Willa Cather’s Turns

SCOTT YENOR

Abstract: Examining Willa Cather’s corpus of literary works reveals several phases of her illustrious career. After defending commercial culture in O Pioneers! and My Ántonia, her later novels, especially her One of Ours, diagnose an unmediated split in the Western world illustrated by the experience of the Great War: the bourgeois commercial culture undermines aspirations for human greatness. Her later novels deepen this diagnosis and offer a way out in a return to a rooted community of believers living in the shadows of the Church.

Keywords: Cather, Catholicism, decadence, Great War, history

Willa Cather’s status as an author of the American West is unambiguous. Her novels are set in America’s West,¹ and they treat distinctive American themes. Her earliest novels, especially O Pioneers! (1913) and My Ántonia (1918), depict the greatness of those who laid the foundation for American civilization on the frontier. Once it is settled, however, the prairie brings forth a new kind of man—small, narrow, greedy, and petty. Niel Herbert, a hero of A Lost Lady (1923), contrasts the “Old West,” which was settled by “dreamers, great hearted adventurers who were unpractical to the point of magnificence; a courteous brotherhood, strong in attack but weak in defence, who could conquer but could not hold” to those of the New West, who would “dispel the morning freshness, root out the great brooding spirit of freedom, the generous easy life of the great land-holders” and cut everything “up into profitable bits, as the match factory splinters the primeval forest.”² For Cather, too, the closing of the American frontier brought an ethic hostile to leisure, beauty, art, tradition, and, ultimately, life.

It is wrong to confine Cather’s understanding of “the West” to the American West. The American West’s decline must be read in light of her observation that “the world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts.”³ One of Ours (1922), Cather’s neglected Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, is the best starting point for analyzing the crisis Cather saw in Western civilization. Cather saw that the “literary world which emerged from the war used a new coinage” due to the fact that a reevaluation had occurred and standards had been shaken “at the Marne” or “at Versailles.” This World War I novel depicts the moral crisis unfolding in history. The self-destruction of the West on the battlefield is the physical manifestation of a deeper spiritual crisis; the destruction of souls antedates the slaughter of soldiers.

The crisis involves a sundering of bourgeois life, characteristic of commercial America, from aspirations for human greatness, which she often associates with European high culture. Mirroring education advocates such as Matthew Arnold,⁴ Cather’s early, more optimistic novels mediated the conflict between bourgeois life and human greatness with her art as informed by liberal education. These early novels criticize narrow-minded, vulgar, bourgeois self-satisfaction from the perspective of a public artist hoping to help raise the cultural and spiritual appreciation for human greatness through universities and liberal arts. She reassesses the efficacy of secular liberal education in One of Ours, where she questions liberal education’s ability to redeem the bourgeois world and shows how a dangerous service to abstract ideals arises in those dissatisfied with bourgeois emptiness. She doubts not only the ability of secularized liberal education to

Scott Yenor is an assistant professor of political science at Boise State University, Idaho, where he teaches political philosophy. He has written on David Hume, Alexis de Tocqueville, the American presidency, and issues of church and state. Copyright © 2007 Heldref Publications
redeem bourgeois life, but also the goodness of bourgeois life as such.

Cather did not solve this problem in One of Ours, but she
overcame it in her later novels, which emphasize the cen-
trality of religious faith and community to human thriving.
In her later novels, the presence of religious faith and
Catholicism specifically coincides with the experience of
happiness and nobility (Shadows on the Rock [1931]; Death
Comes for the Archbishop [1927]; My Mortal Enemy
[1926]), whereas the absence of religion means the novel
ends with the tragically sundered world (The Professor’s
House [1925]; Lucy Gayheart [1935]). She “progressed”
from seeing beauty in commercial heroism and decent fam-
ily life to developing a backward-looking appreciation for
an almost feudal community of devotion. After sketching
her progress as a novelist, the article concludes that Cather’s
tragic vision opposed political radicalism as much as the
scientific spirit.

