

Willa Cather

REVIEW

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New Scholarship on *My Ántonia*

Willa Cather REVIEW

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During that burning day when we were crossing Iowa, our talk kept returning to a central figure, a Bohemian girl whom we had both known long ago and whom both of us admired. More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood. To speak her name was to call up pictures of people and places, to set a quiet drama going in one's brain. I had lost sight of her altogether, but Jim had found her again after long years, and had renewed a friendship that meant a great deal to him, and out of his busy life had set apart time enough to enjoy that friendship. His mind was full of her that day. He made me see her again, feel her presence, revived all my old affection for her. ¶

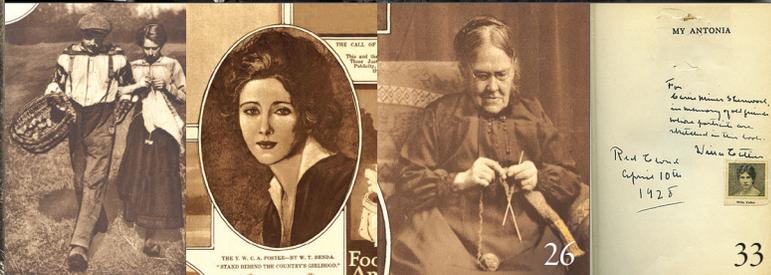
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On the cover: **Destination the Same as Ours**

Family from across the water
surrounded by utter darkness
huddled together on the platform
our new neighbors



Letter from the Executive Director Ashley Olson

As this centenary year of *My Ántonia*'s publication progresses, there's a great deal more to celebrate than just the milestone birthday of this much-loved novel. Earlier this spring, the Nebraska Legislature passed two bills that were subsequently signed into law by Governor Pete Ricketts. The passage of these bills will positively affect our mission to promote Cather's legacy through education, preservation, and the arts.

The first bill, LB 379, will (among other provisions) provide a mechanism for the Nebraska State Historical Society (now History Nebraska) to transfer ownership of six state-owned Cather historic buildings in and around Red Cloud to the Willa Cather Foundation. These historic sites include Willa Cather's Childhood Home, the Farmers and Merchants Bank, Burlington Depot, Grace Episcopal Church, St. Juliana Catholic Church, and the Pavelka Farmstead. If you've visited Red Cloud and embarked on one of our guided historic site tours, you know firsthand the significance of these sites for those looking to immerse themselves in locations connected to the life and writings of Willa Cather. While these properties have been state-owned through statute dating back to 1978, the Cather Foundation's renewed ownership

of them will create opportunities to make capital improvements and expand the interpretive experience offered through exhibits, tours, and programming.

The second bill, LB 807, calls for the return to Nebraska of statues depicting William Jennings Bryan and Julius Sterling Morton that were installed in National Statuary Hall of the U.S. Capitol in 1937. These statues are to be replaced by Ponca Chief Standing Bear and Willa Cather. That's right; a statue of a preeminent American writer will be created for addition to the National Statuary Hall Collection in the U.S. Capitol. This endeavor not only celebrates Cather as one of Nebraska's foremost citizens, but also provides some fitting acclaim as one of our nation's greatest writers.

In the months ahead, we'll be sharing more information about these projects and a new campaign to support key aspects of our strategic plan, including: restoring and interpreting the Cather Childhood Home and the Pavelka Farmstead; expanding educational offerings and outreach; addressing other capital improvement needs; and increasing our endowment. Our board and staff are eager to embark on this new chapter following the tremendous success of the award-winning National Willa Cather Center. The future holds many exciting opportunities for Cather enthusiasts. Meanwhile, we send thanks for your continued membership and support, which makes our work possible.



Letter from the President Marion A. Arneson

The life and writings of Willa Cather have been deservedly brought to the forefront during this 2018 centennial anniversary of Cather's *My Ántonia*. Attendance at the 63rd annual Willa Cather Spring Conference, dedicated to this timeless novel, was one of the largest ever, with more than 250 attendees and participants from twenty-seven states and four countries.

The exuberance and passion for Willa Cather continued "across the pond" earlier this summer at the Cather Symposium in Limavady, Northern Ireland. A centuries-old market town of some twelve thousand inhabitants, Limavady is perhaps best known for the tune "Londonderry Air," which later was used for the beloved song "Danny Boy." Cather followers enjoyed presentations over a three-day span, highlighted by special events and tours. Symposium guests were treated to a special art exhibit by Limavady youngsters in the public library, with drawings of their interpretation of the American prairie and scenes from Cather's books. Tours explored Magilligan Point and Beach and the Giant's Causeway, unique geological attractions which hold

conservation and historic significance along Ireland's northern coast. Special highlights included visits to the Magilligan Presbyterian Church in rural Limavady to view stained glass windows donated by the Cather family and a traditional Irish banquet at Drenagh, a Georgian manor built in 1835. Many participants stayed on after the closing session to tour beautiful historic Londonderry (also known as Derry), the only completely walled city remaining in Ireland.

Mark your calendars for the 17th International Willa Cather Seminar, to be held June 17–21, 2019 at Shenandoah University in Winchester, Virginia, near Cather's birthplace. In addition to visiting sites in the area where Cather spent the first nine years of her life, participants will tour Cather's first childhood home, Willow Shade, as well as spend a day in Washington, D.C.

Participation in Willa Cather events allows for international research, study, and discourse; encourages lively conversation and socializing in settings that held great meaning or provided inspiration for Cather, and gives us the opportunity to meet and interact with people from all over the world. I encourage you connect with Willa Cather's legacy by reading (and re-reading!) her works and attending the excellent educational and cultural events undertaken by the Cather Foundation and our partners.



Introduction: Jim Burden's Enduring Story

Robert Thacker

Along with most Cather scholars, I have a personal creation story involving *My Ántonia*. I first remember the novel going by in an undergraduate course on the American novel in the fall of 1972, my senior year of college. But only going by: owing to the class's structure I read another novel and just heard about Cather's book from other students' reports. Some years later, preparing for comprehensive exams and planning a dissertation on prairie fiction writ large, I finally read *My Ántonia*. To say I was bowled over does not really even approximate my reaction then; I was completely taken and shaken, transfixed by its affecting and humane story, and most especially by the way that story is told and by the role of the introduction in its

telling. And given what I was doing just then, I immediately saw *My Ántonia* as an urtext within any understanding of prairie-plains landscape and cultural adaptation by Euro-Americans to the region's salient features. If by writing *O Pioneers!* Cather taught us how to read and understand prairie-plains landscape—and she did—then with *My Ántonia*, having returned to the story of prairie-plains pioneering after writing S. S. McClure's *My Autobiography*, having drawn upon her own awakening as an artist in *The Song of the Lark*, and having tried to write "The Blue Mesa" but put it aside for several years, in that 1918 novel she taught us how to live there, telling her tale differently, and better, through Jim Burden's enduring story of his own life and of his long relation to his Ántonia.

Placing most of this in the contexts of exploration, travel, and belle-lettres prose writing set on the prairie-plains (and insisting on that designation, since I was looking at Canada as well and, for Canadians, the "plains" are "prairies"), I traced this imaginative adaptation first through a dissertation and, revised during the 1980s, as a 1989 book, *The Great Prairie Fact and Literary Imagination*. There, as I still say, Cather

got the most ink, the most attention as the single writer who transformed a landscape that most writers had seen as empty or threatening into something else. She offered the prairie-plains as habitable land, she saw the American West as Living Space, in Wallace Stegner's phrasing or, in Janis P. Stout's, she Pictured a Different West. Doing so, Cather brought the region into North American literature in ways it never

had been before—and her foremost accomplishment in this process is *My Ántonia*. Jim Burden's enduring story is one that draws us to its detail and fascinates us as readers and critics ever yet.

While this is not the place to offer an overview of the wide-ranging scholarship focused on *My Ántonia* over the past four

decades, an introduction to this issue of the *Willa Cather Review* styled "New Scholarship on *My Ántonia*" needs to say something about what has gone before and so something about where we as critics are now. In some sense the personal creation story I just offered here valorizes *My Ántonia* at a time when, in the 1970s and '80s, the novel was still seen as central to Cather's status as a regional writer. That view has changed, and changed utterly, of course. The critical signposts marking this shift are seen in the work of the late Susan J. Rosowski: *The Voyage Perilous* (1986), *Birthing a Nation* (1999), *Approaches to Teaching Willa Cather's My Ántonia* (1989), and the massive project which is the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition (1992–). Along with Rosowski there is the lifelong commitment of John J. Murphy, whose critical work on Cather began in the 1950s and continues today: his *My Ántonia: The Road Home* (1989), his *Critical Essays on Willa Cather* (1984) and his work across the whole of Cather's oeuvre, including his own editing within the Willa Cather Scholarly Edition, within many other volumes and, for many years, within this *Review*.

~~When Jim was still an obscure young lawyer, struggling to make his way in New York, his career was suddenly advanced by a brilliant marriage. Genevieve Whitney was the only daughter of a distinguished man. Her marriage with young Burden was the subject of sharp comment at the time. It was said she had been brutally jilted by her cousin, Rutland Whitney, and that she married this unknown man from the West out of bravado. She was a restless, headstrong girl, even then, who liked to astonish her friends. Later, when I knew her, she was always doing something unexpected. She gave one of her town houses for a Suffrage headquarters, produced one of her own plays at the Princess Theater, was arrested for picketing during a garment makers' strike, etc. I am never able to believe that she has much feeling for the causes to which she lends her name and her fleeting interest.~~

The images accompanying this essay show textual extracts comparing the 1918 and 1926 versions of Cather's introduction to *My Ántonia*.



Other books and works should be mentioned. Among the biographies there are Sharon O'Brien's *Willa Cather: The Emerging Voice* and James Woodress's *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, both 1987, and those by Hermione Lee (1989) and Janis P. Stout (2000). Then there are the letters. Stout's work on Cather's letters has been of singular importance, in her *Calendar of Letters* (2002) and, coedited with Andrew Jewell, in *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather* (2013); and now in the ongoing *Complete Letters*. Their availability is a game-changer. A succession of critical books, most drawing significantly on *My Ántonia*, have appeared. Throughout, too, there have been singular articles on the novel that over time have gained particular prominence and have changed the ways we think about *My Ántonia* through the imaginative power of their arguments—Blanche H. Gelfant's "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Ántonia*" (1971), Jean Schwind's "The Benda Illustrations to *My Ántonia*" (1985), and Richard H. Millington's "Willa Cather and 'The Storyteller'" (1994) are three that I would cite in this regard, but others might be mentioned too. Then there is the indispensable 1994 Scholarly Edition of the novel edited by Charles W. Mignon, Kari A. Ronning, and James Woodress.

For various reasons, the 2015 Norton Critical Edition of *My Ántonia* edited by Sharon O'Brien seems especially germane here, both by what it represents as an edition—unequivocal classic status within American Literature—and by what O'Brien included in (and excluded from) the volume she shaped. Resplendent on its cover is a photograph of the Willa Cather Memorial Prairie south of Red Cloud, the Norton edition contains sizable selections of relevant memoir, contemporary interviews with Cather, letters to and from her, a section on the timely question (now as then) of "Americanization" among immigrants, contemporary reviews, and criticism, much of which I have already mentioned here.

But there is something missing. In her own introduction O'Brien immediately asserts what needs always to be taken as a salient fact: "It was in *My Ántonia*, however, that Cather most fully transformed memory into art and created her most autobiographical novel" (vii). This was and is most certainly so,

and O'Brien continues to offer a sound contextualization of the novel, giving readers an account of Cather, the book's publishing history, its reception, and her own secondary inclusions. Taking up Cather's correspondence with her editor at Houghton Mifflin, Ferris Greenslet, O'Brien argues effectively that Cather "had a complex, contradictory view of *My Ántonia* as a literary commodity" (xii). She certainly did, and this was made all the more urgent by the fact that by then Cather's dissatisfaction with Houghton Mifflin was already evident. (Cather's dissatisfaction did not extend to Greenslet himself, who remained a lifelong friend after her move to Knopf.) Treating this, O'Brien spends considerable space on the novel's 1926 revised edition, where "the major change was Cather's extensive revising and cutting of the Introduction, in which an unnamed narrator describes her train journey with Jim Burden and their reminiscences about Ántonia" (xiii).

To my mind, this shift in the introduction is another salient fact in Cather's and the book's history, and so I confess that O'Brien's decision to return to the 1926 introduction in the Norton—it had long been the norm in Houghton Mifflin editions but since the Scholarly Edition appeared the 1918 version has been ascendant—is one I find disquieting. It is the only introduction in this prominent edition, and I wonder why the first version is not included for purposes of comparison.

In the "Note on the Text" here someone (probably O'Brien) has written "This Norton Critical Edition incorporates the 1926 introduction into the 1918 text (the version that represents Cather's original conception of the work)." While I

should think that "original conception of the work" means the 1918 text *with* its introduction, the point here is that by revising the introduction—just after, quite significantly—she completed *The Professor's House*, Cather was fundamentally, and quite consciously, changing the ways readers read *My Ántonia*. As O'Brien quite rightly asserts as she concludes her discussion of the two versions, "the meaning of the 1918 *My Ántonia* is doubly indeterminate, because we have both an unreliable narrator/writer (Jim) and an unreliable editor/writer (the narrator of the Introduction)" (xv). In 1926 Cather revised the earlier version and so offered a quite a different book,

During that burning day when we were crossing Iowa, our talk kept returning to a central figure, a Bohemian girl whom we had both known long ago and whom both of us admired. More than any other person we remembered, this girl seemed to mean to us the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood. To speak her name was to call up pictures of people and places, to set a quiet drama going in one's brain. I had lost sight of her altogether, but Jim had found her again after long years, and had renewed a friendship that meant a great deal to him, and out of his busy life had set apart time enough to enjoy that friendship. His mind was full of her that day. He made me see her again, feel her presence, revived all my old affection for her.¶



one not nearly so uncertainly vexing to its readers as is the original. But critics are a different matter. Once Cather had tipped her hand through the 1918 introduction with respect to the indeterminacy of Jim's position in relation to "the unreliable editor/writer" who narrates it, she could not go back. Thus the privileging of the 1926 introduction over the 1918 here is not only disquieting, it is a mistake.

While I have an argument I prefer about all this—it moves from McClure's autobiography through *The Song of the Lark* through "The Blue Mesa" ("Tom Outland's Story") to the structure of *The Professor's House* and to the provenance of *My Mortal Enemy*—I will not detail it here. Rather, it seems that this absence in O'Brien's edition demonstrates yet again that the structures of the enduring story Jim Burden tells—who he is, why he writes what he does, how he is creating his *Ántonia*—continue to demand sharp critical scrutiny and debate. Always. By "transforming memory into art," as O'Brien says, Cather produced not only "her most autobiographical novel" but, as was immediately recognized, a novel that did not seem a novel at all. "Life itself," as Cather has it in *The Song of the Lark* (335) or as the reviewer from the (New York) *Sun*, highlighted by Max Frazier in her article here, had it, "You picked up *My Antonia* to read a novel (love story, of course; hope it's a good one) and find yourself enthralled by autobiography." This reviewer also wrote, "but now you are positively uncomfortable from page to page with the conviction that all of this happened!" ("My Nebraska Antonia"). This was a notice that especially pleased Cather herself. Well it should have done, for it was evident that with *My Ántonia* Cather had reached the level of high artistry she had been striving toward from her very beginnings, and which she would continue to pursue and achieve in the years following this novel, the classic of American fiction celebrating its centennial this year, still in print, still being read and reread.



The three fine essays we offer here all deal in matters of sources and so, by extension, with Cather's engagement with the world around her as she wrote. The opening essay, a part of Evelyn I. Funda's ongoing analyses of Cather's use of

Bohemian cultural sources, makes a compelling case for Joseph Anthony's *Rekindled Fires* as an almost exactly contemporary novel which dealt in different but parallel ways with the urban Bohemian immigrant experience, one Cather alludes to in both *My Ántonia* and "Neighbour Rosicky." Whether or not Cather knew Anthony's novel—and I am inclined to think she must have—the parallels are both compelling and speak to

questions of ethnicity in 1918 as they do now. Just as Funda's essay has us wondering just what Cather was doing with her source influences, so too John Jacobs with his argument that, in addition to Virgil's *Georgics*, Lucretius and his *On the Nature of*

Things offer salient parallels to the story Cather tells in *My Ántonia*. Strikingly so. That Cather began with the classics is not news, of course, but Jacobs's argument is one that deepens and connects as it illuminates. Here again, I find myself convinced that this "new" source was one which Cather had to have had in mind, certainly, and may even had at hand in the midst of her composition. Max Frazier's essay, already mentioned, concludes this group of essays by pointing up and detailing another salient fact: that *My Ántonia* is for Cather another war novel, that its language and allusions—despite its retrospective cast—could not escape the pressing and horrific times during which it was composed. Altogether, these three critics offer us new scholarship on *My Ántonia* at a time when the enduring story it tells—"the conviction that all this happened!"—is as striking and compelling today as it was a hundred years ago. The best years are the first to flee.

