released the prisoned spirit of man into the wind, into the blue and gold, into the morning, into the morning" (276). Nevertheless, Latour's presence is very different from that of the Indians, who "pass through a country without

disturbing anything . . . pass and leave no trace, like fish through the water, or birds through the air" (233); the Zuñi runners he sees one day, for instance, vanish unforgettably, "their bodies disappearing and reappearing among the sand dunes, like the shadows that eagles cast in their strong, unhurried flight" (235). Theirs is the true cosmic consciousness, the knowledge of union with all that is. Latour's is the tower of the self; he dies (like old John Driscoll) with "no night of the grave," translated immediately into his artifact, his immortality, his Cathedral.

Closely allied with this focus on the ego and its preservation is Cather's rejection, through and for Latour, of a sense of darkness. Sunlight irradiates the book—the clear high skies, the "blue and gold" of morning (276). As Susan Rosowski points out, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is founded on a pattern of belief anything outside of which threatens the believer; at least twice Latour is shaken by his encounter with "materials that predate form and . . . a people who exist outside Calvary's sacrifice" (*Voyage Perilous* 173). At Ácoma, for instance, he preaches to Indians who seem to represent "types of life so old, so hardened, so shut within their shells, that the sacrifice on Calvary could hardly reach back so far." When he blesses them and sends them on their way, he feels only "inadequacy and spiritual defeat" (*Archbishop* 100). But though Cather mentions this despair, the book cannot really accommodate a sense of shadows. Nor can it accommodate a sense of the body, the secret, sexual body; in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*—in marked contrast to some of the earlier novels—the body is the one thing

Cather, through her Bishop, seems to want most to deny."<sup>[15]</sup>

Once again as he moves about the land the Bishop loses his composure. Caught in a sudden snowstorm, he is led by his Indian guide Jacinto to a secret cave high in the side of a mountain, the entrance to which suggests "two great stone lips, slightly parted and thrust outward." Cold and dank, the cave is filled with "a fetid odour, not very strong but highly disagreeable" (127). It is a mighty place, an Indian place of worship. It gives onto a yet more secret cave, very small, and inhabited (it is rumored) by an enormous serpent. Beneath it rushes a "great underground river . . . a flood moving in utter blackness under ribs of antediluvian rock . . . a great flood moving with majesty and power" (130). The river hums and roars like the blood in the body, or like Being itself; the serpent sleeps; the cave abides-and the Bishop responds to this landscape with revulsion. "It flashed into his mind from time to time," Cather writes of this occasion, "and always with a shudder of repugnance quite unjustified by anything he had experienced there. . . . the cave, which had probably saved his life, he remembered with horror" (133).<sup>[16]</sup>

Cather's Mariolatry and her treatment of female characters in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* suggest that she shares the horror. Like millions of Christian believers, she finds in Mary the image of female divinity. In the story of the broken old bondswoman Sada-a story she liked so well that she had it reprinted separately for Christmas-Cather writes movingly of Mary as mother and intercessor, and seems to allude to her

own pain too when she comments that "only a Woman, divine, could know all that a woman can suffer" (217). But Cather's aggrandizement of the humble, cringing Sada as the type of "pure goodness" (212) suggests that Mary, in this book, is the dream of a flesh that would eschew itself. The impression is strengthened by Cather's presentation of the story's other two female characters. The first is Magdalena, a Mexican girl who marries a "degenerate murderer" named Buck Scales (77); who nearly dies under the yoke of a marriage in which as soon as her babies are born, they are killed in ways too horrible for her to relate; but who regains youth, beauty, and wit once she escapes her husband and goes to live in the convent. The second is Doña Isabella Olivares, the woman the Bishop calls upon to "make a little *poesie* in life for us here" (192). She is indeed charming and sexually alluring, but she comes to seem pathetic when, in an incident Cather presents as amusing, she would rather forfeit her dead husband's estate than tell the truth about her age. Terrified of time, age, and death, she attests to the perils of basing one's female identity upon one's sexuality. Far better, in terms of this novel, to emulate the Virgin Mary, woman without the darkness or the odor, woman without desire, need, or stain.