ARTISTIC CANVAS AS CULTURAL CANOPY: LIBERAL
EDUCATION AS MEDIATOR

For Cather, human beings are restless, uneasy, and anx-
ious, and the canopy of culture provides an interpretation
of this native psychological disposition. Without that life-
lending canopy, human beings become unmoored and are
doomed to wander, aimless and alienated from what is
most needed. Against modern individualism and the uni-
versalism of what is now called globalization, Cather’s
account of human thriving emphasizes how healthy life is
informed by a traditional horizon from which individuals
initially take identity with their breast milk. As Claude
Wheeler, the hero of One of Ours, relates, “Life [is] so
short that it meant nothing at all unless it were continually
reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows
of individual existence came and went against a back-
ground that held together.”

In One of Ours and A Lost Lady, Cather shows how
America’s freedom, economic mobility, and progress shat-
ter the enduring background in America. America gives
rise to a rootless, commercial bourgeois unable to sense the
beautiful, good, and noble. European countries (especially
France), in contrast, maintained an enduring horizon,
social stability, and organic local traditions that sustain a
humane vitality and a sense of place. Unlike what she
viewed as the artificial monotony of American commercial
life, the organic European canopy brought forth the full
range of human emotions and talents. Cather distinguished
Europe and America in an interview shortly after she pub-
lished One of Ours:

The Frenchman doesn’t talk nonsense about art, about self-
expresssion: he is too greatly occupied with building the
things that make his home. His house, his garden, his vine-
yards, these are the things that fill his mind. He creates some-
thing beautiful, something lasting. And what happens? When
a French painter wants to paint a picture he makes a copy of
a garden, a home, a village. The art in them inspires his brush
... Restlessness such as ours, success such as ours, striving
such as ours, do not make for beauty. Other things must
come first: good cookery; cottages that are homes, not play-

things; gardens; repose. These are first-rate things, and out of
first-rate stuff is art made. It is possible that machinery has
finished us as far as this is concerned. Nobody stays at home
any more; nobody makes anything beautiful any more. Quick
transportation is the death of art. We can’t keep still because
it is so easy to move about.6

Her literary treatment of Europe in relation to America is
not as clear-cut as this statement suggests. Europe, home
of the Great War’s slaughter, was not immune from the
spiritual crisis that Cather saw in America. Cather saw
rootless decadence, caused by the evaporation of culture’s
protective mist, as the problem of modern Western civili-
zation. The problem was just more advanced—and hence
more peaceful—in the more democratic and commercial
American context.

Cather’s early novels reflect an appreciation for the
“romanticism of everyday life.”7 The Song of the Lark
(1915), O Pioneers!, and My Ántonia present progress—the
advancement of civilization, its code of honor, and the
spread of opportunity to all—as the meaningful, enduring
American moral canopy. In these novels, conflicts between
bourgeois life and human greatness are mediated by liberal
arts education. Characters often see that it is difficult to find
their places in this dynamic commercial order, but restless
ambition finds expression in diverse institutions as the com-
mercial order spreads a rousing restlessness throughout
society. These early novels constitute a moral defense of the
capitalist order, although they reflect an awareness of the
vulgarizing tendencies of that order. In The Song of the
Lark, a brewer (Fred Ottenburg) and a free-thinking doctor
(Dr. Archie) support Thea Kronborg’s rise from a dreary life
as a minister’s daughter to greatness as a singer. Thea con-
ceives of art as “an effort to make a sheath, a mould in
which to imprison for a moment the shining elusive element
which is life itself.”8 Alexandra Bergson of O Pioneers!
made the high land bring forth crops herself, but her great-
ness is only appreciated by Carl Lindstrum, an engraver.