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When I told him that I would like to read his account of her, he said I should certainly see it—if it were ever finished.¶

Months afterward, Jim Burden arrived called at my apartment one stormy winter afternoon, with carrying a bulging legal portfolio sheltered under his fur overcoat. He brought it into the sitting room with him, and tapped it with some pridesaid, as he stood warming his hands.¶

"I finished it last night—"Here is the thing about Ántonia," he said. "Now, what about yours?"¶

I had to confess that mine had not gone beyond a few straggling notes.¶



Rekindled Fires and *My Ántonia*: The Bohemian Immigrant Novels of 1918

Evelyn I. Funda | Utah State University

Against the backdrop of the closing months of the First World War and the Czech and Slovak political struggle to establish an independent nation,¹ a reviewer for the *New York Times* claimed on May 12, 1918 that a new novel about Bohemian-Americans was “a novel of Americanization. But the most interesting thing about its theme is that it . . . is the story of assimilation, too, of what the immigrant himself brings.” The reviewer praised the novel as “an interesting story of youth, ambition, ideals, told with sympathy,” offering “vivid little sketches of Bohemians” (“Latest Works of Fiction”). Also in May, the *Bookman* published the first of two notices on this book, saying it demonstrated “broad humanity and romance in the telling of this novel of youth, Americanisation, and Old-World ideals rekindled on new hearths” (“Chronicle and Comment” 311). In a review by H. W. Boynton later that same year, the *Bookman* added that this novel, which was “original in its scene and characters,” was bringing “new blood, and force, into the field of American thought.” Asserting that “the strangers who come to our shores are not of necessity merely parasites or tough material to be somehow assimilated—made over into our own likeness,” this reviewer said that the immigrant characters in the novel had a “capacity for toil” and “the wistful idealism” of their race. He called them “apostles of their own traditions and ideals, ready and able to make their own contributions in sturdiness, thrift, and even idealism to the sum of our national character” (“Paths and Goals” 682–683).

It may surprise some to know that these reviews were not about Willa Cather’s *My Ántonia*. They referred, instead, to *Rekindled Fires*, a first novel by Joseph Anthony, a recent graduate of Columbia University and the son of Jewish Hungarian immigrants.² Released in April of 1918, it was published by Henry Holt nearly six months before *My Ántonia*—meaning that, to borrow a well-known phrase of Cather’s, as far as our country’s first English-language novels focused on Bohemian immigrants were concerned, “there were two.”³ Today, however, Anthony’s work is all but forgotten, perhaps because its ultimate optimism and obvious labor-rights and religious agendas were unpopular in the decade following the war.⁴

Following *Rekindled Fires* and while he was working as a journalist at the *Newark Evening News*, Joseph Anthony would go on to write other novels that also demonstrated a deep understanding of urban immigrant culture in America, including

one about street gangs in New York City and another about rural Romanian immigrants, both of which were praised for accurate depictions of ethnic American cultures. The *Bookman* reviewer for his second novel (*The Gang*, 1921) wrote, “He understands his New York, and its street life. . . [and] the countless little ceremonies that attend the rites peculiar to the New York gamine, the codes and the morals, the legends and the heroes,” and the reviewer predicted that his third novel (*The Golden Village*, 1924) would show “the psychological effect of the setting down in America of a group of Rumanian colonists with their old-world color and legendry” (Review 192). After being employed by several publishing houses in New York and London and then by the War Department in publicity, Anthony moved to Hollywood, where he wrote screenplays for films starring Cary Grant, Broderick Crawford, and Rita Hayworth. Perhaps most famously, he has a screenplay credit on the 1935 Peter Lorre film *Crime and Punishment*. In 1936, he would team up to write the screenplay *Lady of Secrets* with Cather’s good friend Zoë Akins.

While there is no evidence that Cather ever met Anthony or any explicit indication that she read his novel, the timeline and the public record imply that, at the very least, it would be hard for Cather not to know of the existence of *Rekindled Fires*. In May 1918 when the *New York Times* review and the first review from the *Bookman* appeared, Cather was in New York finishing up copy for *My Ántonia*. Surely that was a moment when she would have noticed another new novel apparently built on the same thematic foundation as her own and also written about Bohemian immigrants, a group essentially unheard of in American letters prior to that year. Although the second *Bookman* review, written by H. W. Boynton, came out that August, while she was in the West waiting for *My Ántonia*’s release and planning her next novel by reading the letters of G. P. Cather, she regularly kept up with that publication and in fact Boynton had already favorably reviewed both *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark* in the *New York Evening Post*. Cather had written to him on December 6, 1915 to thank him for those reviews (*Selected Letters* 211), and had also invited him to tea at the Bank Street apartment in 1916 (*Calendar of Letters* no. 2040).

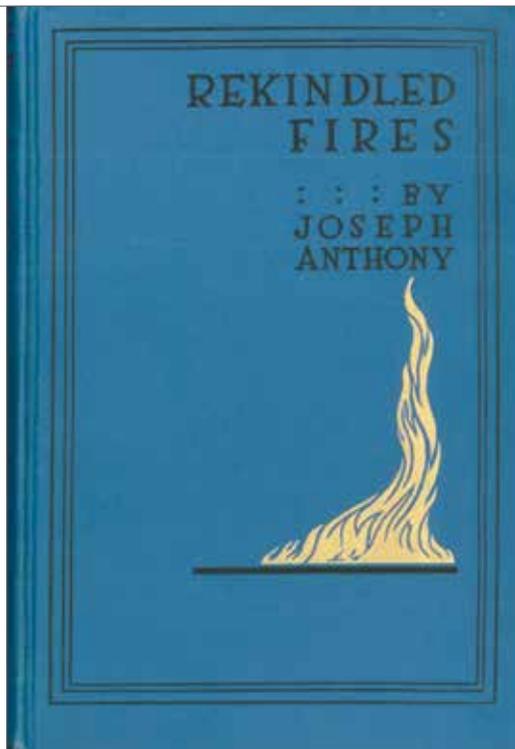
In early December of 1918, she wrote R. L. Scaife at Houghton Mifflin pointedly asking if *My Ántonia* had been



sent to the *Bookman*. This letter, in fact, was written just days before Boynton's review of *My Ántonia* appeared in the magazine. On balance, Boynton's review of Cather's novel seems glowing. He calls her an "accomplished artist" and says that "casual as her touches seem, no stroke is superfluous or wrongly emphasized," and "the total effect of the portrait is owing to the quiet beauty and purity of the artist's style." Even so, ultimately Boynton's review failed to satisfy Cather, perhaps because he had equivocated when he wrote, "On the surface it . . . might be called artless and deficient in action" ("All Sorts" 495). A year later, she would complain in a letter to Greenslet that the *Bookman* never gave her writing its due (*Calendar of Letters* no. 489), and as for Boynton, there is no record of further correspondence. If Cather was aware of

Anthony's novel and the reception it had received, one partial explanation for her dissatisfaction might be that she recognized that the Boynton review of Anthony's novel had been slightly longer (more than a hundred lines compared to hers, less than seventy-five) and had seemed more effusive in comparison to his assessment of *My Ántonia*.

In his 2004 essay "The Bohemian Paradox: *My Ántonia* and Popular Images of Czech Immigrants," Tim Prchal does point to Anthony's novel as context for Cather's novel, specifically as an example of American suspicion of Bohemian religious and philosophical notions, but he writes that Cather "stays clear" of many of the religious issues at the center of Anthony's novel (12). Beyond that and a brief reference to music in the two novels, he does not elaborate on points of comparison between Cather and Anthony. Yet, as I see it, the real value of considering Anthony's 1918 novel with Cather's is to recognize how fully Cather's work was in dialogue, not with Anthony's novel specifically, but with the ethnic culture and literature that is represented by *Rekindled Fires*. Both their 1918 novels offer truthful depictions of Czech-speaking immigrants in ways that assiduously defy the tendency in American fiction of portraying immigrants as caricatures, a trend of stereotyping that Cather would recall in her essay "My First Novels (There Were Two)," when she lamented that the Swede "never appeared on the printed page in this country except in broadly humorous sketches" that solely focused on "his physical strength, and his inability to pronounce the letter 'j'" (94–95).



Joseph Anthony's *Rekindled Fires*, published in 1918 by Henry Holt and Company.

Rekindled Fires has two main plot lines; the first two-thirds of the novel is a *Bildungsroman* about the main character's formative years, followed by an *Erziehungsroman*—that is, the story of a formal education. The first portion is set in a fictional industrial town of Creekville, New Jersey, which has a large immigrant population of Germans and Bohemians who are employed in local factories and local shops. Likely patterned after towns near either Passaic or Hackensack, where Anthony's family had moved after several years in the tenement settlements of the East Harlem neighborhood of New York, the setting is still decidedly urban, and characters live either in tenements or in homes over storefronts. The novel focuses on Stanislav Zabransky (Americanized to "Stanley Zabriskie"),

the son of working-class Bohemian immigrants. Although by trade his father is a shopkeeper and shoemaker, Michael Zabransky is at heart an intellectual who is known in their community as a fine orator and a leader in the local school board. Stanley excels in school and has made an unlikely but influential friendship with a middle-class American boy named Harry Johnston from the adjacent and more prosperous town of Milford. When his father is hospitalized for a long period, the fourteen-year-old Stanley has to leave school to take a three-dollar-a-week job in a cigar factory and assume many of his father's roles as a leader in the family and the local immigrant community.⁵ While he tries to keep up his studies at night, Stanley also gets involved in the politics of both the Cigar Maker's union and his father's Bohemian Lodge. When his father is released from the hospital, Stanley manages to distract him from worries about hospital bills by engaging him in a series of philosophical debates. These exchanges especially concern education and his father's long-held freethinker ideals, including his belief that rather than the world being an orderly creation of God, nature is "an assertion of anarchy universal . . . first and foremost a denial of God [as well as] a denial of authority in all forms and of purpose itself" (147). On religious matters, Michael Zabransky tells his son, "Stanislav . . . if anyvun tell you you got a soul, und dot soul liff always, dot ees bunk. Ef ryting vich liff got to die—dot's Natchert. . . You on'y got vunce to liff; vy you *shouldn't* liff right?" (147).

At this point, we can recognize some coincidental plot similarities with Cather's novel: both works portray a cross-cultural, cross-class friendship of young adults, an important father-child relationship, the main character assuming significant family responsibilities at a very young age, and an immigrant culture shaped by a non-Protestant American world view.

More interesting, however, are the differences. As the above quotation from Anthony demonstrates, Cather displays a keener sense of the subtleties of the Bohemian immigrant speech. Rather than Germanizing the sound of a character to portray a thick accent, as Anthony seems to do with Michael in a way that broaches on the kind of stereotyping Cather disliked, her depictions focus on the grammatical constructions of a Bohemian immigrant learning English; for instance, in the scene where *Ántonia* asks Jim "What name?" instead of "what is the name?", Cather drops the definitive article "the," as a Czech speaker would often do. Cather uses Czech words like "*Tatinek*" for "father," and her only depictions of accent emphasize the Czech emphasis on the first syllable, as in "*Án-tonia*" (25–26). Cather's more subtle approach may have been due to more extensive exposure to Bohemian immigrants than Anthony and to her "habit," as she said in a 1921 *Bookman* interview, "of remembering mannerisms, turns of speech [and] phraseology of those people" (Carroll 20).

Anthony's novel also offers an urban correlative to Cather's *My Ántonia* in its portrayal of immigrant community, religious practices, and occupations. In a December 1924 interview published in the *New York Times Book Review*, Cather claimed that although her main character was "tied to the soil," she could just have easily written "the tale of a Czech baker in Chicago, and it would have been the same. It was nice to have [*Ántonia*] in the country; it was more simple to handle, but Chicago could have told the same story. It would have been smearier, joltier, noisier . . . but still a story that had as its purpose the desire to express the quality of these people. No, the country has nothing to do with it; the city has nothing to do with it" (Feld 72). While it could be argued that in Cather's short story "Neighbour Rosicky"—in which many of the key remembered scenes in the "smearier, joltier, noisier" cities of London and New York are set against the Rosicky's rural farmstead—the setting of city versus country had *everything* to do

with the formation of the main character's set of values, Cather is signaling here that in the 1918 novel, the key was how the Czechs' ancestral history and culture shaped their experience of settling in a new world. In this regard, *Rekindled Fires* is the other side of the coin, offering us a glimpse into that alternative novel of Chicago Shimerdas, and in doing so, it highlights some of the choices Cather did make.

Living as she then did in the ethnically diverse hive of New York City, for instance, Cather undoubtedly saw such working-class Bohemians as the Zabranskys in the immigrant neighborhood of Yorkville on the Upper East Side. She would have seen how cigar-making along with metal work, pearl button-

making, and other forms of garment work were leading forms of employment among Czech-speaking immigrants (Čapek 81). Factory work often led Czechs like Stanley to join unions and side with the leftist politics prevalent during the Progressive era. In their urban neighborhoods, Czechs also maintained notably tight community ties, freely held their lodge meetings, and took active roles in the education of their children. They were active on school boards and set up free Czech language schools after hours that emphasized the importance of maintaining their mother tongue as an expression of the Czech belief that the language was an important embodiment of cultural identity and nationhood. They were also involved in unionization activities in the factories, which served both a social and political function. For instance, in union meetings

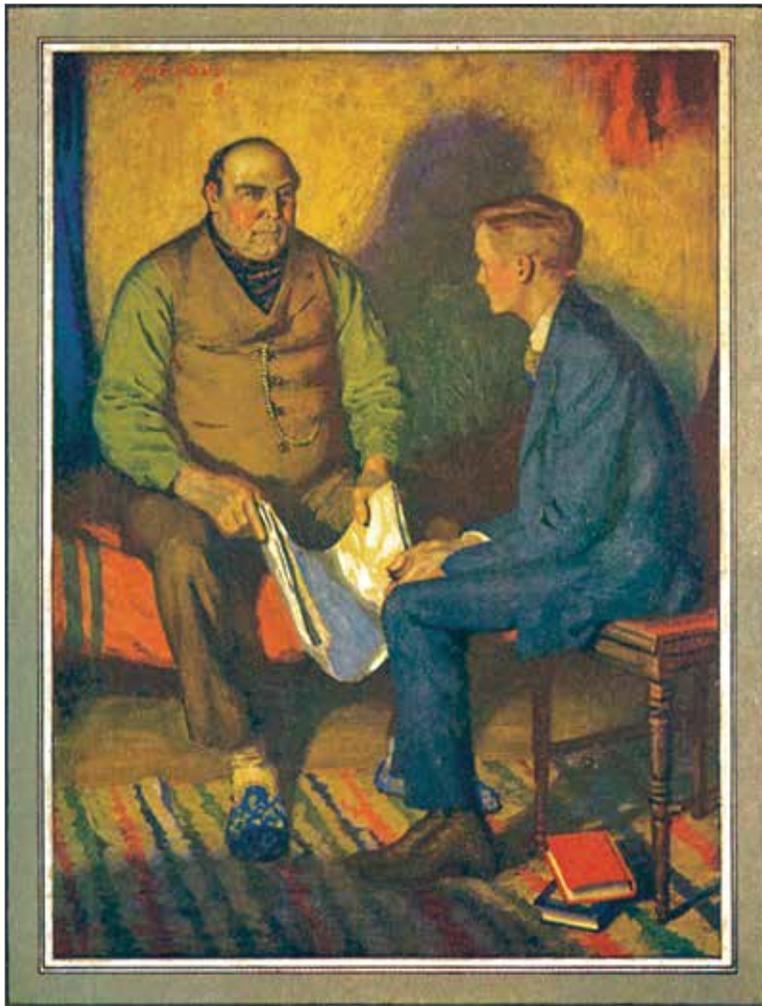
described in *Rekindled Fires*, the progress of union business is regularly punctuated by a character striking up a Czech song on the accordion while the others dance and sing, and at one point the response to Stanley's call for a strike for structural changes in the factory that would ensure better ventilation on the shop floor is a comical scene in which union members turn what might have been a "bloody revolution" into a parade, complete with American flags, a stop at a saloon, speeches, and plenty of lively music (213).

More seriously, however, Anthony portrays how the unionization efforts and organized labor movements offer Stanley's community a political agency that the Shimerda family lacks. While the Zabranskys are involved in a vital cultural community where their ancestral language continues to be part



Joseph Anthony. This image accompanied the "Chronicle and Comment" review of *Rekindled Fires* in the *Bookman*, May 1918.





Stanley and his father are depicted in the frontispiece to *Rekindled Fires* by “J. Ormsbee,” who was the American painter and illustrator James Ormsbee Chapin.

of their working lives and they make decisions, for instance, that directly affect how their children are educated, Cather depicts how isolated are the Bohemian immigrants in the small plains towns and how much not knowing the language hinders their involvement in the community. At first the Shimerdas avoid going into the town of Black Hawk because Krajiek warned that they would lose all their money there (31). *Ántonia*’s father is adamant that she learn the language as soon as possible, and she is very aware of his isolation and how much he misses the company of fellow musicians from the old country or the priests who sought him out to talk about books (86, 119). Even after Mr. Shimerda’s death and once the family has settled in, they remain socially insulated, viewing the town of Black Hawk with such suspicion that *Ántonia* is only allowed to go to town to be a hired girl after much negotiation with Mrs. Harling.

Historically speaking, however, rural Bohemian immigrants were actually rather quick to establish cultural communities through religious or secular gatherings or periodical publications. David Murphy outlines how local drama societies, which began to be established in rural Nebraska as early as 1869 and more than a

decade prior to the arrival of Anna Sadilek’s family in 1880, were a “means of maintaining national identity . . . and promot[ing] explicitly national cultural and political ends” (169). Nebraska historian Bruce Garver discusses how important and intellectually vibrant were the numerous Czech-language periodicals in Nebraska that began with the founding of the newspaper *Pokrok Západu* in Omaha in 1871 (“Czech-American Freethinkers” 150). Yet Cather holds off in portraying that kind of vibrant Bohemian community until the “Cuzak’s Boys” chapter when Cuzak and his son happily return from the street fair in Wilber and Cuzak brings the latest Czech-language newspapers. Thus Cather emphasizes that *Ántonia*’s husband enjoys the benefits of a supportive immigrant community that her father, at his lowest moment, could not have predicted would be reconstructed in the new world.⁶

In both Cather’s and Anthony’s novels, religious difference is an important conflict, but again, the two novelists come at the religious question in distinct ways. In *My Ántonia*, the Shimerdas retain their Catholic faith so closely that Grandfather Burden feels the need to “Protestantiz[e]” the moment Mr. Shimerda kneels before the Christmas tree, and at the time of Mr. Shimerda’s death, the Bohemian family’s insistence on where to bury the body and the rituals of each family member making the sign of the cross over Mr. Shimerda’s bandaged head raise suspicion about their faith, leading Grandmother Burden to call for a hymn to make the occasion “seem less heathenish” (84, 113).