Just at the end of the book, Cather tells an inset story of the Navajos, the loss and restoration of their Canyon de Chelly. Her handling of this narrative reveals both the great beauty of her vision in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and the dangers of that vision. As the Bishop lies dying, he thinks not only of his own moment of origins, that moment when he and Vaillant stood on the mountain road and accepted

*"l'invitation du voyage"* (285), but also of the restoration of the Canyon de Chelly to the Navajos. For a time, American policy was to drive the Navajos from their own ancestral lands to the "Bosque Redondo, three hundred miles away on the Pecos River. Hundreds of them, men, women, and children, perished from hunger and cold on the way; their sheep and horses died from exhaustion crossing the mountains. None ever went willingly; they were driven by starvation and the bayonet; captured in isolated bands, and brutally deported" (293). Their lands too were laid waste; Kit Carson (elsewhere one of this book's heroes) followed "the last unconquered remnant" into the Canyon de Chelly, "spoiled their stores, destroyed their deep-sheltered corn-fields, cut down the terraced peach orchards so dear to them. When they saw all that was sacred to them laid waste, the Navajos lost heart. They did not surrender; they simply ceased to fight, and were taken" (293). But then, as if by miracle, the American government admitted its mistake, and after five years of exile the Navajos were allowed to return.

On first reading, it seems that Cather has introduced utterly extraneous material right at the end of her novel. But of course the story is not extraneous at all; in Cather's vision it offers that all-but-impossible thing, a return to the Garden.

In 1875 the Bishop took his French architect on a pack trip into Arizona to show him something of the country before he returned to France, and he had the pleasure of seeing the Navajo horsemen riding free over their great



plains again. The two Frenchmen went as far as the Canyon de Chelly to behold the strange cliff ruins; once more crops were growing down at the bottom of the world between the towering sandstone walls; sheep were grazing under the magnificent cottonwoods and drinking at the streams of sweet water; it was like an Indian Garden of Eden. (297)

The story is very beautiful, but as it functions in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, the sense of closure is too complete. For one thing, as has been pointed out, "no authoritative work on the religion and mythology of the Navajos supports [Cather's] proposition that their gods dwelt in the canyon" (Bloom and Bloom 339). For another, even in Cather's telling of the story, the history of the Navajos is filled with irrevocable losses. Yet here she ignores these losses. In this second Eden man walks with his gods, and woman suckles a lamb: "Man was lost and saved in a garden" (267). Placing it as she does at the end of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, stressing its analogy with Eden, Cather seems to offer the Navajo story, against her own bitter knowledge, as assurance to the heart's deepest longing that all which has been lost will be restored.

## NOTE

1. The best example is the Bishop's hair-raising but quickly concluded encounter with Buck Scales. A partial exception is the episode in the Stone Lips cave (discussed below). ([Go back.](#))



2. E.g., the execution of Father Baltazar at Ácoma, and the capture, near-death, and stunning escape of Manuel Chavez from the Navajos offer not present threats but rather (as Jim Burden says of the story of Pavel and Peter) the "peculiar and painful pleasure" of vicarious participation in violence long completed (*Antonia* 61). ([Go back.](#))

3. Examples are the conflict with Father Gallegos, only briefly alluded to, and the far greater conflict with Father Martinez, who sets up a church in schism at Taos and whose power is broken only with his death. ([Go back.](#))

4. In her Prefatory Note to *Not under Forty*, Cather comments that "the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts" (v). The feeling had several causes, preeminent among them World War I and what Brown calls that beginning "estrangement from modern American life that was to grow more acute as [Cather] grew older" (171). But I argue that an overpowering sense of loss surfaces earlier, in *My Ántonia* as the "burden" of Jim Burden, and intensifies in the novels that follow until Cather attempts to transform a sense of loss into a sense of possession in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. ([Go back.](#))

5. This is my own interjection, not Cather's. However, the tendency of epic to turn into elegy occurs as early in Cather's fiction as her first "real" novel, *O Pioneers!* (1913). "This is all very splendid in its way," Carl remarks to Alexandra upon returning to the farmland after an absence of sixteen years, "but there was something about this country when it was a wild old beast that has haunted me all these years. Now, when I come back to all this milk and honey, I feel like the old German song, 'Wo bist du, wo bist du, mein geliebtest Land?'" (118). The bitter awareness that in development or possession lie destruction and loss is at the heart of nearly all Cather's fiction and helps to account for her retreat from the present: in moving her settings from Nebraska to the Southwest (in *The Professor's House*

and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*) and from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to ever earlier times (in *Shadows on the Rock* and the unfinished, destroyed "Hard Punishments"), Cather searches ever further afield for the lost "geliebtest Land." ([Go back.](#))