The best example of this convention is My Ántonia,
which presents Ántonia’s beauty in the context of America’s
increasingly secular society. Her self-sacrificing inner beau-
ty, as expressed in motherhood, is not naturally attractive
to bourgeois, but the sensible artistic imagination formed by
liberal education makes Ántonia’s beauty irresistible.
Through art, Americans can sense the dignity in common
things and stem the tide of vulgar democracy. Liberal arts
education liberates the narrator, Jim Burden, from Ameri-
can’s stifling “mode of existence” that “was like living under
a tyranny.”9 At the university, Jim undergoes a “mental
awakening” as a sophisticated, sickly European teacher ini-
tiates Jim in the “world of ideas.” Introduced to the “pecu-
liar charm and vividness” of liberal learning, Jim ranges
over human experience to appreciate the naturalistic beauty
and dignity in Ántonia and her fully immersed, meaningful
life of motherhood. Cather’s opposition to the merely tech-
nical Progressive education movement afoot during her day
could not be clearer—it deadens the sensibilities and there-
by fosters a prosaic, subtly tyrannical democracy dominat-
ed by empty individualism, restless materialism, and tech-
nology. Nor could her faith in art and liberal education be
more pronounced—only it can ennoble the New West. Jim translates Virgil—"For I shall be the first, If I live, to bring the Muse to my country"—and so Cather seems to conceive of her own works of art in these early novels.

Through Jim, Cather makes the sensibilities dwell on the beauty and fittingness of a situated, nonmechanical life. Hers is a classical approach to art, where the poetic presentation of beauty and ugliness educates readers in virtue and vice. Instead of priests or pastors conveying a sense of meaning, the liberally educated narrators in these early novels provide the spiritual guidance and interpret beauty for the philistines in the middle. The early Cather is a critic of bourgeois fainéant without being alienated.

Liberal arts education would not prove strong enough to resist the democratic tide. Appealing only to the few taken with intellectual delights, liberal education proves incapable of cultivating gentility on a mass scale. More to the point, the possibility of liberal education shaping sensibilities depends, to an extent, on a consensus about what those liberal arts teach or even that those liberal arts teach; meaningful instruction depends on shared meaning more than a conversation about meaning. In post-frontier America, there was no artistic consensus about the interpretation of a life that should be elevated through art. Progressive novelists such as Sinclair Lewis gave a more strikingly materialistic interpretation to native restlessness, an interpretation more akin to Marxist alienation than spiritual longing. The American moral horizon turned against itself and destroyed the conditions under which art can redeem and elevate American society.

CATHER'S TURN FROM LIBERAL EDUCATION: THE DESTRUCTION OF THE WEST

The bourgeois, commercial world splits irrevocably from the artistic life in One of Ours, and the consequences of the split are immense. Bourgeois life and art suffer—artists lose the horizon of civilized opportunity that sustained great achievements, whereas the bourgeois lose the sensibilities that make life worth living. All that seems left is artistic alienation as expressed in juvenile criticisms of petty bourgeois life. Claude Wheeler,12 the hero of One of Ours, is defined by a restless dissatisfaction with life on the settled prairie. Outlets for ambition closed with the settling of the West. This closing shattered the American moral horizon that sheltered, nourished, and ennobléd life for generations. Claude and his ambitious friends "lament that the book of History was finished" (208), that all the great deeds have been done, that the death of heroism brings with it a debilitating narrowing of human horizons. Most people are oblivious to this dreary reality, preferring to distract themselves with trinkets and busy-bodying rather than thinking about the death in life that was America. Claude’s younger brother Ralph, for instance, fills the Wheeler house with inventions, which he justifies as labor-saving devices, but which really are his source for meaning and pride. Cather and Claude doubt technology’s value as a savior of labor. Their deepest worry, however, is that technological society seeks to bring nature under human control while distracting people from thinking about the ends to be served by technology. Questions of meaning are obscured from human view by materialistic success, continual striving for progress, and scientific education. American farmers felled beautiful orchards and Cottonwood trees because they were callous to the “old things they used to take pride in,” but such trees were a source of pride among the French (cf. 85 and 274–75).

Normally, one would expect those great questions to be raised in the context of religious faith. This does not happen in One of Ours. Cather’s most ostensibly anti-Christian book. Gone is Cather’s nostalgia for the old religion characteristic of the early portions of My Ántonia. Christianity in One of Ours appears first as oppressively moralistic and worldly. The ugly American of the book, Bayliss Wheeler, Claude’s older brother and the embodiment of censorious Puritanism, teams up with Claude’s wife, Enid, to embitter Claude. Even as Claude looks out over corpses in the No Man’s Land of France near the novel’s dénouement, he insists that no “battlefield or shattered country he had seen was as ugly as this world would be if men like his brother Bayliss controlled it altogether” (339). Bayliss anticipates A Lost Lady’s Ivy Peters. Just as Ivy turns the Forresters’ meadow into farmland, Bayliss buys the only traditional, beautiful mansion in town and plans to “pull down the old trap and put something modern” (93). Unlike the cunning, voluptuary Ivy, Bayliss wants to regulate the pleasures of drink (he supports Prohibition), song, and learning. Following the Progressives, Cather sees Christian public opinion stifling life, love, and learning (although she does not align it with property rights, which are secure without religious support).