Using the Shimerda’s religion as another marker of difference, Cather’s narrative engages in the national anti-Catholic debate, but Anthony explores another aspect of the significant anti-Catholic, anti-cleric sentiment, as expressed by Bohemian freethinkers, that existed *within* many Czech communities. According to historian Thomas Čapek, while Nebraska claimed the third highest Czech-Catholic population in the country in 1917, nationally Bohemian immigrants could also claim the highest number of any immigrant group to be, as the Zabranskys were, freethinkers, agnostics, atheists, secularists, or rationalists (Čapek 247). Czech immigrants gave up church affiliations upon entry into this country at the rate of somewhere between fifty and seventy percent (119). Garver, in an essay he subtitled “A Minority Within a Minority,” estimates that among Czech immigrants in the 1910s, freethinkers actually stood in the majority, both nationally and in Nebraska, where the only exception was Saunders County, just north of Lincoln (150–151). The percentages of freethinkers among the Bohemian immigrants, says Garver, are “what most distinguished Czechs from other immigrant groups” (“Czech-American Freethinkers” 148). In Clinton Machann’s essay on religious attitudes of the early

Czech immigrants, he asserts that “Czech-American society and culture, seen as a whole in the period 1860–1920, was dominated by the Freethought Movement.” Citing figures that claim that in 1920, only sixty-two percent of Czechs living in New York City professed no religious affiliation, Machann concludes that the majority of freethinkers had “simply drifted away from the Church” in their pursuit of “a ‘scientific’ and ‘rational’ approach to life,” while a powerful minority “saw the movement as a sort of crusade against organized religion” (168–169).

People who identified as freethinkers—especially freethinkers who became involved in labor movements—faced their own prejudices in the U.S., where the government worried that foreigners without any stated religious affiliation might be social anarchists. But freethinkers, shaped by centuries of oppression, believed in reason over institutional worship and the maintenance of their ancestral language and distinct folk life.

Čapek traces the freethinker movement in America back to the Old World Hussite movement, the Bohemian Reformation movement that dated back to Jan Hus and the fifteenth century. Čapek writes that “the Čech’s inclination to dissent, to question, to challenge, to dispute, is largely inherited from his Hussite forefathers” (122). After this groundwork was laid, the era of the Habsburg dynastic expansion throughout Central Europe continued to build religious and national tensions, especially after Bohemians lost the Battle of White Mountain in 1620 to the Austrian Habsburg monarch, which then consolidated power by ousting from Bohemia all non-Catholic priests. Catholicism was proclaimed the national religion of the entire Austrian Habsburg empire and German its official language. Issues of religious freedom and language maintenance thereafter dominated the debate between Bohemians and the ruling Austrian empire (later known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire). As a result, writes Čapek, the Czech-speaking immigrant “burst forth with elemental strength the moment he landed in America, where he could speak, act, and think free from the oppression to which he was subject in his native land” (122–123). Thus, political and religious choice were inextricably intertwined with their notions of nationhood and patriotism.⁷

Like his treatment of Bohemian work conditions in the factories, Bohemian political sympathies, or his understanding of something as ordinary as Czech cuisine, Joseph Anthony’s portrayal of the complexity of the religious issue is remarkable—all the more so when we recognize that his own family was Jewish and suffered prejudices aimed at Jewish immigrants in New York. His brother Edward Anthony, a successful writer and publisher, would write in his autobiography that, “I do remember that during the night someone had tossed a rock through the glass store front

of my father’s shop and there was pasted on one of the surviving stretches of plate glass the legend CHRIST KILLER” (18). This was only one of many times during his childhood in New York that Edward Anthony heard this particular racial epithet.

In *Rekindled Fires*, Joseph Anthony’s understanding of the forces behind the freethinker movement is especially evident in Michael Zabransky’s speech before the Sons of Bohemia lodge meeting when he says:

Most of us present tonight, ve are here to se-cure der liberty dot ve could not get in de old country. Here ve are masters, ve are bosses, ve are kings! . . . In Bohemia de Chermans got us und dey choked us und dey throttled us, und den dey couldn’t sqveeze us hard enough mit noblemen und taxes, dey tried it mit priests. Ve fought deir nobles und ve laughed at deir priests. For dis mine grandfadder died mit a gun in his hands; for dis I will knock de block off from efery Cherman dot tells me I shall respect “mine king,” und efery priest dot asks for mine hard-earned dollars to mumble for me his hocus-pocus. (31–32).

Anthony’s novel shows that far from being anarchists, freethinkers thought of themselves as “spreading Bohemian ideals of liberty” (219). As such, they embody many of the essential American values that Cather’s Jim Burden talks of in the novel: self-determination, fluidity of class, family responsibility, and patriotism—that is, a devotion to the “patria” (homeland) that does not negate their commitment to their new nation.



Burning of Jan Hus at the stake at Konstanz in 1415. From the *Spiezer Chronik* (1485) by the chronicler Diebold Schilling the Elder, held by the Burgerbibliothek, Bern.



Rekindled Fires points us to recognize that religious affiliation was not a given among Czechs as it was for many other ethnic groups, and we see how Cather subtly refers to the forces behind this contested religious history in *My Antonia* when Otto Fuchs advises Grandmother Burden that “Bohemians has a natural distrust of Austrians,” and he explains only that the reason is complex and has to do with politics (20). Fuchs’s comment is Cather’s acknowledgement that the Shimerdas hold to their faith within a hotly disputed cultural debate taking place.

These two 1918 novels, therefore, are similarly debating whether religion is a useful philosophy, a strange superstition, a meaningful belief that brings comfort and order, or an exertion of political power. In these terms, Anthony’s novel could have influenced Cather in the writing of her next novel, *One of Ours*, a book that she was planning during the late summer of 1918, when the reviews of *Rekindled Fires* were still coming out. The potential connection to Cather is most evident in the second portion of Anthony’s novel where he moves into the story of a formal education, one that parallels the education story of both Jim Burden and Claude Wheeler.

As medical bills from Stanley’s father’s illness mount, Stanley must go to work at the cigar factory and give up any other ambitions. Anthony writes that Stanley saw “as clearly as ever Joan of Arc beheld her heaven-sent duty, his mission as the last prop of the falling house of Zabransky” (98). Still, he keeps up with his studies at night with the help of some tutoring by his teacher. His father, under the guise of having Stanley teach *him* English grammar, also enriches his son’s education during the evenings when the two discuss philosophy, and these conversations carry over into heated arguments between Stanley and his friend Harry about religion. When Harry expresses surprise that Stanley is an atheist freethinker and asks if he is an anarchist, Stanley makes an impassioned speech in which he builds on his father’s “dazzling truths, translating them into terms [Harry] could understand, framing parables to

fit them. Now, as he explained the nature and workings of the universe to Harry, it was not his father’s ideas alone that he drew upon; there were many things of his own in this universe he was expounding” (161).

Meanwhile, having won the respect of his fellow cigar workers for his work in the union, Stanley’s community surprises him with the presentation of a new suit and a small fund to attend Rutgers University. In a scene reminiscent of a religious calling, Stanley’s employer makes a speech in which he says they were gathering “to select one of our number, a boy who was born among us and is one of us to carry on the ideals we have lived for, by means of the education that we ourselves have never been able to secure” (217). Stanley knows that he is expected “to represent the Sons of Bohemia and the Cigar-makers’ Union by spreading Bohemian ideals of liberty” (219). His father, too, implores him to “Get a good edg-oo-cation” (271).⁸

Having rekindled the fires of his imagination and ambition, Stanley meets up again with Harry at Rutgers, yet now he is unfazed by class distinctions between himself and well-to-do American-born students of Harry’s ilk. Stanley also refuses to be embarrassed, at least outwardly, by the financial necessity of peddling cigars to local businesses and his fellow students to cover his daily expenses, and over time he comes to see Harry’s



“Bohemian cigar makers at work in their tenement” ca. 1890 by Jacob A. Riis (1849–1914). Museum of the City of New York 90-13-1-150.

world as materialistic and bankrupt of meaning or purpose. He has little interest in trying to fit in with his classmates, ignoring their comments on his unfashionable suit, refusing to wear the cap that marks him as a freshman, and getting an exemption from Protestant chapel services because the registrar automatically assumes that the Bohemian young man is a Catholic. He humorously diffuses a hazing incident by playing on his violin a piece of Bohemian music that functions as a refrain throughout the novel. The “Martyr of Constance” is described as a “weird” but “noble piece of music” that depicts the burning at the stake in 1415 of the Czech national hero Jan Hus, the pre-Reformation philosopher and church reformer who had challenged the authority of the Roman Catholic church to tax peasants, denounced the moral failings of its clergy, and conducted his services in the Czech language rather than Latin (29, 255).⁹ Hus is venerated in the Czech lands as one who spotlighted the Catholic church’s overreaching powers in matters of national sovereignty within the Austrian empire, the very issue that Otto Fuchs referred to in *My Antonia*.

While Stanley’s peers struggle in classes, he thinks that education was “the most glorious form of play in the world” that offers “adventure, true lively romance . . . [and] delight” (325, 231). In a philosophy class where he answers the professor’s question about the purpose of philosophy by asserting that it is poetry, he is undaunted by the professor’s claim that his was “a very interesting and very wrong-headed idea.” With “great gusto,” the professor and student begin a heated discussion in which “Stanley returned blow for blow, with a savagery that surprised even himself” (307). Although his father had hoped his union activities would lead him to a future in politics, Anthony writes that “there was no doubt about his possessing the divine madness that a philosopher has to have” (163). Influenced by his father’s Bohemian freethinker philosophy, which Anthony characterizes as as much a part of Stanley’s daily life as air and his mother’s daily soups (262), he writes a thesis on epistemology arguing that philosophy is and must be poetry. The novel closes as Stanley delivers his thesis to his professor who suggests he publish the manifesto and then accept a job teaching philosophy at a college in Missouri. Anthony’s story ends there, not with the martyr’s pyre but with fires of imagination and achievement “rekindled.” To use Cather’s term, Stanley has realized the “something splendid” that will drive the rest of his life for the life of the mind. He is now a cultural insider, fully assimilated into an American community where he is entrusted with the education of others. Yet, in a story where the music about Hus’s martyrdom echoes, it is also clear that Stanley’s philosophical ideology is and always will be shaped by his Bohemian cultural background. The Hus

story is broadened from a story of religious freedom to one about freedom of thought.

So many moments in Cather’s *One of Ours* seem like they could be direct responses—often inversions of what Anthony did in this portion of his narrative—that it is hard to believe Cather was not aware of *Rekindled Fires*, even as she was basing her novel on the life of her cousin G. P. Cather. Instead of having Stanley’s supportive community backing and the blessing of his father, Claude’s own community and family seem mistrustful of, even hostile to, his university education. Although Claude hungers for the enlightenment that a state university education represents, his father believes that going to anything but the denominational college where he is enrolled is a waste of time and money and likely to make him “too knowing, and to be offensively intelligent at home.” His mother believes that “one should learn, not think; and above all, one must not enquire. . . . The mind should remain obediently within the theological concept of history” (42). Stanley’s family and community, on the other hand, abide by the Czech thinker Jan Komensky’s “pansophic” educational reform, which embraced all knowledge and said that a university education needed to be an international education fully based on inquiry and investigation. Unlike Claude, Stanley is encouraged by his family to question and explore intellectually. While Stanley recognizes the class distinctions at the university, he is not bothered by them in the way that Claude is, for instance, when he worries whether or not clothes that he buys are fashionable or when he laments “his frail claim” on the lively intellectual life in the Erlich home (121).

The cross-cultural, cross-class friendship of Stanley and Harry is similar to the friendship between Claude Wheeler and his Bohemian freethinker friend, Ernest Havel, and Cather’s descriptions of her secondary character Ernest sound very much as if she were describing Stanley Zabriskie, as when she writes, “The Bohemian boy was never uncertain, was not pulled in two or three ways at once. He was simple and direct. He had a number of impersonal preoccupations; was interested in politics and history and in new inventions. Claude felt that his friend lived in an atmosphere of mental liberty” (23).¹⁰ When Claude defies his parents and signs up for a European history course at the state university in Lincoln, he seems aware that Ernest might be better fit for the experience: “How often he had wished for Ernest during the lectures! He could see Ernest drinking them up, agreeing or dissenting in his independent way (58). Like the characters in Anthony’s novel, the two frequently discuss religion, history, the future, and what it takes to make human life meaningful. But in spite of Ernest’s intellectual capacity and his ability “to state clearly just why he believed this or that”), he had resigned himself, like Stanley in the first half of Anthony’s novel, to a life where he



would go no further than his own farm. “That’s enough,” he says, “if it turns out right, isn’t it?” (78). When Claude argues that “The martyrs must have found something outside themselves,” Ernest’s reply is that “they were the ones who had nothing but their idea! It would be ridiculous to get burned at the stake for the sensation. Sometimes I think the martyrs had a good deal of vanity to help them along, too” (79–80). Nevertheless, Claude venerates the martyrs’ strength of conviction and refusal to renounce their beliefs, even when faced with the fires. He carries that attitude over into his sense of the war, which for him is as abstract, exotic, and foreign (both geographically and as a concept) as Jeanne d’Arc’s martyrdom.¹¹

Although both authors make reference to national heroes associated with crucial wars of national sovereignty—heroes who were accused of heresy and ultimately burned at the stake after long and famous trials (Hus in 1415, Joan of Arc in 1431)—Stanley’s attitudes about war and martyrdom are much more personal and particular. The repeated references to the music of “The Martyr of Constance” suggests that Stanley is more interested in someone who represents reason and rationality, a power that the human mind can access directly. Hus’s message was that the church needed to rid itself of corruption and that church officials should take no actions in matters of the state. Thus, Stanley is less interested in a martyr who claims divine guidance and more influenced by his father’s Hussite-inspired beliefs that nature is “a denial of God . . . a denial of authority in all forms” (147). In Michael Zabransky’s speech about liberty, he had hinted at the centuries-old, nationalist, and imperialist conflicts that would lead to World War I: “Ve fought deir nobles und ve laughed at deir priests. For dis mine grandfadder died” (32). In a moment as important to Stanley’s education as any university lecture, Stanley hears the fuller story. Michael tells Stanley about how his great-grandfather and fellow villagers fought land annexation by an Austrian nobleman by destroying the three-hundred-year-old village fish pond rather than let the nobleman have it. When the Emperor sent in his soldiers, Stanley’s great-grandfather shot three of the soldiers before he was killed (148–149). While World War I is not



Jan Hus at the Council of Constance (1842) by Karl Friedrich Lessing. Städels Museum, Frankfurt am Main.

directly mentioned in *Rekindled Fires*, Anthony uses the story of this battle to encapsulate the nationalist and imperialist conflicts that would directly lead to that war.

In Cather’s novel, Ernest Havel’s perspective on war is similar in the way it moves from political power—“The German army will go where it pleases”—to talk of the personal consequences of the exertion of that power. Referring to the conscription practices of the Austrian army, he says, “If I were at home . . . I would be in the Austrian army this minute. I guess all my cousins and nephews

are fighting the Russians or the Belgians already. How would you like it yourself, to be marched into a peaceful country like this, in the middle of harvest, and begin to destroy it?” (222). Although the actors in Ernest’s story are compelled to destroy the harvest rather than choosing to do so to keep it out of the hands of an invading force, in both cases Cather’s and Anthony’s stories center on the question of who controls the land and, by rights, who

or what has granted them that authority: nature or God? In her characterization of Ernest as one of the Bohemian freethinkers who gave up their Catholicism upon emigration for as much political as religious reasons, Cather subtly demonstrates a deep understanding of one of the key causes of the war that will take Claude’s life.

Both Cather’s and Anthony’s stories of formal education culminate in the writing of a thesis that forever alters the way they see their education and futures. But although Claude is sincere and thorough in his methods, his thesis on the trial of Jeanne d’Arc’s martyrdom lacks insight and is ultimately predictable in its conclusions. For instance, the professor says of his Joan of Arc essay, “I suppose you acquitted her on the evidence?” While the professor recognizes that Claude “got a good deal out of your course, altogether,” his final endorsement of Claude’s work is hardly effusive when he says, “Your work has been very satisfactory to me” (94–95). Moreover, nothing comes of Claude’s thesis, which is the last assignment he completes before going home to the farm on Lovely Creek. Meanwhile, Stanley’s thesis impresses his professor because it directly challenges his assumptions. In keeping with his main assertion, his philosophical treatise is poetically written, like a “fine web of argument” in which he was

“inventing new subtleties, discovering new pillars on which to rest his great truth” (335). Stanley leads the life that Claude aches to find by gaining familial and communal approval, recognition and validation for his intellect, and perhaps most important of all, a guiding purpose—and he does so without the messiness of a wedding or a war.