6. My sense of the shape of Cather's canon resembles Marcus Klein's when he writes, "After *My Mortal Enemy* the next novel was to be *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, that most fluent and serene of Willa Cather's elegies. Before it, by a handful of years, there had been the radiance and the supreme ease of *My Ántonia*. In the years between there was a gathering darkness of which *My Mortal Enemy* . . . was the crisis. . . . it is to be seen that the same forces of darkness had been gathering from the beginning and that a series of holding visions culminating in *My Ántonia* had given way" (v). ([Go back.](#))

7. Rosowski discusses the two death scenes—John Driscoll's and Myra Henshawe's—that frame the novel, and writes, "As John Driscoll died, so shall his niece, for despite the yearning of their immortal souls, human beings are doomed to failure by their mortality. Mortality is Fate; the measure of an individual is how he or she meets that inevitable end" (*Voyage Perilous* 152). My argument parallels Rosowski's in our sense of the novel's concern with weighing all human experience, especially passionate sexual love, against death. My argument differs from hers, however, in that I sense a greater degree of investment on Cather's part in the romantic love plot, Love's bid against Fate. John Driscoll dies, and Myra dies—but Myra rejects precisely those forms of safety and closure which give Nellie the illusion that Driscoll can ascend into heaven without passing through "the dark night of the grave"; Myra rejects them even though her uncle's will offers her money and protection if she repents of her runaway marriage and returns to his house, now a convent. She literally *could* come "home to die in some religious house," where the abbot or abbess would receive her "with a kiss" (73). But she

chooses not to. Instead, a true Romantic, she dies into infinitude and openness.

[\(Go back.\)](#)

8. Klein writes: "It is the struggle to get beyond the necessity of human relationships that is the secret history of all Willa Cather's novels, only as time went on, as the struggle turned, one supposes, more desperate, its nature became more apparent. . . . In *My Mortal Enemy* . . . [the enemy] is friendship and love, human relationship, itself" (xvi). [\(Go back.\)](#)

9. Hans Holbein the Younger published his series of woodcuts titled *The Dance of Death* in Lyons in 1538. [\(Go back.\)](#)

10. This is the argument advanced by Randall (310 and passim). I had assumed that Randall's argument was dated until, during the fall semester of 1987, I discovered that four or five of the most thoughtful students in my University of Virginia graduate course on Willa Cather and Ernest Hemingway felt the same. [\(Go back.\)](#)

11. Among them, Bloom and Bloom (236); West (62-63); Sergeant (226-28 and passim); Fryer (310-18). [\(Go back.\)](#)

12. In his 1970 biography of Willa Cather, James Woodress comments, "There is no doubt that the writing of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* was for Willa Cather something of a spiritual journey towards redemption. Although she had been confirmed in the Episcopal Church in 1922, the act of joining the church represented more a hope for faith than the consequence of a religious experience. This novel gave her the peace she had been seeking and the serenity to face her last two decades" (*Life and Art* 275). [\(Go back.\)](#)

13. "On *Death Comes for the Archbishop*" 9. Keeler discusses the influence of the

frescoes (251-57). ([Go back.](#))

14. Curtin (122.) reads these sentences very differently, giving them an entirely positive construction. ([Go back.](#))

15. In some of her earlier fiction, of course, Cather powerfully affirms the female body through landscape; Panther Canyon in *The Song of the Lark* is the best-known instance. The contrast with Cather's handling of the Stone Lips cave in *Archbishop* is therefore all the more striking. For discussions of Cather's gendered landscapes, see Moers (258-59); Rosowski, "Female Landscapes"; O'Brien (410-11 and passim); and Fryer. ([Go back.](#))

16. This passage directly contradicts Moers's assertion that the vagina and womb have "almost no place, so far as I have discovered, in the female literary imagination. . . . the female landscape is that 'complicated topography' to which Freud referred: external, accessible, a prominent, uneven terrain, not a hidden passageway or chamber" (257). What happens to the Bishop in the Stone Lips cave is similar to what happens to Mrs. Moore in the Marabar Caves in E. M. Forster's *Passage to India*; one difference is that what happens to her utterly transforms the vision of the novel, whereas what happens to the Bishop is repressed and its larger implications not developed. ([Go back.](#))

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