In Cather’s attempt to take Christianity seriously (i.e., apart from bourgeois life), her deepest reservations about Christianity come forth. Claude’s devout mother, Evangeline (literally: preacher) Wheeler, tries to bring Claude into the fold. She thinks “the trouble with her son [is] that he had not yet found his Savior” (86). Like Claude, Evangeline is old-fashioned, but her sentimentalism is grounded in simple-minded Christian faith that shies from confronting the world; she is praying and “always hoping to hear that [Claude] at last felt the need of coming closer to the church.” Although Claude initially thought much about religion, “there was something stubborn in him that would not let him avail himself of the pardon offered.” He felt condemned, “but he did not want to renounce the world he as yet knew nothing of”; he wanted to enter life “with all his vigour, with all his faculties free” (42–44). The school that Claude attends at the behest of Bayliss and his mother, Temple College, breeds contempt for Christianity in Claude. Claude dismissed “all Christian theology as something too full of evasions and sophistries to be reasoned about. The men who made it, he felt sure, were like the men who taught it . . . ‘Faith,’ as he saw it exemplified in the faculty at the Temple school, was a substitute for most of the many qualities he admired” (44). Foremost among these many qualities was the willingness to tempt death for a great idea—Claude is fascinated by martyrdom. The hapless Brother Weldon, who relies on platitudes and loves being pampered
by friendly old ladies, typifies the comfortable Christianity around Claude.

This attraction to self-sacrifice and charity brings Claude to Enid Royce. Enid nurses Claude back to health after he suffers a farm accident. Her beautiful, ethereal, dignified appearance—a refraction of her soul—"made one think of something 'early Christian'", (i.e., prebourgeois Christianity) (104). It seems Enid's faith attracts Claude to her. Faith, the "natural fragrance" of her mind, lifted her above the "prosaic and commonplace" world of males (107). Never seeking marriage with Claude, she wants to dedicate her life to missionary work in China, bringing light to those living in darkness. Her shunning of the bourgeois order makes her all the more irresistible to Claude. Claude pursues her as the "one who would put him right with the world and make him fit into the life about him," although she is as much an outsider as he (122). After first declining Claude's proposal, she seeks advice from Brother Wheeler, who advises her to marry Claude and bring him to the Church. Out of Christian duty, she abandons her missionary calling for a marriage to Claude, although her attempts at converting Claude resemble wilyly nagging more than Christian evangelizing.

Enid shuns earthly delights, and hence she embodies the shunning of the natural. She does not eat meat, imbibe, or consummate her marriage with Claude. So opposed to carnal desires is Enid that she introduces an experimental means of fertilizing chickens that does not require sexual reproduction. When told that her sister, already in China, is ill, she does not hesitate to abandon Claude with the hope of nursing her sister back to health. Her escape shows that Enid neither fathoms nor desires to fathom human relationships; she is without eteros, "selfish whims" (144), or "ardour" (172). Enid denies the place of nature, self, deep relationships, and aesthetic refinement to bring the Gospel to the world. This portrait of lifeless self-abnegation and inhuman asceticism is Cather's most serious critique of Christian caritas as shaped by American pietism.

Enid's faith compounds Claude's problem. He longs to serve "something splendid about life" (46), but Enid's Christianity denies that merely human life is splendid: Claude's restlessness (e.g., 17, 24, 25) shows that he is not at home in the world, but he longs to be; Christianity teaches that people cannot be at home in the world. Christianity in the New West of One of Ours is an abstraction from daily life that does not show how faith grows out of daily concerns (although this abstraction is part of Claude's attraction to Enid). Enid's Protestantism proves uninterested in showing how God's footprints cover the land as she seems busy trying to transform the world; Brother Wheeler's comfortable Christianity fails to distinguish between American and Christian concerns. Both see Christianity as a means of making man moral; neither sees Christianity as growing out of deeper human concerns and longings. Just as important, the marriage shows that Claude's longing for meaning leads him into serious error, as nearly all of his family, friends, and even his fiancée understand. This is not Claude's last misjudgment.