The main difference in these two education stories may be that Claude compartmentalizes while Stanley synthesizes. Claude ignores the freethinker-based admonishment of his friend Ernest that “In old countries . . . we learn to make the most of little things. . . . It doesn’t matter much what I think about it; things are as they are. Nothing is going to reach down from the sky and pick a man up” (79–80). Instead, in his overwhelming hunger for that “something splendid,” Claude throws his whole being into each of his individual tasks: education, the farm, the marriage to Enid, and finally the war. When one desire fails him, he is crushed, and he turns his back on it in bitterness. He is, thinks his mother, a “perturbèd spirit” (102). But Stanley is more resilient. He is able to accept and enjoy his life as it is. Intellectually, his ultimate talent is that he is able to merge a host of cultural influences and consider them with fresh eyes, thus putting into practice the inquiry and investigation that Jan Komensky had promoted. The success of Stanley’s final project, for instance, is based on a synthesis of philosophy, literature, and religious debate. When he first raises the topic of philosophy as poetry in a class discussion, Anthony humorously writes that Stanley “denied that there was any such thing as absolute truth. He denied that philosophy could attempt to expound it, if there was.” And then “he assured Professor Fenwick that, so far as he was concerned, one philosophy was just as good as another, provided it was just as artistic.” Stanley’s speech, writes Anthony, “was neither Platonism nor empiricism, positivism nor romanticism. . . . It was straight Zabranskyism” (307–308). Stanley’s final written product is colored by his father’s edicts to promote the freethinker principle of reason over faith, but it is also influenced by the splendid feelings he experiences when he sits quietly one afternoon in the university’s Protestant chapel, or later when he attends the moving ceremony of his sister’s marriage to a Catholic (a ceremony his father refuses to attend). He is as pragmatic as Cather’s Ernest Havel, as intellectually bold as the Erlichs, and for him, education itself was not a means to an end, but the end itself. Ultimately, in accordance to the community send-off he received, education does prove to be Stanley’s calling.

For Claude, the ideals of someone like Joan of Arc are completely foreign to his experience. No voices provide him with divine guidance, no pursuit fulfills his need for a divine calling, and ultimately, rather than leading an army to victory, he dies

in battle not long after he arrives in France, without ever doing anything very heroic. Meanwhile, Stanley’s education is filled with a number of voices but of the earthly, not the saintly kind. He listens to teachers, community leaders, family members, and then confidently makes up his own mind.

While the degree to which both Cather and Anthony build their novels of formal education upon the symbolic significance of different martyrs burned at the stake in the fifteenth century does not offer incontrovertible evidence that Cather had read *Rekindled Fires*, the parallels are fascinating. The ways *My Ántonia* and *One of Ours* seem to speak to Anthony’s work on matters of Americanization, ethnicity, religion, education, does make plain, at the very least, how deep-seated those issues were in the public consciousness in 1918.

NOTES

1. In the Spring of 1918, World War I raged on with the German military engaging in their bloody spring offensives throughout Europe. Meanwhile, the Czechoslovak Legion, a unit of ninety thousand volunteer soldiers and deserters from their conscription into the Austro-Hungarian Army, were fighting along with the Russian Army to win Allied support for an independent nation. In May of that year, the outcome of the war was still unclear, but Czech and Slovak political leaders nevertheless were meeting in Pittsburgh to endorse a unified and independent Czechoslovakia as part of the restructuring of the postwar Austro-Hungarian Empire. By the end of October, the war was coming to a close and the First Republic of Czechoslovakia officially proclaimed independence; in November Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk was declared the new nation’s president.

Equally, Bohemians may not have been well-represented in American literature until 1918, but they were well-represented in this country’s population. Czech-speaking immigration rates reached a peak in 1907, and by the 1920 censuses, the Czech population in the U. S. was well over 600,000 (Garver “Czechs” 228).

2. Joseph Anthony was born in New York on April 9, 1897, to Robert Anthony (formerly Rosenzweig), a garment worker, and his wife, Rose, who, according to United States public records (census, naturalization, draft registration, and passport petition) were Jewish immigrants of Hungarian descent. Joseph Anthony’s 1921 passport application lists his father as born in “Czecho-Slovakia (Austria-Hungary)” —a claim that demonstrates the fraught nature of nationhood at that time since Czechoslovakia had recently been carved out as an *independent* nation from the former “Austria-Hungary” (as the Austrian empire had been called from 1867–1918); however, on Robert Anthony’s 1930 naturalization papers, he claims Hungarian as his nationality. Joseph Anthony’s brother Edward Anthony writes in his autobiography that their father came from a small town outside of Budapest (16). Rose Anthony’s birthplace is listed on those same naturalization papers as “Kaschan,” which probably refers to the Slovak town today known as Košice and situated very close to the Hungarian border. During the “Austria-Hungary” period of the nineteenth



century, when the Austrian empire comprised eleven distinct national groups, issues of nationality were complex, sometimes fluid, and often loaded with political implications, so it is not unusual that pinning down the Anthony ethnicity is so difficult.

3. *My Antonia* publication was plagued by delays. In spring of 1917 Cather was expressing hopes for a fall 1917 publication; by summer of 1917 she was hoping she could make the publisher's deadline for spring 1918 release. During the winter of 1917–18, she expressed disappointment that she could not manage to meet the deadline for spring publication. In the end, Greenslet did not get the finished manuscript until June of 1918, after the publication of Anthony's book, and *My Antonia* did not appear until September 21, 1918 (Mignon/Ronning Textual Commentary 482–494). Cather's *O Pioneers!*, published in 1913, had an important Bohemian character; however, Marie Tovesky's Czech ancestry and culture play a secondary role in her story.

4. Cited in a 2006 dissertation entitled "Translating Eastern European Identities into the American National Narrative," the novel is noted along with other works about immigration by Eastern Europeans that have "gradually faded from the literary imagination of the American-born," and although author Mihaela Diana Moscaliuc does not do more than mention the novel, her study does make a call for "the resuscitation of a critical and theoretical interest in Eastern European American identities" more broadly (52–53, ii). In 1974, as multiculturalism in academe was in its early days, Anthony Roy Mangione had made a similar plea in his "Literature on the White Ethnic Experience," where he cites Anthony's novel in a bibliography meant to remedy a "deficiency" he saw in white ethnic American experience being represented in high school and college anthologies, curriculum guides, and book lists (42). Robin G. Elliott's 1985 essay "The Eastern European Immigrant in American Literature: The View of the Host Culture, 1900–1930" offers a preliminary overview of fiction portraying non-Jewish immigrants at a time when immigration from Eastern European countries was at its peak.

5. New Jersey was one of the top cigar manufacturing states in the country. According to Thomas Čapek, at the turn of the century it was commonly said of Bohemian immigrants that "Every Czech [is] a cigar-maker." Cigar-making factories in the northeastern United States were dominated by Bohemian immigrant factories because so many immigrants came from the large tobacco factory towns in Bohemia (71–73).

6. Garver writes that "fellowship, entertainment, and opportunities for community service were as important to Czechs as to other pioneer settlers west of the Missouri in overcoming physical and psychological isolation" ("Czech-American Freethinkers" 158).

7. In 1872 the publication *Hlas jednoty svobodomyšlných* (*Voice of the Freethinkers' Union*) published a fourteen-point creed that included the following assertions: "We see, believe and comprehend that man by himself is powerless and incomplete, and individuals are called upon to combine their minds and their wills into higher entities, first into small communities, then into larger ones, and ultimately into a unity of all mankind; we call this self-conscious entity Great Mankind, whom all should serve as the only Lord on earth. . . . We feel, believe and comprehend that conscious creatures are liberated through their consciousness, hence they should voluntarily fulfill their purpose, and that is conscious or free religion" (quoted in

Laska 97). However, the narrative poem "Yearning for the Lord's Temple" by Nebraska Catholic priest Štěpán Brož (1865–1919) criticizes the freethought movement with a picture of an old Czech pioneer who kept the faith when all around him "children without that faith . . . dabble in the scathing embittered Free Thought way" and "fling derision, denounce your sacred hope, [and] poke fun at priesthood" (quoted in Laska 97, 101).

8. Czech-speaking immigrants were among the most highly educated of immigrants (something Anthony suggests with the community's support of Stanley's college education), and they were vocal in their support of education efforts. As a result, like Michael Zabransky's service on his local board of education, they were active in such local politics and educational debates. Bohemians took great pride in their history of educational reform and brought with them many of the attitudes about education that had been espoused by seventeenth-century reformer Jan Komensky (John Comenius) who advocated relating education to everyday life, teaching in the vernacular rather than Latin, systematizing all knowledge, and regarding religion and science as compatible.

9. While no song of that exact name appears in Czech music history, Anthony may be referring to a fifteenth-century Hussite song called "O Slovanie Konstantske," which has the character of a march. According to David HOLETON and Hana Vlhová-Wörner, "No other piece in the rich Hussite song tradition is so full of bitterness and fury, or anticipates so boldly the rejection of the Roman church by the whole population of Bohemia in the early 1420s, as does this text" (310).

10. Notably, Cather had previously raised the issue of Bohemian freethinkers in the 1913 novel *O Pioneers!* when Marie tells Emil that the Kourdna family aren't buried in the Catholic graveyard because they are "free-thinkers," and Emil replies, "Lots of the Bohemian boys at the University are. . . . What did you ever burn John Huss for, anyway? It's made an awful row. They still jaw about it in history classes." The Catholic Marie answers, "We'd do it right over again, most of us," as she chides Emil for not knowing the important role that Bohemians played in the Christianizing of Europe (77). In *My Mortal Enemy*, Myra Henshawe calls her husband "a German free-thinker" and claims that her marriage to him caused the break between her and her family as well as the church (85). James Woodress notes that during her years in Lincoln, Nebraska, Cather "professed not to believe in God and expressed great admiration for atheist Robert Ingersoll after he lectured at the University" (*Willa Cather: A Literary Life* 337). Ingersoll (1833–1899) was an American lawyer and orator nicknamed "The Great Agnostic" for his defense of freethought. He famously wrote, "My creed is this. Happiness is the only good. The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here. The way to be happy is to make others so. This creed is somewhat short, but it is long enough for this life, strong enough for this world. If there is another world, when we get there we can make another creed" (quoted in Jacoby 169).

11. Ironically, Jeanne d'Arc and Jan Hus are themselves historically connected. In 1430, fifteen years after Hus's death and just over a year before Jeanne d'Arc's, she dictated a condemning letter to be sent to the followers of Hus, accusing them of "tak[ing] up a disgraceful and unlawful superstition" in order to "persecute and plan to overthrow and destroy this Faith"; she then threatened them with military action unless they return to Catholic orthodoxy ("Joan of Arc's Letters to the Hussites" 56).



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On the Nature of *My Ántonia*: Lucretius and Willa Cather

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In his review of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), T. S. Eliot writes: "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him." Both Joyce and Eliot were a bit late. Willa Cather had begun to pursue thoroughly the dynamic of the contemporary and the antique in *My Ántonia* (1918). This esthetic of classicism, which would become a prominent esthetic of the 1920s according to Theodore Ziolkowski, was self-consciously explored by Cather through the bifurcated education Jim Burden got from Gaston Cleric, his classics instructor, and Lena Lingard, his first lover. In the well-known scene when Jim recalls his discussions with Cleric, he reflects that the classics have grown in importance to him. Not a scholar like his mentor, however, Jim that evening found himself at once interested in Cleric's discussions but at the same time he found himself wandering back to reveries over his childhood experiences. Such memories do not banish the classics, but rather are enhanced through the lens the classics provide. Just as Jim finishes his thoughts, Lena knocks on his door and so begins—we readers infer—his first sexual adventure, the pleasure of which contends with and complements the pleasure of his contemplations on the classics (255–57).

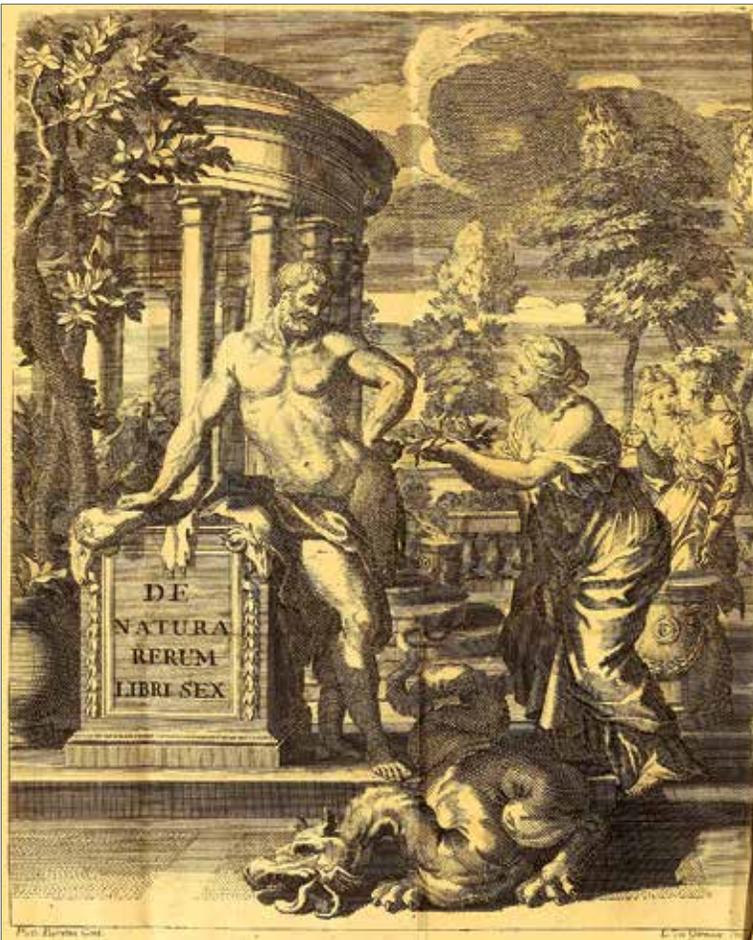
This dynamic synthesis is often at the heart of Cather's aesthetic, which is generated by personal memory and experience, but recollected and illuminated through the beauties and insights of the classics. The classics permeate Cather's writing not as dead touchstones or fleeting allusions, but as living forms which she dialectically engages within her fictions. While Jim's mind is on Virgil's *Georgics*¹ as he contemplates the importance of the classics to him, Cather's co-respondent in *My Ántonia* is Lucretius, the epicurean poet-philosopher of pleasure, contemplation, and human harmony, in his *On the Nature of Things* (50s BCE).²

Writing in the midst of the "war to end all wars," Willa Cather composed *My Ántonia* as an epic of harmony dedicated to Venus. She celebrates epicurean pleasure of *ataraxia* (tranquility) wrested through hard work and determination from the seemingly blank and indifferent prairie, itself a microcosm of Nature as a universal force of creation and destruction. Dedicated to the god of war Mars's opposite and his lover Venus, and ultimately to Everywoman, *On the Nature of Things* serves as a gloss on Cather's esthetics of composition and is incorporated into themes of

My Ántonia. Lucretius invokes Venus as his Muse, instead of one of the traditional nine Muses. Venus is "the Muse who is to help the poet write charming verses on nature [and] is herself the charming ruler of nature," writes Elizabeth Asmis (98). More timely for Lucretius, who lived during a time of upheaval throughout Rome, Venus is dedicated to peace and tranquility.³ As he asks her: "make the mad machinery of war drift off to sleep. / For only you can favour mortal men with peace" (1: 30–31).⁴ Lucretius invokes Venus by name, but he does not believe that the gods intervene in mankind's affairs. The gods, like men, are interested in pleasure, so much so that they will not ruin their perfect pleasure by interacting with humans (1: 44–48). For Lucretius Venus is an allegorical figure who represents, at varying times, eros (1: 21–28); harmony, as opposed to war (1: 29–43); motherhood and fatherhood (5: 1011–1027)⁵; and collectively, Everywoman. Similarly, Jim sees Lena Lingard—Venus's prairie avatar—as representative of those girls who inspired ancient poetry and continue to do so (262). More important, when Jim tells Ántonia, the fullest inspiration for his book, that she is "anything that a woman can be to a man" (312), he transforms her into Everywoman.

As a fervent disciple and famous interpreter of Epicurus (341–270 BCE), Lucretius argues that all of existence is material and all things are transitory. Both are atomists who argue that mankind's end is pleasure in this world which provides humans the only existence they will ever know. There is no life and no moral judgment after death, which is merely the dissolution of the irreducible atoms temporarily conglomerated to form an individual's body, mind and soul. Once humans are freed from the darkening fear of death, they are free to make the best and most pleasurable world possible for themselves. Fear of death, Lucretius warns, leads men and women to cowardice, betrayal, avarice, envy, and despair. Once freed from this fear of death, humans live in the light of day and can discover their place in nature (3: 31–93). The senses are the avenues of pleasure, knowledge, understanding, and judgment. Through the senses, then, humans order their world as best they can in the face of nature's indifference to their success and the absence of providential gods. While such a vision of life may be foreboding, and for some defeating, for those actively engaged in the struggle for pleasure and tranquility it is empowering. This human capacity to order nature through reason achieves its apogee in art (5: 1147–1157).





Title page engraving from a 1743 *Of the Nature of Things* from the John Adams Library, held since 1894 in the Boston Public Library.

Early in her career (“A Mighty Craft” [1896] 417), Cather equated art with god and pledged her faith; in *The Professor’s House* (69), St. Peter equates art with religion. Having striven to become a writer for the better part of three decades, Cather—always self-confident of her skills—would have found a kindred spirit in Lucretius, equally self-confident in his skill as an epic poet to compose “honeyed” verses to deliver the sometimes bitter philosophy of Epicurus’s purely material world (1: 922–950; 4: 1–24). *My Ántonia* is Cather’s most realistic, most earth-bound narrative, not the nostalgic pastoral as Jim imagines. At the same time that *My Ántonia* celebrates the joyful possibilities of the pastoral world, it is marked by both death and the memory of death throughout. While Venus is the god of procreation, she is also the god of natural destruction which compels procreation. Cather’s use of Lucretius is not confined to broad attitudes that they share, however. The links between the two are manifest in their shared topical and thematic concerns—especially the dynamics of sexuality and the tranquil pleasures of family life—and their metaphoric uses of mythological figures. There is also the fundamental atomistic viewpoint both share.

Lucretius insists in Book 1 that Nature’s first principle is that “*nothing’s brought / Forth by any supernatural power out of*

naught. / . . . Nothing can be made from nothing. . .” (1: 149, 155; emphasis in the original). All things consist of atoms, irreducible particles of matter invisible to the naked eye; and void, the necessary space among atoms to allow for their movement and rearrangement—the “swerve”—which, among other variations throughout Nature, accounts for individual differences within species and for free will (2: 216–318).⁶ Since the number of atoms in the universe is changeless, “Nature refashions one thing from another, and won’t allow / A birth unless it’s midwived by another’s death” (1: 263–264). Cather transforms Lucretius’s more literal sense of death as new life’s midwife into a metaphor; through it she introduces her modernizing Lucretius to focus on the time-bound urgency to make a life of meaning and pleasure.

Jim’s migration from Virginia to Nebraska results from his parents’ deaths. The final threshold of his journey occurs at night and metaphorically signals his rebirth. As he heads across the dark prairie, Jim is in a state of pre-birth, journeying “in the bottom of the wagon-box, covered up with a buffalo hide” through the darkness and roughly undulating prairies toward the light of a new life:

I did not believe that my dead father and mother were watching me from up there; they would still be looking for me at the sheep-fold down by the creek, or along the white road that led to the mountain pastures. I had left even their spirits behind me. The wagon jolted on, carrying me I knew not whither. I don’t think I was homesick. If we never arrived anywhere, it did not matter. Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be. (7–8)

Like Lucretius, Jim imagines the “spirits” of the dead as temporary forms—limited in space and, as Lucretius names “spirits,” transitory “barks”—atomistic veneers—of the recently dead soon to dissolve into constituent atoms (4: 29–52). As there are no everlasting spirits, neither are there any caring gods to pray to; chance—“what would be would be”—replaces providence. Not long after Jim recalls this sense of rebirth, he grasps the nature of death—a return to the “nothing” that precedes birth. Jim’s epiphany equates death with dissolution and ultimate happiness:

I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep. (18)

Lucretius himself might have written this meditation with its emphasis on the naturalness of death as a kind of sleep, and on the dissolution of the individual into its constituent atoms.



Between the nothingness before and after death humans not only seek pleasure but also meaning in their lives and in nature. As Nature arranges atoms to manifest its physical existence and variety, humans arrange the parts of the alphabet into discriminating words and sentences to express their experience and understanding of Nature.

Furthermore, all through these very lines of mine, you see
Many letters that are shared by many words—and yet
You must confess that words and lines from this one alphabet
Have sundry sounds and meanings. Letters only have to change
Their order to accomplish all of this—and still the range
Of possibilities with atoms is greater. That is why
They can create the universe’s rich variety. (1: 823–829)

The analogy’s immediate purpose is clear enough: even in a limited alphabetic system, the possibilities for rearrangement are immense, but the possibilities for atomic rearrangement are far greater. Implicit in the analogy is the writer’s claiming a powerful tool for explicating and mimicking nature, including human nature. As Duncan Kennedy argues, in Lucretius’s panegyric to Epicurus (1: 61–79),

Epicurus conquers the universe, but conveys his control, his understanding, of it by textualizing it: an infinite phenomenon, the universe is “captured” within the confines of a finite phenomenon, a text. An established tradition of Lucretian scholarship has in turn mapped some of the ways in which [*On the Nature of Things*] uses textual phenomena (notably combinations of letters) as analogies for the workings of an atomic universe; and how these seek to transcend the status of analogies to become themselves examples of those workings. (378)

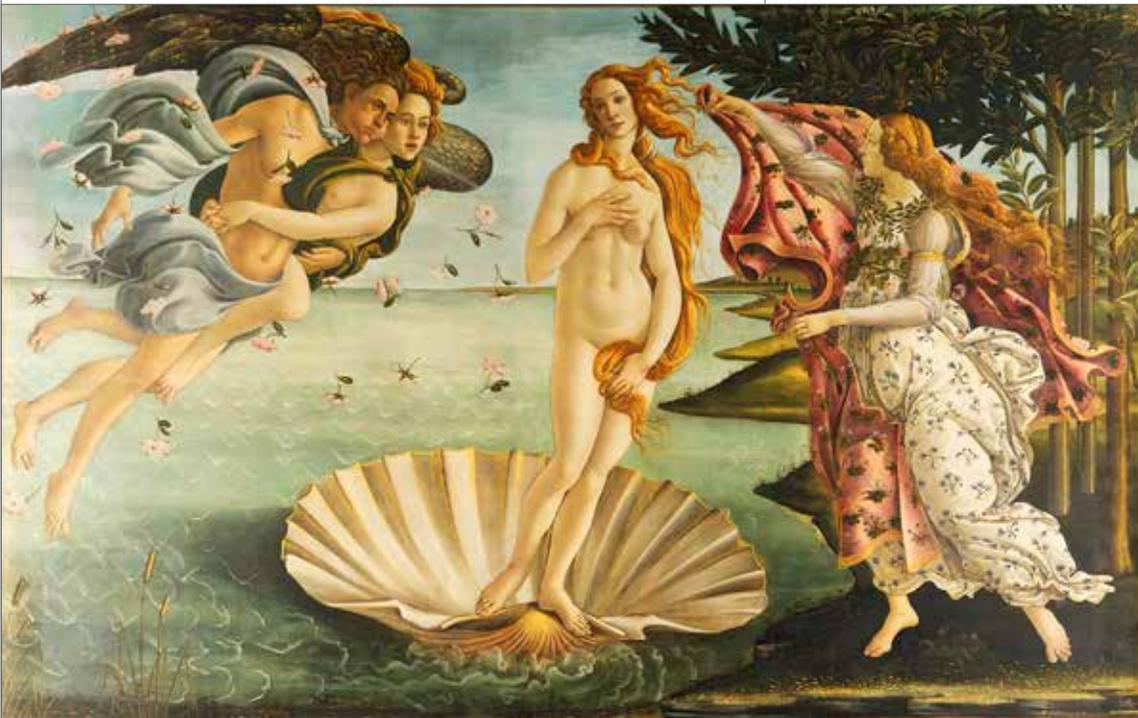
Cather adapts this analogy between alphabet and atoms and its authorial implications early in *My Ántonia*. When Mr. Shimerda calls upon Jim to “Te-e-ach, te-e-ach my Án-tonia,” he has taken “a book out of his pocket, opened it, and showed [Jim] a page with two alphabets” (26–27). Not only does Jim’s teaching enable Ántonia to master English, it also provides him with a vocabulary to make sense of the Nebraska prairie, which he initially found to be “not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made” (7).

As the alphabet provides extensive possibilities for arrangement and meaning of words, Lucretius posits that the much more numerous possibilities for the arrangement of atoms makes possible other worlds in the universe and any number of possible explanations for natural phenomena. After speculating on the “reason[s] for the movement of the stars” (5: 508), Lucretius declares:

But which of these is the true cause, it’s hard to ascertain.
Rather, it is the *possibilities* that I explain—
What things can and do come about in all the universe
In the many worlds created different ways. I give divers
Rationales which can explain the motion of the stars
In *all* the worlds—and *one* of these has to hold true for ours,
Empowering stars with motion. Which is right? We cannot say,
When we are only blindly, step by step, feeling our way.
(5: 526–533; emphasis in the original)

Such fluidity of possibilities at once stimulates Cather’s own speculative approach to understanding human nature and also warns against absolutism in art which demands verisimilitude but

resists a single interpretation. As Jim Burden hands the editor his manuscript “Ántonia,” “He frowned at this a moment, then prefixed another word, making it ‘My Ántonia.’ That seemed to satisfy him.” “Read it as soon as you can,” he said, rising, “but don’t let it influence your own story” (xiii). Jim’s caution to his first reader extends to every reader of *My Ántonia*. Cather signals a specific, limited narrative perspective but entices her readers to reconstitute other possible meanings from the evidence that Jim presents. The reader is expected to pay



Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus* (ca. 1484–86). Uffizi Gallery, Florence.



close attention to the facts of the story, as Lucretius does to the movement of the stars, so that whatever possible interpretations are derived are consistent with the empirical evidence provided. Each reader, then, may have his own *Ántonia*, but one reader's version does not eliminate other possible *Ántonias*. Monica Gale notes a similar dynamic of readership in *The Nature of Things*: "the argument . . . becomes a kind of dialogue: the actual reader is drawn into the poem and invited to model his/her own reading on the addressee's [that is, Memmius, the person to whom the text is addressed] active engagement with the speaker's discourse" (14).

In content as well as linguistic philosophy and narrative strategy, Lucretius and Cather resonate with one another. Much of the center of *My Ántonia* is occupied by pleasure-seeking young people trapped in a hierarchical and much-scrutinized society. Nevertheless, in spite of social and national differences (native-born Americans versus immigrants), lively and pleasure-seeking young people manage to enjoy one another in spite of social prohibitions. Sexual drive, to which Lucretius devotes many lines (see especially 4: 1030–1216), is what smashes social strictures and brings heterogeneous youngsters together at local dances. That drive is first given free play at Blind d'Arnault's piano performance at the Boy's Home Hotel (175–187) on an evening when Mrs. Gardener, the guardian of community morals, is away in Lincoln. Cather's text describes d'Arnault as a creature driven by blind emotion, an intuitive genius at the piano, though by no means a disciplined musician. To emphasize his more primitive instinctive personality—"he looked like some glistening African god of pleasure" (185)—Cather describes him as a zoomorph somewhat resembling a bull—the Minotaur: "He was a heavy, bulky mulatto, on short legs. . . . He had the negro head, too; almost no head at all; nothing behind the ears but folds of neck under close-clipped wool" (178). Recalling the conception of the Minotaur from Pasiphae's hiding in a box designed to look like a cow so she could couple with a magnificent white bull (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8: 132–139), d'Arnault, caught-up in his first desire to play the instrument, is said to couple himself to the piano (182). Cather, like Lucretius, does not believe in the literal existence of zoomorphs. Neither does she believe in the separate existence of "barks"—the spirits of the recently dead—accidentally and fleetingly conjoining with human images to form a convincing but false monster as when a gauzy image of a horse meets that of a man to form a centaur (4: 721–757). Rather, she turns Lucretius's "scientific" explanation into a perceptive metaphor that captures the raw sexual nature of d'Arnault through her allusion to the Minotaur legend.

The hired girls, including *Ántonia*, are present at d'Arnault's performance and give themselves over to the power of his

sexually charged music through dance. While there are no literal sacrifices of innocent young men and virgins on this occasion as there were in the Minotaur's labyrinth (Peyronie 814), d'Arnault's performance stirs a sexual awakening for both Jim and *Ántonia*. Afterwards, Jim recalls, "we were so excited that we dreaded to go to bed. We lingered a long while at the Harlings' gate, whispering in the cold until the restlessness was slowly chilled out of us" (187). Later, after a stimulating summer dance at the Vannis' tent, Jim feels emboldened to kiss *Ántonia* passionately as they part company at the Cutters', where *Ántonia* has gone to work after Mr. Harling ordered her away from the dances. She, however, in spite of her own passionate nature, upbraids Jim for his passionate kiss and threatens to tell his grandparents if he continues with such attempts (216–217). Their long childhood companionship, the memory of which will provide them a unique intimacy throughout their lives, prevents the physical intimacy Jim so strongly desires. At the same time *Ántonia* upbraids Jimmy for his boldness, she warns him against the charms of Lena. However, as Jim's erotic desires intensify, his object—though he wished it could be *Ántonia*—becomes Lena.

In examining the psychological and physiological nature of youthful lust, Lucretius proves himself prescient of modern views. In one of the most famous, or for some, infamous passages of *The Nature of Things*, Lucretius examines the nature of erotic dreams.⁷ He sees that such occurrences are natural among young men and recognizes them as consequences of physiological changes, "when Manhood has made / Seed in their limbs for the first time" (4: 1030–1031). More important, Lucretius examines how the primal drive to fulfill erotic desire and gain sexual release lead a young man to idealize his lover (4: 1037–1287). Thus Jim's dreams and ultimately his first sexual relationship focus on his idealized version of Lena:

One dream I dreamed a great many times, and it was always the same. I was in a harvest-field full of shocks, and I was lying against one of them. Lena Lingard came across the stubble barefoot, in a short skirt, with a curved reaping-hook in her hand, and she was flushed like the dawn, with a kind of luminous rosiness all about her. She sat down beside me, turned to me with a soft sigh and said, "Now they are all gone, and I can kiss you as much as I like." (218)

Jim is fortunate in his first love; while they clearly enjoy their time together, Lena's desire to remain single allows Jim space to follow his own intellectual development without constraint. Indeed, she declares—as she had earlier at the Harlings (157)—that marriage and all of its encumbrances will never be for her (282).





A picnic on the Cather homestead, 1910s. George Cather Ray Collection, Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries.

While at times Lucretius emphasizes epicurean withdrawal from society as the best way to achieve tranquility, he also recognizes the necessity of community, especially the community of the family, to perpetuate the best interests of mankind, indeed, mankind itself. And so he explores ideal human gatherings which foster tranquility. The first of these images of communal tranquility in *My Ántonia* is in Ántonia’s memory of her father’s happiness in the company of his friends. For Mr. Shimerda, the center of his life remained in Bohemia, where intelligent and artistic friends were commonplace, and where he found “peace and order” (83) in their companionship. Ántonia reports to Jim: “My papa sad for the old country. He not look good. He never make music any more. At home he play violin all the time, for weddings and for dance” (86). Mrs. Shimerda’s material ambitions for her children, especially Ambrosch, compelled her to migrate to America and to drag her husband with her. In Bohemia, Ántonia recalls after Mr. Shimerda’s suicide, “he went much to school. He know a great deal; how to make the fine cloth like what you not got here. He play horn and violin, and he read so many books

that the priests in Bohemie come to talk with him” (119). Such a life would be appreciated by Lucretius who valued most highly individual accomplishment in intellect, reason, and the arts. Such a life, in concert with others, would bring about the “peace and order”—tranquility—humans sought and deserved.

Lucretius paints a prototypical gathering of early humans in a picnic scene which becomes the lusty progenitor of later human gatherings that fulfill human desires for peace and order; but this early picnic is overcharged with sexuality and quickly becomes an occasion for flirting and competition:

And often a party of them sprawled on the soft carpet of grass
 Beside the riverbank, in the shade of a lofty tree, would pass
 The time refreshing their bodies at no great cost. And with more reason
 When fair whether smiled upon them and it was the season
 That prinked out all the greenery with flowers. That was the time
 Of joking, and of conversation, and sweet laughter’s chime,
 For that was when the Rustic Muse was at the height of her powers.
 Then lusty Merriment instructed folk to go plait flowers
 And leaves in garlands and bedeck the head and shoulders round. . . .
 (5: 1392–1400)



But as time passed, Lucretius reports, such simple pleasures of woods, acorns for food, and rustic playfulness were replaced by ever more sophisticated luxuries. Rudimentary “animal pelts” as clothing, for example, are replaced by coverings of “purple raiment worked with massive patterns in gold thread” (5: 1426–1428). The pleasure of the simple picnic cannot be improved by the addition of extraneous material comforts:

Man doesn't realize that even *having* has its measure;
There's a point beyond which nothing can increase our real pleasure.
And this is what has by degrees dragged Life so far from shore,
And stirred up from the very depths the tidal waves of War.
(5: 1432–1435; emphasis in the original)

Cather captures this fleetingness of the simple life of pleasure in the picnic scene and then immediately afterward shows its quick erosion by acquisitiveness, materialism, and violence in the Wick Cutter episode in “The Hired Girls.”

The most pastoral scene in *My Ántonia* is the picnic Jim enjoys with the hired girls, including Ántonia and Lena. For the girls, the picnic provides a tranquil Sunday retreat from everyday chores and fosters not only homesickness for literal places, but also a primal longing for the peace and harmony of summertime nature. Like Lucretius's picnic, this one takes place on the banks of a refreshing river garlanded by abundant flowers and greenery. It is a day of ease, of indulging reminiscences and future hopes; a day without adults, without restraint; and a day of sexual playfulness. Ántonia is especially forthcoming in her nostalgia for Bohemia and her recollections of the strained marriage of her parents (228–229). While the girls recall their families' hardships in leaving Europe behind and settling a new country, they clearly take satisfaction in their accomplishments and have faith in their futures. But this tranquility is also animated by “lusty Merriment,” as the hired girls flirt with the naked Jim swimming in the river below them (226). More disquieting is Lena when she interrupts Jim and Ántonia's emotional reminiscences and quickly excites the contemplative Jim:

Almost as flushed as she had been in my dream, she leaned over the edge of the bank and began to demolish our flowery pagoda. I had never seen her so energetic; she was panting with zeal, and the perspiration stood in drops on her short, yielding upper lip. I sprang to my feet and ran up the bank. (230)

After harvesting the wild elderberries to make wine, the picnickers rest and Lena continues to be Lena:

“Mercy, it's hot!” Lena yawned. She was supine under a little oak, resting after the fury of her elder-hunting, and had taken off the high-heeled slippers she had been silly enough to wear. “Come here, Jim. You never got the sand out of your hair.” She began to draw her fingers slowly through my hair.

Ántonia pushed her away. “You'll never get it out like that,” she said sharply. She gave my head a rough touzling and finished me off with something like a box on the ear. (232)

This summer idyll with its playful sexuality quickly ends and Ántonia and Jim soon find themselves victimized by Wick Cutter, now Ántonia's employer (238–42).

Ántonia surmises Cutter will return to rape her when she alone is left to guard his family silver while he is ostensibly away with his wife on a trip. True to form, Cutter executes an elaborate deception to strand his wife at a railway junction so he can secretly return to Black Hawk to accost Ántonia. Called upon to

be Ántonia's rescuer—as he had been earlier with the giant rattler (42–48)—Jim agrees to take her place and sleep in the Cutter home. When Cutter returns home and discovers this deception, his rage turns to physical assault; Jim, beaten viciously, feels betrayed and humiliated and blames Tony.