Claude faces a world that has been split in two. The bourgeois life channels his restlessness toward this-worldly comforts; such a life cannot satisfy one such as Claude, who longs for something great to which he can dedicate his life. The life of Christian charity tames restlessness with other-worldly aspirations; this life Claude regards as an "unmanly" denial of life altogether. He is disenchanted with the horizontal, bourgeois world, and he stops thinking about the vertical, elevated, religious world (331).

Artistic greatness and liberal learning had mediated such tensions in the earlier novels, but One of Ours depicts a crisis in mere liberal learning. Claude matriculates at a college in European history and, like Jim Burden in My Antonia, his eyes are opened to something "vital, which had to do with events and ideas" (32). He falls in with an educated, happy, poor German family headed by Augusta Erlich (her name means highest, truthful). Claude sees new life—"interesting and attractive" conversations, charged with "generous enthusiasms and ennobled by romantic friendships" (69-70). As in Cather's early novels, the aesthetic tradition needed to sustain such vitality comes from European immigrants who bring with them values that make human endeavor meaningful; unlike the early novels, One of Ours acknowledges no role for Christianity in the horizon the Erlichs bring to America. Claude is attracted to the Erlichs' (selective) backwardness: he too is a backward-looking traditionalist opposed to the progressive spirit of his family.

After Claude shows great promise at the university, his father's bourgeois ambitions put an end to his education (56). Claude must return to the farm. We last see the Erlichs buying a warehousing business—and there is some indication their heartiness will be drained by the demands of business (75). However this may be, those interested in artistic greatness or liberal education are, in the world of One of Ours, unsuccessful outsiders, inefficient dreamers, and shunned by polite society (129). Cather came to understand that art, aligned with liberal learning, could not withstand the subtle power and temptation of bourgeois materialism as it controlled public opinion. Art ennobses common life only by latching onto that which is noble in common life or by assimilating itself into a larger universe of meaning, but there is no such thing in Cather's New West. As Neil noted on the demise of Captain Forrester in A Lost Lady, the New West's ugly Americans co-opt their more generous enemies or prevent them from arising altogether.

Cather suggests that perhaps truly romantic love might fill the void in Claude's soul through her portrayal of his relationship with Gladys, his well-wisher and soul mate. Gladys's openness to Bayliss's courting embitters Claude, however. Claude and Gladys are reconciled only after Claude is married and about to leave for war, and she swears off Bayliss and marriage in general. Cather depicts an impoverished, materialistic rural world not dissimilar to that in Flaubert's Madame Bovary. Cather tempts readers to think that Claude might have been contented if he had married the stylish Gladys instead of the ascetic Enid. Her other works, Lucy Gayheart especially, show that romantic love produces debilitating personal dependence and tragic disappointment.

Cather's portrayal of Claude's war experience, in the last book of One of Ours, is the only time her completed novels
leave the New World for the Old. As the relationship between Europe and America is a central concern of hers, this section is especially significant. Early in the book, the French appear well-mannered, courteous, patriotic, spirited, and emotional, whereas the Americans are vulgar utilitarians without reverence or respect. But many doughboys love their new European home, and they shun America, where there is, in one character's words, a "conspiracy of Church and State to keep you down" (267). One soldier, a blessed one in Claude's eyes, has been so wounded that he has forgotten his life before he arrived in France (271–73). Cottonwood groves and Gothic architecture provide a life-lending shadow and express the European disdain for utility.