Following this, lust soon betrays Ántonia, when she fantasizes her romantic ideal—a passionate delusion of the beloved's perfection that only young men exhibit in Lucretius (4: 1152–1191)—in Larry Donovan, the dishonest and greedy railroad man, who impregnates and then abandons her. This is an episode which both parallels and contrasts to the obligatory and disastrous marriage of the Shimerdas. Ántonia returns to her family's farm and courageously gives birth to her daughter alone, “without a groan,” at night, in a cold room off the kitchen (308), a situation

which parallels and contrasts to her father's quiet suicide, alone in the barn, on a cold night (92–93).

Ántonia's commitment to life and to the life of her daughter propels her toward a life of pleasure and satisfaction amid a life of hard work as Cuzak's wife and mother of ten children. For Lucretius, as argued by W. R. Johnson (45–46), a settled married life based on mutual understanding and acceptance, and not the heated, self-deluding entanglements of young lust nor relations



Anna Sadilek at age 17. Bradbrook photograph ca. 1887, from the WCPM/Willa Cather Foundation Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.





Anna and John Pavelka and family. Kozy Studio photograph ca. 1915, from the WCPM/Willa Cather Foundation Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.

aimed at self-satisfaction, provides the strongest basis for enduring love and sexual pleasure: “it is familiarity that leads to love” (4: 1283; see 1278–1287). Cather validates this perspective in her portrayal of the Cuzaks, just as she validates the pleasures of youthful sex in the picnic scene and in the intimate relationship between Jim and Lena in Lincoln. By contrast, Cather condemns sex when it is used to dominate others as Mrs. Shimerda uses it to dominate Mr. Shimerda, and as Wick Cutter does in raping hired girls and making sure his wife knows about it. In context—whether in youthful passion, more mature non-adulterous affairs, or marriage—sex is valued by Cather as a pleasurable and important aspect of human life.⁸

Family, according to Lucretius, is not only the ideal enclosed community, it is the hub of society (5: 1011–1127). Cather explores Lucretius’s anthropology of the family in her history of the Shimerda and Cuzak families. Young Jim’s epiphany of the nature of the universe as material and random describes the general situation in which all immigrants to the prairie find themselves. The Shimerdas, for example, must learn simple survival in an alien and seemingly lawless landscape. In contrast to their comfortable physical and social circumstances in Bohemia, the Shimerdas find their prairie homestead primitive, indeed, savage, very much like Lucretius describes the earliest times of mankind. Humankind, Lucretius writes, did not devolve from a past Golden Age, but painstakingly evolved from plains nomads to farmers to urban sophisticates (5: 926–1010). Unlike their successful neighbors

the Burdens, who live in a wood-frame house and enjoy an abundance of food and companionship—predicates for the ideal life of contemplative pleasure celebrated by Lucretius—the Shimerdas initially live in a one-room sod dugout—like one of Lucretius’s “caverns in the hills” that early humans inhabited (5: 955)—with a tiny interior cavity which becomes the earthen retreat of *Ántonia* and *Yulka*. As to their food, like nomads they initially depend upon the uncultivated foods of the earth—such as the dried mushrooms they brought with them from Bohemia, and the rabbits Mr. Shimerda kills—and the generosity of the Burdens. As Lucretius might describe the Shimerdas: “No one knew how to work the land with

iron tools, or how / To plant young slips in soil” (5: 937–938).

More important, the Shimerda family is broken, the result of the mismatched parents’ youthful lust that led Mr. Shimerda to marry his family’s pregnant maid out of obligation, not love; while their three children after *Ambrosch* are evidence of continuing sexual connection, the Shimerdas lack conversational intimacy and any sense of continuing mutual pleasure. Except for the sisters’ youthful companionship and Mr. Shimerda’s special fondness for *Ántonia*, the family members are suspicious and critical of each other, as well as of the strangers among whom they live. The Shimerda family, especially Mr. Shimerda and *Ántonia*, have the rudimentary capacity for a sharing and nurturing family, but Mr. Shimerda despairs at the loss of the pleasurable companionship and artistic life he enjoyed in Bohemia, without which he becomes primitive and reclusive. He grows fond of his rough rabbit skin hat, he often retreats to the empty sod house of Peter and Pavel, and he sleeps alone in his barn, all signs of his increasing atavism. He is taken advantage of by his own countryman, and his family fails to notice the depth of his gloom that ultimately leads to his suicide, an action Lucretius suggests is acceptable when the world’s pleasures have become beyond reach:

*But if all the good you got was wasted, poured away,
And life is hateful to you, why seek to extend its stay? —
All will just turn out wrong and perish profitless again.
Why do you not, instead, make an end of life and all its pain?
(3: 940–943; emphasis in the original)*

Shimerda's suicide also alludes to Lucretius's dismissal of religion as destructive superstition (1: 62–101). A few days before he shoots himself, Shimerda visits the Burdens' home on Christmas Day where he finds comfort and abundance. Before Shimerda leaves, he kneels to pray at the lighted and decorated Christmas tree, under which is a manger (82–85). Such a scene appeals to religious sentiments of resurrection from the direst of circumstances, the promise of Christ's birth in the dead season of winter. Shimerda's suicide in a manger repudiates the efficacy of such sentimentality and the power of religion in man's life.

The Shimerdas become the measure of the successes or failures of the other families that show up in *My Antonia*, including the Harlings and the Cutters, but most importantly the Cuzaks. At first glance, the Harlings appear to be an ideal family, especially to Jim and Antonia. For Jim, Mrs. Harling and her children substitute for the family of playmates and indulgent mother he never had; for Antonia, their pleasure in one another, their civil manners, and their relaxed entertainments when Mrs. Harling plays the piano provide a refreshing alternative to the laborious and lonely life of the farm. But the Harlings are not a perfect family. The life of ease and abundance they enjoy in one of the finest houses in town is at the willing expense of Mr. Harling, a hard-driving businessman, who is frequently away from home. When he is at home, he is a killjoy disciplinarian who expects his wife to wait on him and also that his children are neither seen nor heard (152). His success brings pleasure to others—when he is not around—but not to himself. While the family is fairly large, there is no longer a sense of physical intimacy between the Harling parents nor even a sense of relaxed social intimacy. (Indeed, Mrs. Harling's sexual longing is suggested in her having "known d'Arnault for years" and in her encouragement to the vivacious Tony to go hear him [175–176]).

In the childless marriage of the Cutters, Cather implicitly contrasts the youthful promise of the sacrificed newlyweds in the wolf episode (57). The Cutters' marriage is barren, not only without children but without intimacy or mutuality. While Mr. Harling makes money for the sake of his family and forgoes marital intimacy, Wick Cutter makes money for the sake of making money, and he perverts the pleasure of sexuality into sexual predation. The Cutters are continuously at war with each other. Cutter's murder of his wife and suicide are emblematic of all the pleasures they have denied themselves for the sake of competitive power. By telling the story of their macabre deaths humorously, Cather distances the reader from the Cutters' equally macabre shared life but does not hide it (350–352).

The closing section of the book is a celebration of the fullest possibilities of marriage and family. Antonia's family recovers

the tranquility of her father's life among his friends in Bohemia. Unlike her grasping and envious mother, Antonia is generous and nurturing; Jim idealizes her as Mother Earth (328–329; 342), a concept that Lucretius argues is literal, not figurative, as all life begins with the earth (5: 782–836). Lucretius posits the family as Nature's most essential group, a relationship discovered by men and women when it dawned on them that their sexual union brought about children:

And Venus drained their powers, and the little ones, with ease,
Broke down the stubborn pride of parents with their coaxing pleas.
Then neighbours began to form the bonds of friendship, with a will
Neither to be harmed themselves, nor do another ill,
The safety of babes and womenfolk in one another's trust,
And indicated by gesturing and grunting it was just
For everyone to have mercy on the weak. Without a doubt
Occasional infractions of the peace would come about,
But the vast majority of people faithfully adhered
To the pact, or else man would already have wholly disappeared;
Instead, the human race has propagated to this day.
(5: 1017–1027)

In this passage, Lucretius not only speculates on the establishment of families, but assigns to Venus the power of the protecting mother who values the nurture and protection of children above erotic passion, and favors peace and harmony above strife and aggression, the provenance of Mars. As Venus is the patron of mothers and children in Lucretius, so is Lena in *My Antonia*. As she tells Frances Harling: "I've seen a good deal of married life, and I don't care for it. I want to be so I can help my mother and the children at home, and not have to ask lief of anybody" (157).

But eros is not banished from the family, only sublimated. The Cuzak family, with the gentle father whose "sociability was stronger than his acquisitive instinct" (355)—a sharp contrast to Mr. Harling—an indulgent mother, and good-natured and talented children, including the budding violinist Leo, manifests Cather's ideal community as well as Lucretius's. Antonia's youthful passion has been transferred to the care of her children and orchard, even as she and Cuzak indulge a quiet self-assured intimacy:

The two seemed to be on terms of easy friendliness, touched with humor. Clearly, she was the impulse, and he the corrective. As they went up the hill he kept glancing at her sidewise, to see whether she got his point, or how she received it. . . . This trick did not suggest duplicity or secretiveness, but merely long habit. . . . (347)

While Jim applauds the Cuzak family's success, his focal point becomes Leo, Antonia's favorite child, much as his focal point was Lena in sections of Book II and all of Book III. In the mythic framework in which Lena and Leo are both cast, she



is Venus to his Pan, two exponents of eros—godmother and godson, if you will. But Leo is also mythically related to Blind d’Arnault, and literally, of course, to Ántonia, Cuzak, and his Shimerda grandparents. This focus on Leo is Cather’s celebration of the possibilities of youth; her exploration of Leo’s character also evidences Lucretius’s disquisition on heredity (4: 1209–1232). Lucretius envisions conception as the mixing together of “seeds” from both father and mother according to Venus’s “shifting lottery.” Lucretius posits that a child may favor father or mother or both. He also notes that sometimes children may express the hidden seeds of their grandparents, invisible in their children but now expressed in the third generation.

Cather similarly emphasizes this same idea through the characterization of Leo. His familial inheritance aligns him with his grandfather—his musical abilities, closeness to animals and moodiness—and his grandmother and her “habitual skepticism” (339). These traits mingle with his mother’s loving strength and passion, and with Lena’s mischievousness and gregarious cheer. Leo is “handsome . . . fair-skinned and freckled, with red cheeks and a ruddy pelt as thick as a lamb’s wool, growing down on his neck in little tufts” (320). Like the joyful Lena—whose hair is described as a “ruddy thatch”(160)—he is given to “irrelevant merriment” (320), and “he’s never out of mischief one minute” (325), his loving mother declares, echoing her fond tolerance of the seductive mischievousness of Lena: “She can’t help it. It’s natural to her” (217). His identity is further complicated by his kinship with Blind d’Arnault, since both characters are described as zoomorphs: Leo “really was faun-like. He hadn’t much head behind his ears, and his tawny fleece grew down thick to the back of his neck” (337; see also 178). Like d’Arnault, Leo can be disdainful of others, an attitude Jim believes he detects toward himself as he imagines Leo’s dismissal of him:

His expression was droll; it dismissed me lightly. “This old fellow is no different from other people. He doesn’t know my secret.” He seemed conscious of possessing a keener power of enjoyment than other people; his quick recognitions made him frantically impatient of deliberate judgments. He always knew what he wanted without thinking. (343)

Whatever Leo may become, he reminds us of what Jim—a collector “of legal anecdotes” (352)—is not. Jim’s incapacity for sustained enjoyment of the present and his slow deliberation leave him fruitlessly wishing to return to those fleeting “best years,” to “be a little boy again” and with Ántonia inscribing the prairie anew (313). He fantasizes returning to hunt with the Cuzak boys, to recapture his boyhood past (357–58). In the meantime, Ántonia—traumatized as a child by her father’s suicide, exploited as a hired girl, abandoned by the father of her child, ill-treated by

her family, and forgotten by Jim for twenty years—finds her best years unfolding into the future of her children.

NOTES

1. David Stouck, with a nod to Virgil’s *Georgics*, classifies *My Ántonia* as “Pastoral of Innocence” (46–58). The importance of the *Georgics* to *My Ántonia* is discussed by John J. Murphy throughout *The Road Home* and Theodore Ziolkowski (*Virgil* 150–54). Dedicated studies of Lucretius’s influence on Cather appear limited to articles by Michael Price, Carey Chaney, and Sarah Cheney Watson on Lucretius and *The Professor’s House*, although there are occasional mentions of Lucretius in longer works by Mary Ruth Ryder and Eric Ingbar Thurin.

2. Mary Ruth Ryder surveys “Cather’s Classical Background” in *Willa Cather and Classical Myth*. Ryder notes that Cather’s introduction to the classics, and possibly the study of the Latin language, began in Virginia. In *Red Cloud*, she was tutored by William Drucker in Latin and Greek and read with him portions of the *Iliad* and *Aeneid* as well as Anacreon and Ovid (7–25).

James Woodress notes that the Cather family owned “some translations of Latin and Greek classics” (50). At the University of Nebraska, Cather studied Greek and Latin her first two years, and in her third completed three semesters of Greek in courses that covered lyric poetry, “Pindar, Herodotus, Homer, and the dramatists” (71–72). Based on my examination of a typescript of course syllabi at the university during Cather’s student days (provided by Robert Thacker), Cather’s formal study in all likelihood did not include Lucretius, but her own reading went far beyond curricular requirements.

While others note Cather’s exposure to the classics included her reading of Victorian and earlier English literature, Thurin stresses the multiplicity of classical sources, visual as well as verbal, that inform Cather’s writing. Thurin takes special note of the Victorians’ influence (9–17). Thurin and Ryder both remark Cather’s maturing use of the classics from early, occasional ornamental allusions to later, fuller organic interpolations into her texts.

3. A. E. Stallings notes that “Rome during Lucretius’ lifetime was in a constant state of unrest” (240, n. 6). Janis P. Stout comments on the effects of World War I on *My Ántonia*, writing that “Cather was keenly conscious of the war and depressed by it. Perhaps that in itself impelled her imagination toward wishful celebration of nurturing, abundance, and security” (164–66).

4. The translation used in this essay is by A. E. Stallings (2007).

5. In this section, Johnson argues, cohabitation in a comfortable, warm hut which parents share with children modifies their brute sexual drive—“Venus drained their powers” (5: 1017)—their sexual relations become less urgent and more gentle, as their parental affection civilizes them and, consequently, their neighbors (50–53).

6. Stephen Greenblatt, while exploring the drama of the medieval hunt for Lucretian manuscripts, discusses *The Swerve* in his



summary of Lucretius's major topics (185–201) and in other passages throughout the book.

7. Cather's possible text for Lucretius may have been the Henry G. Bohn edition of 1851. In *A Lost Lady*, Niel recalls reading from his uncle's set of "the Bohn classics." In the Bohn edition, the translation does not differ from twenty-first century translations of details of Lucretius's commentaries on sexual matters. The Bohn edition is readily available at Google Books and elsewhere online. Carl J. Richard offers a full commentary on the importance of the classics in antebellum America. Translations of the classics were ubiquitous as was the teaching of the classics throughout America.

8. Blanche Gelfant argues that *My Ántonia* is "a brilliantly tortuous novel" that forms "a pattern of sexual aversion into which each detail fits" (65). Throughout the narrative, however, Lena is portrayed as a joyous erotic figure who may inadvertently cause destructive behavior as with Crazy Mary, Ole's wife, but more often is seen as a woman who makes her lover (Jim)—and would-be lovers (Ole, Ordinsky, Raleigh)—whole by her sympathy and attentiveness. Elizabeth Asmis ("Lucretius' Venus and Stoic Zeus") discusses Venus's earlier avatar Aphrodite's role as a god of "conciliation and union," grouped in some Stoic texts with gods of "Good Rule, Justice, and Concord, and Peace" (91). Given all the happily anticipated, implied, remembered, wished-for and suspected—though not directly reported—sexual activity throughout *My Ántonia*, Gelfant's argument strains for credulity. Stouck's equally unequivocal assertions also lack credibility: "In Cuzak's relation to Ántonia there is no suggestion of sex: theirs is a friendship in which he is simply 'the instrument of Ántonia's special mission' The elimination of sexuality is thoroughgoing" (57). The nine children the Cuzaks have engendered suggest otherwise.

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“Heroic in Size”: Reading *My Ántonia* as Willa Cather’s First World War I Novel

Max Frazier

In 2017 Willa Cather’s *One of Ours* gained considerable attention as part of the centenary observance of the entry by the United States’ into “the Great War,” World War I, “the war to end all wars” (1914–18). Focused on an idealistic Nebraskan who loses his life fighting in the war as part of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF), this novel is the obvious choice for connecting Cather to those years, and all the more so because of its 1923 Pulitzer Prize. But even acknowledging the preeminence of Cather’s 1922 novel in this regard, readers may also find themselves thinking of that war when reading its immediate predecessor, *My Ántonia*. Wholly written during the war, that earlier novel contains allusions and echoes to the war’s ongoing presence that mark it as Cather’s first World War I novel, this despite its seemingly very different focus. In what follows here I wish to examine the most prominent of these allusions and echoes. To begin, I offer what seems a striking phrasing appearing quite early in the novel, one with which most readers are familiar: “That hour always had the exultation of victory, of triumphant ending, like a hero’s death—heroes who died young and gloriously. It was a sudden transfiguration, a lifting-up of day” (39). Cather in the late 1890s was drawn to the poetry of A. E. Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad*, to his “To an Athlete Dying Young” in particular; she would go on to create Claude Wheeler and his fate in *One of Ours*; and Tom Outland too, another central character killed in the war. Seeing *My Ántonia* as part of an imaginative process connected to these ideas seems not only apt, but inescapable. The question at stake in reading *My Ántonia* as a war novel is the tension between context and content.