As the soldiers go deeper into France, Cather forces readers to raise a question that the Francophile Claude will not: How could the Great War come to such a civilized people? This question is acute in light of the war's terrible human cost. After Claude's first engagement he travels to Headquarters and meets an orphan from a "Pal Battalion" on the way. A Pal Battalion is a group of classmates from school who formed a battalion to fight for king and country. Ordered to take an enemy trench, a thousand schoolboys, the survivor relates, were slaughtered by the Huns' guns, leaving only seventeen to fight again. There is, Cather understates in narration, "something very unpleasant about the idea of a thousand fresh-faced school boys being" slaughtered without effect (304). Claude and his companion never want to hear about Pal Battalions again. This exchange happens just before the most decisive scene of the book for understanding Cather's assessment of France and Western civilization: Claude's visit to Mlle. Olive de Councy.

The encounter is Claude's immersion in French life and leads Claude to confront his longing for European cultural wholeness. Claude is first impressed by the village's decay—he stands in an ancient ruin able only to imagine the grandeur of the dead culture. The village of eighteen thousand has been reduced to four hundred. As Claude kicks about the ruins, he meets a one-armed former soldier busy trying to repair them so that the villagers can enjoy the comforts of life again. Mlle. de County serves Claude lunch and tea among the rearranged ruins too. Claude steps with a light foot among the junk, worried that among the ruins he was "imperiling something fragile." This scene is paradoxical. On one hand, the spiritual love of home presented bespeaks a noble instinctive patriotism. The thought that French national spirit could be untouched by the Great War is a beautiful thought, as expressed by Mlle. de Councy at lunch with Claude. The war, she relates, has taught her that "the made things matter" but little; "only the feeling matters" (311–12). Claude feels that he has been searching his whole life for this sentiment; its hearing transforms him somehow. On the other hand, Claude's worry about "imperiling something fragile" among the ruins forgets the war, which ruined the town in the first place. As Claude leaves, he observes that this lady of twenty-four years appears over forty and that the town will never be the same. This village had its own "Pal Battalion" of a sort; it seems few male villagers will return—a point that makes the lady's distinction between feeling and made things ring hollow. Although Cather identifies and sympathizes with those repairing the ruins, the war seems to have shattered the beautiful canopy irretrievably.

This paradox manifests itself when we compare the villagers' hopeful (yet pitiful) reconstruction of ruins and David Gerhardt's rejected reaction to the war. David embodies Claude's image of human greatness (279, 332). Before the war, David moved to Paris to study violin under a master, but he believes that the world into which his violin took him has been smashed to pieces with his violin (329). When Claude objects to David's fatalism about the postwar world, David believes that the war killed the conventions that sustained artistic desire; David has seen "so many beautiful old things smashed" (286; also 328, 330). His fellow students—and their teachers—were killed at the war's onset. Mass warfare appears to accelerate the corrosion of the enduring backdrop afoot in modern society. Does Cather embrace the romantic reconstruction represented by the French village or the tragic vision embodied by David?

Commentators often resolve this paradox by seeing a hopeful, Francophile Cather,18 Claude, on this reading, embodies Cather's thinking about the persistence of a French high culture. This reading, in my view, overlooks the 800-pound gorilla—the Great War. As much as Cather sometimes presents France and its culture as an alternative to American bourgeois order, its physical ruin brought on by its war calls into question that culture's health. Further, the novel shows that the war destroys European high culture while raising the question of whether that culture was healthy at the war's onset. Presumably the war was attractive in Europe for the reasons that it was attractive to American boys. Spiritual longings and restlessness found no steady expression in religious belief and insufficient satisfaction in liberal education, the very possibility of which was called into question in post-Nietzschean Europe. Youth greeted calls to national sacrifice with relief and enthusiasm because the coming bourgeois order was devoid of higher meaning. Without a community of meaning in peacetime, soldiers and society at large embraced a regimented community in the trenches (304 ff.).19 It was not only the German army that was an "unprecedented power of destruction . . . loose in the world," destroying "ancient" seats of learning in impersonal, methodical, novel ways (137–38). Bayliss's forward-looking bourgeois spirit is linked to warfare against the human spirit, breaking the "background that held together" and lent meaning to "individual existence." The war awakens men to focus and feeling. Claude used to lament that "the world had come to avaricious old age and noble enterprise was dead forever" (208), but he laments it no longer.