Critics who have singled out *One of Ours* as Cather’s war novel have often overlooked the contextual implications for *My Ántonia*, so connections between the war and the earlier novel have not been frequent in critical discussions. Steven Trout introduces *Memorial Fictions: Willa Cather and the First World War* with this statement: “Military conflict frames and in many respects defines Willa Cather’s life and career” (1), yet he spends little time on *My Ántonia*, offering this observation in an aside: “There is the coroner in *My Ántonia* ‘a mild, flurried old man, a Civil War veteran, with one sleeve hanging empty’” (2). He mentions little more about this book and ignores the war’s role in the cultural contexts of Cather’s imaginative production of the novel. Janis P. Stout notes this in a review of Trout’s book and wonders, “surely *My Ántonia*, written during the war years, manifests in its

instances of shocking and unexpected violence a response to the anxieties of the war news Cather was reading in the daily papers” (96). Similarly, in her literary biography, Stout notes that with *My Ántonia*, “in a sense, Cather had already written a war novel” (*The Writer* 164). Indeed, following this suggestion, the contextual presence of the war seems to be felt everywhere in Cather’s life and career. Elizabeth “Elsie” Shepley Sergeant devotes an entire chapter of her memoir to *My Ántonia*, opening it in the spring of 1916 when she emphasizes that Cather “had not been able to forget that, in these war days, the youth of Europe, its finest flower, was dying,” and she adds “but a growing vital work [*My Ántonia*], with Willa, usually took precedence, even in her thoughts, over the life around her” (138). Even acknowledging that Cather’s ongoing focus was on her novel, Sergeant is clear that the war was the major topic saturating the world around the author.

Along with Stout, James Woodress and other biographers note the many letters that show Cather’s consciousness of and misery over the war. In particular, Cather writes Sergeant from Pittsburgh in September of 1914, noting that “the war broke in on things a good deal. . . . One can’t get away from the pull of it because somehow everything one most cares about seems in danger and under test” (*Selected Letters* 195). About six weeks later, again from Pittsburgh, she comments to her Aunt Franc that “we talk and think of little but the war” (196).

Because *My Ántonia* engages the war contextually rather than overtly, much of the evidence of Cather’s references to wartime are similarly contextual. A particular review of the novel, one published in the (New York) *Sun* just six weeks before the Armistice and one that particularly pleased Cather, is especially relevant. So too are the contexts—especially those of provenance—of the novel’s illustrations and the previous work of the illustrator W. T. Benda. More than these two issues, the specific scenes of violence and its attendant imagery found in the novel evoke Cather’s awareness of the ongoing war; as such, contemporary readers would unavoidably recognize the contexts of the Great War in this fictional autobiography of a retrospective and nostalgic American midwestern past.

Reading *My Ántonia* in the contexts of the war is quite plausible and even necessary when we see that the novel’s opening pages encouraged an anonymous reviewer in the *Sun*’s “Books and the Book World” to note the militaristic qualities of Cather’s



writing. The critic insists that she surrenders the “usual methods of fiction in telling her story” by writing a fictional autobiography (“My Nebraska Antonia”). While the entire review is remarkable for its use of militaristic language, this long selection demonstrates how this analysis, under the subhead “A Surrender and a Victory,” operates within an ongoing worldwide conflict and encourages the *Sun*’s readers to associate the novel within their present-day context of global war:

By deliberately and at the outset surrendering the story teller’s most valuable prerogatives Miss Cather has won a complete victory over the reader, shattering his easeful assumption of the unreality of it all, routing his ready-made demand for the regulation thrills and taking prisoner his sense of what is his rightful due. It is as if General Foch [a key French military commander] were maneuvering. The strategy is unfathomed and the blow falls in the most unexpected quarter. You picked up *My Antonia* to read a novel (love story, of course; hope it’s a good one) and find yourself enthralled by autobiography (“My Nebraska Antonia”).¹

Readers have nearly become troops maneuvered by Cather’s unique attack on literary form. This reviewer insists that Cather wrangles the materials of romance into reality because the same materials for both are “the very substance of actuality. They need only to be skillfully related, and in handling them Miss Cather does unfailingly well. Nor is her accomplishment easy; murder, suicide, debauchery and occurrences that were not only unvarnished but unvarnishable are quite as much a part of what she has to handle as the happy, domestic scenes natural to childhood.” The reviewer’s approval of this female author moving

away from what he describes as the traditionally feminine subject of romance to the more masculine subjects he cites, “murder, suicide, debauchery,” makes later critiques that any woman, even Cather, could not write on the subject matter in *One of Ours* that much more difficult to accept. The reviewer closes with the 1918 contemporary connection of the Cuzak family and the war by referring to the blue star service flag.² The critic adds “And, by the way, at the Cuzak farm there must now be a red bordered flag, and the stars in the heart of it must form a glorious constellation” (“My Nebraska Antonia”). This reference to “glorious” reminds us of the early fall afternoons and the hour that “had the exultation of victory, of triumphant ending, like a hero’s death—heroes who died young and gloriously” in the novel (39). Readers in 1918 choosing to purchase *My Antonia* based on this review would have their intellectual context clearly formed within the mindset of the ongoing war, both by the reviewer’s connection to it and by the shared daily obsession with it. The easy use of war metaphor suggests that war is simply a part of daily life.

If the war was ever-present to initial readers of *My Antonia*, then the physical aspects of the published novel would have resonated in context with the war images that had been bombarding them since the war began in 1914. Cather’s intense concern for the aesthetics of her book, most especially her directives regards its illustrations, adds weight to analyzing it within the cultural contexts of the war. In her discussion of them, Jean Schwind writes about Cather’s implied role as the editor of Jim Burden’s narrative and about how the illustrations may be seen “as fulfilling her promise to provide a separate account of Jim’s heroine” (387). Schwind reads these drawings as Cather’s artistic story about Antonia. Cather’s choice of illustrator, W. T. Benda, shows complex and intertwining motivations. By 1917–18, Cather had been familiar with Benda’s work for over a decade, since he was among the illustrators regularly appearing in *McClure’s* during her time there (1906–11). Cather wanted immigrants rendered in simple lines and she knew he was the person to do what she wanted. Much of Benda’s work at this time was related to the war, such as the 1916 illustrations of the American Mary and the Belgian Marie that accompany Porter Emerson Browne’s “Mary and Marie,” a story about the very different impact of the war on two young women (see illustration to the left). Cather worked with Benda in earnest, beginning in October of 1917. In a November 24, 1917 letter to Ferris Greenslet, Cather wrote that she “selected Benda as a man who knows both Bohemia and the West” (*Selected Letters* 247). Stout, for her part, connects Benda’s simple line drawings to Cather’s writing style: “They offer a visual equivalent of her verbal clarity and selective focus on a few details against a far prospect” (*Picturing a Different West* 116). These images clearly connect the novel to the war effort.



W. T. Benda's illustrations for Porter Emerson Browne's "Mary and Marie," *McClure's Magazine*, September 1916.





Images from the *New York Times* “Rotogravure Picture Section” from Sunday, January 20, 1918: a French war veteran and his wife; a detail from W. T. Benda’s poster for the Y.W.C.A. (“Stand Behind the Country’s Girlhood”); and “Mrs. Sarah Eggleston of Sewanee, Tenn.,” knitting socks for soldiers.

Viewing the crux of the novel’s illustrations within the context of the war, a fascinating group of pictures seems to connect the illustration of Lena Lingard, particularly, with images correlated with Benda’s other, war-related work. Just how Benda and Cather worked together to choose Lena knitting as one of the illustrations is unclear. Cather herself wrote in a 1919 article for the *Red Cross Magazine* that she remembered a vigorous Red Cross organization when she returned home in 1917 that becomes a full-blown knitting, food conservation, and money-saving effort by 1918 (“Roll Call” 27–31). The illustration of Lena Lingard draws a clear connection to iconic images of women knitting for the war that matches Cather’s memory of immigrant women contributing to the war effort.

According to her letters, Cather had three Benda drawings, two of which she sent to her editor, Ferris Greenslet, in December 1917 (*Selected Letters* 250–51). At that point, the Lena Lingard illustration was not among them. Benda had an illustration in the January 20, 1918 Sunday pictorial insert of the *New York Times*. On the first page of the insert there appears a photo of a former French soldier with prosthetic arms accompanied by his wife, who is knitting (see illustration above). The image is strikingly similar to the Lena Lingard illustration with the major differences found in Lena’s scant clothing and reverse direction to the newspaper photo.³ Benda’s unrelated illustration was on the next page. A few pages later, there is a photograph of an elderly woman knitting for the war effort. In a March 7, 1918 letter to Ferris Greenslet, Cather tells her editor that she will send him the Lena Lingard illustration, along with some others, setting the date for the *My Ántonia* drawing after the potential prototype image in the newspaper insert (*Selected Letters* 252–53). Benda’s 1918 Red Cross poster of a woman knitting is the primary result in a Google image search for knitting in World War I (see illustration on next page). The resemblance

between the two is clear. Whether or not these previous images represent direct influence on the drawing of Lena (see illustration on page 30), there is no question that the drawing of Lena Lingard knitting would resonate with the contemporary demand for women to knit for their men at the front. An intentional connection to the war context or not, the illustration would remind readers of women supporting the war effort.

Beyond illustrations, the text of the novel surrounding Benda’s simple line drawings is equally compelling and full of literal and figurative references to war. There are recognizable war connections with references to violence in the iconic imagery surrounding the German dog, the dachshund, in Jim Burden’s battle against an immense rattlesnake, and in Mr. Shimerda’s suicide—his depression brought on by his family’s living conditions in a prairie dug out suggests those of the war’s trenches. Beyond all this, finally, Cather is writing about Bohemians, immigrants from the then Austro-Hungarian Empire, one of Germany’s allies.

The dachshund was a frequent negative figure in war posters, postcards, and other imagery that defined the Great War culture among the Allies (“The ‘Great War’”). As with the knitting illustration, a war context is supplied by the presence of a dachshund, a word whose literal translation from the German is “badger hound.” Early in their friendship, Jim is teaching Ántonia to read English near the badger hole in Grandmother Burden’s garden. Jim had learned about Grandmother Burden’s affection for the badger when she told him, “He takes a chicken once in a while, but I won’t let the men harm him. . . . I like to have him come out and watch me when I’m at work” (17). In this context Jim notes “squadrons” of bugs and experiences the happiness he describes in a famous passage from the novel, in which he asserts that happiness is “to be dissolved into something complete and great” (18); associating the badger and the garden with military squadrons and the memory of sun-soaked sentimental afternoons. The badger becomes associated with friendly trench dwellers who find themselves underground. In the English lesson, a dog, readily seen by readers as a dachshund, given the multitude of dachshund images associated with the war in posters and other media, emerges in a tale about Ántonia’s Bohemian past:

That afternoon she was telling me how highly esteemed our friend the badger was in her part of the world, and how men kept a special kind of dog, with very short legs, to hunt him. Those dogs, she said, went down into the hole after the badger and killed him there in a terrific struggle underground; you could hear the barks and yelps outside. Then the dog dragged himself back, covered with bites and scratches, to be rewarded and petted by his master. She knew a dog who had a star on his collar for every badger he had killed. (37)

Ántonia shares the Burden admiration for badgers while also seeing them as a worthy opponent that exists in the Old Country. While Cather neatly avoids the term “dachshund,” the military reference is clear. The breed was unjustly discriminated against in Britain and America after 1914 with accounts that dogs were even attacked or put to sleep (Hayward 7). Historians note that, after 1914, people began replacing the term “dachshund” with the phrase “liberty hound” (Manning 16). The militaristic “stars on his collar” for every killed badger solidifies the ties to the war by evoking images of high-collared German uniforms and the dangling cross (see illustration on page 31). In a scene set well before war begins, Ántonia admires the dog’s ferocity, even if it would later become reviled for its connection to a modern-day enemy. The fictional Jim Burden’s layered memories, woven into Cather’s contemporary context replete with war imagery, highlight this link between the tale of a dachshund and the pervasive presence of the ongoing conflict. The textual proximity of the German-connected dog killing a badger, a friend to Grandmother Burden, while burrowed into a trench-like hole, foreshadows Mr. Shimerda’s suicide.

While topical given the Nebraska badger described, Ántonia’s recollection of the Bohemian dachshund is a direct connection to the ongoing war. In another scene located between the dachshund’s battle with the badger and the suicide, there is Jim Burden’s “epic” battle with the massive rattlesnake he and Ántonia find guarding the entrance to the tunnels of the prairie-dog town. As that scene begins they were “examining a big hole with two entrances. The burrow sloped into the ground at a gentle angle, so that we could see where the two corridors united” (43), evoking the first of several mental images of World War I trenches in the novel. Ántonia’s scream awakens the giant evil, perhaps an allusion to the evil of the enemy forces in the Great War. Perhaps evident in Cather’s thought, since she was writing during 1917, is just what role young Americans would have once they joined this fight. Hired hand Otto Fuch’s

exclamation about the giant rattlesnake—“I wouldn’t want to do any business with that fellow myself. . . . He could stand right up and talk to you, he could. Did he fight hard?” (47)—opens up the opportunity for Ántonia to break in with “He fight something awful!” The event inspires “war stories” and Otto and Jim walk into the kitchen to find Ántonia telling the account “with a great deal of color.” The humor behind this legitimate danger is palpable and allows Jim to rise in Ántonia’s estimation because he can protect her. Cather juxtaposes Ántonia of the Old World and Jim of the New World in a way that could suggest that the U.S. may have a role in protecting what is so vital in Europe.

Cather escalates the violence in the novel as the first, brutal Nebraska winter sets in for the newcomers. The battered nature of the settlers during this winter loosely links them to besieged troops in the war. When the Russian immigrant Pavel injures himself laboring, the resulting “gush of blood from the lungs” is reminiscent of chemical warfare (49). Later, as Pavel lies dying in the house he shares with his fellow Russian immigrant Peter, Jim describes the gusts of winds rattling through their little house as making him think of “defeated armies, retreating” (51). After Pavel’s death and Peter’s departure, Ántonia’s father, feeling “the loss of his two friends,” would sit in their empty house and brood until “the winter snows penned him in his cave” (59). This cave is another trench-like reference, for the Shimerda’s dugout is, as Emmaline Burden describes it, “no better than a badger hole” (20). We remember how the badger is a friend and that evil forces have been bred to kill that friend. Near Christmas that season, even the Burdens are reduced to digging trench-like tunnels in the deep snow, maintaining the sense of the prairie pioneers under siege. The strain on these well-to-do

farmers sets up the despair that the impoverished immigrants must have felt. Jim insists that “it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda, and [he] wondered whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way back to his own country” (97). Cather appropriates the dark, cold trenches already in use across the ocean near Mr. Shimerda’s own country and even anticipates the suicides that will come about because of the great violence men were being required to practice in the world. The Great War permeates the beginning of the novel.

Cather ends Book I of *My Ántonia* drawing the explicit relationship between the efforts of these Nebraska farmers and



W. T. Benda's 1918 poster for the American Red Cross. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.



the well-being of the entire world. Describing the sparse nature of the cornfields dotted within the grazed prairie, Jim Burden notes that “It took a clear, meditative eye like my grandfather’s to foresee that they would enlarge and multiply until they would be, not the Shimerdas’ cornfields, or Mr. Bushy’s, but the world’s cornfields; that their yield would be one of the great economic facts, like the wheat crop of Russia, which underlie all the activities of men, in peace or war” (132). Throughout this first book, Cather has threaded images that evoke the present-day war—heroic afternoons, the struggle between badgers and dachshunds, and the various ways that good people end up tunneled into trench-like spaces. By highlighting the impact of agriculture in the context of war, Cather, as Jessica Hellmann notes, “allows the Shimerdas’ and Mr. Bushy’s cornfields, much the same as many real farms in the Midwest, to become major players in the world economy” (40). In the end of this portion of the novel, Cather foreshadows how the embattled early settlers will become the people from her hometown whose crops have already become a major factor in sustaining troops in the First World War.

The war descriptions lapse for most of the next book in the novel, “The Hired Girls,” although they reemerge at its end. In a seemingly idyllic afternoon, overt references to images of war are used when Jim Burden goes on a summer picnic with the hired girls before he heads to the university. In Cather’s 1909 short story, “The Enchanted Bluff,” set around a similar river to this scene, the narrator describes how he is “already homesick at the thought of quitting the boys with whom I had always played,” marking a similar pivot from a familiar life to something new (70). Cather positions these moments at important turning points when young people set aside their lives cloistered in small midwestern towns to make their way in the larger world. Critics have noticed the repeating theme of a transition, often when characters spend the night on a sandbar in the river or gather along its banks. Robert Thacker notes that Cather returns repeatedly to these images in her writing, seeing them as an enduring influence of A. E. Housman’s *A Shropshire Lad* on Cather’s work. He quotes her 1900 *Lincoln Courier* piece on Housman saying that writing poetry is “to be able to say the oldest thing in the

world as though it had never been said before” (316). *My Antonia* is poetic in its saturation with these kinds of images linked to transition and change. That is, it is a novel ever invoking old things. Jim Burden’s walk to meet the girls takes on the quality of an epic journey in which a man is tasting youth for the last time. The scene reverberates too with the sense of a man’s youth ending, reminiscent of Housman’s “To an Athlete Dying Young.” If Jim Burden has long outlived his youth by the time he writes down his memories of Antonia, the novel and this remembered picnic within it are the living embodiment of the laurels of his youth: “unwithered on its curls / The garland briefer than a girl’s” (*Collected Poems of A. E. Housman* 32–33). This theme that resonates across all of Cather’s oeuvre takes on weighty implications in the context of the Great War, with so many young men’s lives cut short. (And, though beyond the scope of this essay, it reminds Cather’s readers of Tom Outland, one of them.) Notably, Jim Burden is past the age when he would participate in the war when he writes about Antonia, making his story, as Thacker notes, “a rueful backward look at his best years, those that have fled” (316). If this is a lament, solace can be found in the glowing memory of his picnic with the hired girls.

Jim Burden’s impending departure for college mirrors a soldier’s departure for war, something Cather encourages with themes of homesickness, conquest, and language reminiscent of the war. When Jim heads out of Black Hawk for the picnic, he looks across a wire fence and sees a “clump of flaming orange-colored milkweed, rare in that part of the State” (225). That Cather purposefully places a specific fiery plant across a wire fence as part of this scene is underscored by the need to qualify that she knows the flower is rare in her hometown—Jim is placed amid war images of fire and wire, leaving his home. When she then walks Jim across gaillardia that covers the ground “with the deep, velvety red that is in Bokhara carpets” (225), she’s signaling the foreign quality of this day and Jim’s departure to a land that is “over there.” He crosses the bridge and, as he undresses for a swim, he notes that “it occurred to me that I would be homesick for that river after I left it,” adding that the sandbars in it were a sort of “No Man’s Land, little newly-created worlds that belonged to the Black Hawk boys” (226). As a side note, much of Jim’s



Benda's Lena.

actions bathing here and interacting with the girls on the bridge are reminiscent of Claude's shell hole bathing scene in *One of Ours*, with the youthful appreciation of a strong male body (481). The reference to "No Man's Land" would instantly recall the space between entrenched forces for readers in 1918.

As Jim climbs away from the river, he passes a "scar" (227), a wound in the land, covered over by the elderflowers the girls have come to gather for wine. He finds *Ántonia*, who has been crying because she is "homesick"—in this moment, *Ántonia* is the one who has left behind a homeland (228). For the first time, he tells her about sensing her father's presence, when Jim was sure Mr. Shimerda "was on his way back to his own country" (229). Cather links the war references that were clearly present in the earliest chapters of the novel and surrounding Mr. Shimerda's death with this summer afternoon between Jim and *Ántonia*, just before Jim leaves Black Hawk, potentially forever. The heroes'-death quality of the fall afternoons in Book I of the novel pairs with the use of the descriptor "heroic" in this afternoon outing. Michael Gorman reads the presence of a story about Coronado and military conquest as "Cather trac[ing] the United States' cultural heritage and its rise to global power—a genealogy suggesting that America has a duty, as de facto European state, to participate in the Great War" (31). Immediately following this allusion to Spanish conquest comes the iconic plow scene so famous in this novel. Now the plow, which is "black against the molten red" can be read like some form of mechanized warfare equipment in a fiery battle or a vulnerable silhouette on the edge of a trench: "heroic in size" and representing a panoply of possibilities to critics including the option that it represents the growing American responsibility in the Great War.

If reading *My Ántonia* as a war novel requires close examination of context, perhaps the beginning of the novel is also the ending in our clues to understanding the war-contemporary nature of the book and its construction. When Cather writes in the autobiographical first person, "Last summer I happened to be crossing the plains of Iowa" (ix), she would be read as suggesting that a version of herself—perhaps fictional, perhaps not—was crossing the plains by train in 1917, the year before the novel's publication. Ambiguous about the direction they are traveling, she places this version of herself along with Jim Burden in a form of limbo that is near to but never reaching Nebraska, nor



This widely reproduced postcard image by illustrator Bernhardt Wall shows a dachshund wearing an Iron Cross and spiked German helmet.

for that matter, New York. As a man who is over forty and "legal counsel for one of the great Western railways," Jim is too old to serve in the war, but surely he is familiar with troop transport along the lines of his company's trains, something that began once the U.S. declared war in April 1917 and was underway in earnest by September 1917. In fact, the Union Pacific depot in Grand Island, Nebraska, just under seventy miles north of Cather's hometown, Red Cloud, the fictional Black Hawk in *My Ántonia*, "witnessed one of the most massive troop movements across the country from 1917 to 1919" (Setlik). Jim brings his manuscript to the fictional Cather's New York apartment on a "stormy, winter afternoon," which would place this timing in the middle of major troop movements as well

as the coal shortage that would freeze many of New York's poorer citizens to death, a shortage partially brought on by the Great War. Readers would have easily contextualized their own winter of 1917 with this introduction. Simply, the narrative intertwines with notions of the Great War.

In many ways *My Ántonia* is Willa Cather's first war novel, if not in content, then in context. Cather's letters, filled with references to the war, combined with the war-like language and images that appear in the novel show how immediately the war was present during the novel's production. The fact that we find evidence of war in a novel not typically categorized as a war novel matters because war is not an isolated event with a fixed front. War novels often try to make sense of battles, but there are other victims, those on the home front, whose lives are altered by war, as we see in the image of the armless French farmer walking with his wife. War bleeds into our vocabulary, our imagery, our dreams, and our narratives. This connection is important, not just in Cather, but in every novel that speaks to the impact of war at home, for it too is the true cost of war.

What really matters in reading the presence of the Great War throughout *My Ántonia* is the clear impact of world events on a novel seemingly unconnected to those events. If people generally think that a war novel must have as its subject war, then perhaps they are also missing the impact of wars on people at home who are not a direct part of the combat. For a novel about the difficulties of immigration and pioneering prairie life, the pervasive presence of the ongoing war remains woven into its fabric just as surely as Lena Lingard knitted stockings for her siblings and American women knitted stockings for soldiers in the Great War.





A 1918 Canadian poster showing a policeman dragging a miniature German soldier and his dachshund along a country road. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

NOTES

1. Although focused on the autobiographical aspects of *My Antonia* and to the narrative's derivation from Cather's writing of S. S. McClure's *My Autobiography*, Robert Thacker discusses this review and Cather's reaction to it in some detail. See his "It's Through Myself."

2. Blue star service flags, which date from the World War I era, are rectangles that are white, thickly bordered in red, with a blue star in the center for each family member serving in the war. The *Sun* critic is assuming that members of the Cuzak household joined the war effort.

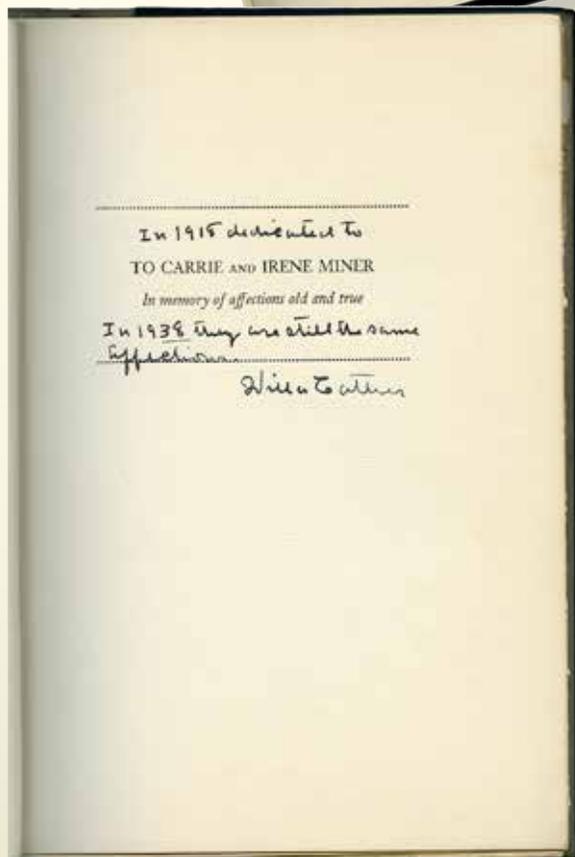
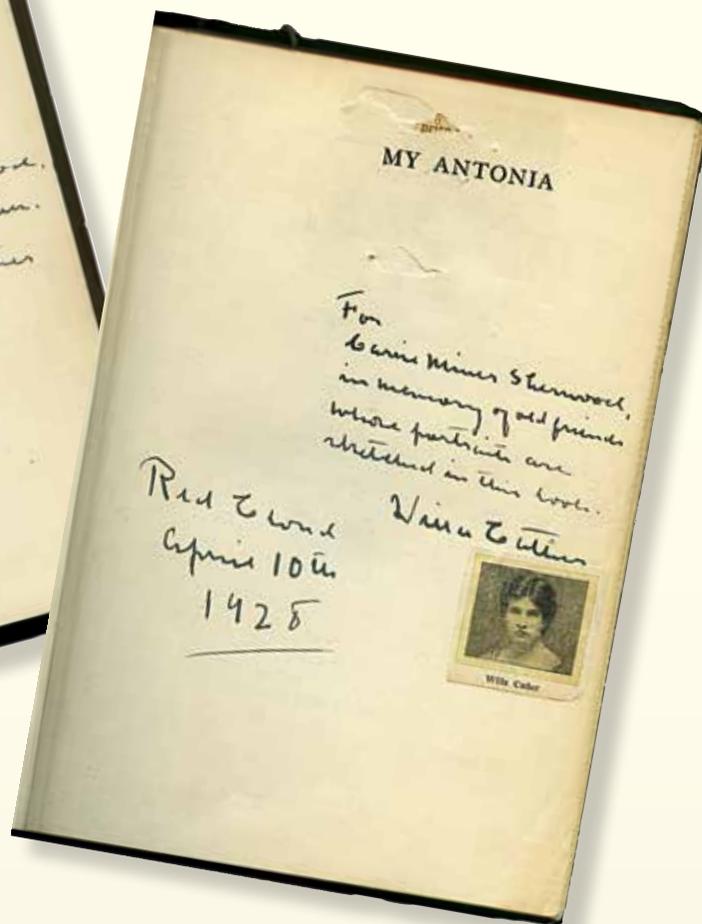
3. Lithographs reverse images when the plate is applied to the paper, suggesting that the original drawing could have been nearly identical in form to the newspaper photo. W. T. Benda worked regularly worked in lithography and with the typical printing process Houghton Mifflin used for reproduction in 1918.

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Affections Old and True

These inscribed editions of *My Antonia* belonged to Carrie Miner Sherwood, co-founder of the Willa Cather Foundation. She and her sister Irene Miner Weisz were the dedicatees of Cather's novel and make fictionalized appearances in it as Frances and Nina Harling. Many thanks to Brad and Nancy Sherwood, long-time generous supporters of the Cather Foundation, for allowing us to share these images. Brad is a great-grandson of Carrie Miner Sherwood and Nancy is Secretary of the Foundation's Board of Governors.



Contributors to this Issue

Max Frazier is an MFA student at Bennington College as well as retired Senior Military Faculty from the Department of English and Fine Arts at the U.S. Air Force Academy in Colorado. She writes about women and war and she studies questions of memory and identity in forming a sense of self, particularly through the lens of women's fiction and autobiography. Her book chapter "Creative Genius: Willa Cather's Characters and the Influence of the American Desert Southwest" is in *Critical Insights: Southwestern Literature* (2016). Her latest essay, "Here Is Where My War Story Begins," appears in the Spring 2017 edition of *CONSEQUENCE* Magazine.

Evelyn Funda, professor of English at Utah State University, has published numerous essays on Cather and is working on a book about Cather's lifelong interest in Czech history and culture.

She is also author of a memoir about her Czech family, *Weeds: A Farm Daughter's Lament*, and coeditor of an interdisciplinary textbook entitled *Farm: A Multimodal Reader*.

John Jacobs is professor of English emeritus at Shenandoah University, where he is again serving—just as he did in 1997—as site director for the International Willa Cather Seminar to be held at his university in 2019, "Unsettling Cather: Differences and Dislocations." His current research focuses on Cather's engagement with the classics.

Robert Thacker is Charles A. Dana Professor of Canadian Studies and English emeritus at St. Lawrence University, a member of the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Foundation, and issue editor of this *Review*.

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It is your support that has allowed our dreams to become exciting and inspiring realities. Your commitment to our mission has taken us far, but there is much more we can achieve together. Will you help us in our pursuit to popularize Cather and her work around the world? A charitable bequest is an excellent way for you to leave a legacy and help further our mission. A bequest is also one of the easiest gifts you can make. Your estate planning attorney can help you



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"There are always dreamers on the frontier."

— O Pioneers!

Ashley Olson

Executive Director

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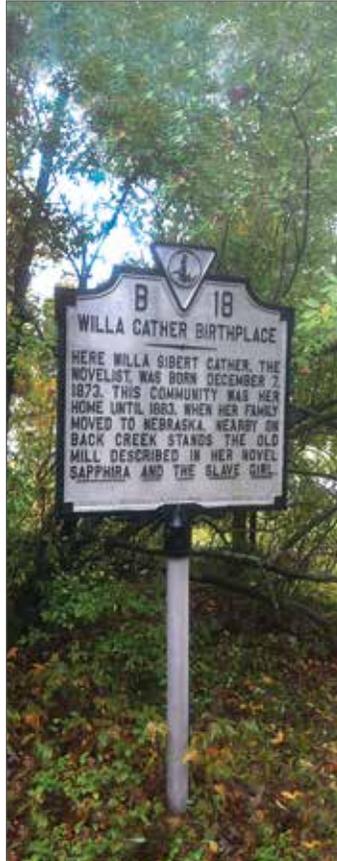
June 17–21, 2019
Shenandoah University
Winchester, Virginia

Unsettling Cather: Differences and Dislocations

Call for Proposals

The 17th International Willa Cather Seminar will be held in the lush, complex place of Cather's Virginia birth and first nine years. When she was born here in 1873, Cather's family had already been in Virginia since the 1730s. Here, as observant daughter of a white family, she first encountered differences and dislocations that remained lively, productive, and sometimes deeply troubling sites of tension and energy in her writings. In this seminar, we do not intend to root conversation solely in this particular locale. Instead, we hope to un-root or unsettle it through attention to the differences and dislocations that marked Cather's life and work, beginning in her undergraduate stories and culminating in her late-life return to Virginia in her last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*.

The seminar will visit many sites in Winchester and the surrounding area that were important to Cather's family, and other Virginians, as they experienced the persistence of slavery, the French and Indian War, the Revolution, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. We will be welcomed by the current owners to Willow Shade, Cather's first childhood home. We will also spend a day in Washington, D.C., with opportunities to visit the new National Museum of African American History and Culture and other museums and sites relevant to Cather's writing.



As always, the seminar will welcome papers taking a broad array of approaches to Cather's life and work. We especially invite fresh takes on the many forms of difference and the many moments of dislocation that her readers encounter. We aim to jump-start a conversation that has been somewhat muted in Cather studies in recent years and to invite new voices and new perspectives into the discussion.

- Differences of sex, gender, race, ethnicity, class, region, and nationality are everywhere in Cather's cosmopolitan fictional world. How do they signify? How do they intersect? How are they navigated? What is at stake in the writer's explorations of difference?
- Cather's characters are often on the move. Relocation tends to produce a sense of dislocation that may be destabilizing and disorienting. What are the social and psychic resonances of dislocation in Cather's writing?
- How has expanded access to Cather's letters unsettled understandings of her life? How does hearing Cather's unmediated epistolary voice (rather than the cautious, mediated voice of paraphrase) alter the sound or our sense of that voice?

Program Directors

Marilee Lindemann, University of Maryland
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John Jacobs, Shenandoah University, emeritus

Please send 500-word proposals of individual papers to the Willa Cather Foundation's education director, Tracy Tucker, at ttucker@WillaCather.org, by February 1, 2019. If your paper is accepted, you will be notified by March 1, 2019. Papers should be 8–10 pages in length (20 minutes when read). The conference organizers also welcome proposals for roundtable panels and other formats; proposals for such alternate formats should be submitted no later than January 15, 2019. Graduate students will be welcomed to the seminar and those whose proposals are accepted may apply for funding through the Willa Cather Foundation.



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My Ántonia–inspired merchandise is available at the National Willa Cather Center or online at willacather.org. Choose from our custom-designed t-shirt with the iconic Benda illustration or our 100th anniversary baseball cap. Purchase both for the perfect ensemble! Other anniversary items available include magnets, buttons, notecards, and puzzles, all showcasing the illustrations of W. T. Benda. Order today and join in the celebration of 100 years of *My Ántonia*!



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- September 22** *My Ántonia* marathon reading
With many special guests and talk-back discussion after.
Beginning 10:00 a.m. at Gallery 1516 in Omaha, Nebraska
- October 14** Selections from the 1995 TV film adaptation of *My Ántonia*
Discussion with special guest, writer/producer Victoria Riskin.
2:00 p.m. at the Film Streams Dundee Theater in Omaha, Nebraska
- October 19–22** Willa Cather Celebration Weekend
With Ashley Olson, Willa Cather Foundation Executive Director, and Tracy Tucker, Education Director, at the Jaffrey Historical Society, Jaffrey, New Hampshire



A collaboration with the Willa Cather Archive. For more information, call 866-731-7304.



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The *Willa Cather Review* welcomes scholarly essays, notes, news items, and letters. Scholarly essays should generally not exceed 5,000 words, although longer essays may be considered; they should be submitted in Microsoft Word as email attachments and should follow current MLA guidelines as articulated in the *MLA Handbook*.

Direct essays and inquiries to Ann Romines at annrom3@verizon.net.

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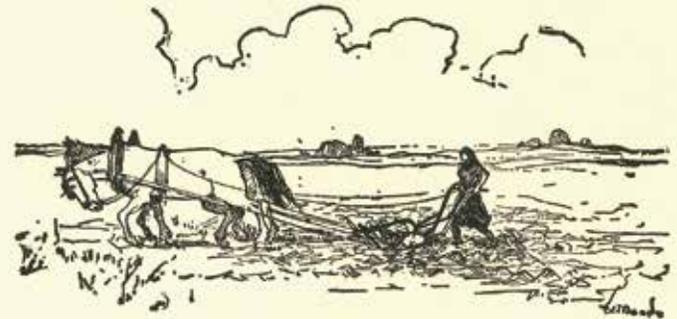
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