Just as Protestantism is an abstraction for Enid, the war brings "the purity of an abstract idea" to Claude (142). Their common focus on abstract ideals and their mutual rejection of the here and now united them in marriage; their service to different ideals—one otherworldly, the other political or communal—led to opposite sides of the world. Each illustrates the problem of a world wherein the life-lending cultural
canopy is disintegrated. They never see other people as other people, nor are they educated toward a sustainable, humane conception of the good life. Cather’s critique of Enid seems obvious; her critique of Claude’s abstraction is equally important but not often observed. Claude’s view of the war is not a solution as much as it is another awful misjudgment. If the civilization Claude left is sick, there is also a sickness in the war’s remedying the bourgeois sickness. The war exposes incoherence in Claude’s way of finding meaning. Soldiers died for an idea whose time was already past. A conversation between Claude and David Gerhardt illustrates the poverty in Claude’s view. Claude “never knew there was anything worth living for, till this war came on.” David dryly replies, “‘You’ll admit it’s a costly way of providing adventure for the young.’” Claude answers, meekly, “‘Maybe so; all the same . . . ’” (338-39). The war taught Claude that “there were a great many people left who cared about something” different from Bayliss and that “men could still die for an idea, and would burn all they had made to keep their dream.” The war proved to Claude that “the future of the world was safe. The careful planners would never be able to put it into a street-jacket,—cunning and prudence would never have it to themselves” (338-39). Claude praises camaraderie culminating in heroic sacrifice, but his understanding of that sacrifice rests on the morally unsustainable view that war and martial virtues are ends in themselves rather than means to higher ends of peace, leisure, virtue, or piety. Confronting a world without excitement and purpose, Claude embraces a mere means (and a bloody one at that) to give his life meaning. Such is the desolation of the moral landscape in One of Ours that this sacrifice is not entirely dissatisfying.

As the novel ends, Claude and David die warding off a German counter-attack. Cather suggests that Claude was better off dead. On his return, Claude would have felt alienated as he came from a life of intense focus and noble self-sacrifice to the loose, directionless, bourgeois world. Cather writes as follows:

One by one the heroes of that war . . . leave prematurely from the world they have come back to. Airmen whose deeds were tales of wonder, officers whose names made the blood of youth beat faster, survivors of incredible dangers,—one by one they quietly die by their own hand. Some do it in obscure lodging houses, some in their office, where they seemed to be carrying on business like other men . . . When Claude’s mother hears of these things, she shudders and presses her hands tight over her breast, as if she had him there. She feels as if God had saved him from some horrible suffering, some horrible end. (370)²¹

Better an honorable death than a bourgeois life. Western civilization willed its own destruction out of a sense of self-loathing and spiritual penury.²² There is little in One of Ours to resist the conclusion that the West was correct in willing its own death.

Art cannot ex nihilo build backgrounds from which the shadows of individual existence achieve meaning. Art resonates only in certain conditions. America was hostile to it, and civilization’s ghosts populated the European wasteland too. Can this decadence be averted? Is Claude’s fate also ours (he is “one of ours,” after all)?

CATHER’S TURN: RELIGION AND A SENSE OF PLACE

These questions cannot be radically answered (or cannot be answered without a form of political radicalism). The New West causes people to forget about beauty and the human good in the ebb and flow of restless lives. People nevertheless feel the import of what is permanent about the human condition: “birth, love, maternity, and death cannot be changed.” The naturalness of domestic concerns suggests, in Cather’s late novels, man’s need for God. “Art and religion express the same things in us,—that hunger for beauty that we, of all animals, have,” but art that is not aligned with religious expression will not satisfy.²³ The New West of One of Ours and A Lost Lady dismantles what Americans regard as cramping conventions that could point to the beautiful, noble, and good. Absent healthy civic conventions, only natural desires and experiences point people to the greatest questions; few heed the call when conventions are hostile.²⁴ Cather wakes people from technological distraction by drawing on natural resources, especially death, that force people to confront ultimate questions, while exposing our impoverished conventions for dealing with them.

Cather’s late novels fall into two categories, depending on the setting. Novels set in the modern world reach a resolution only when protagonists address ultimate questions within an explicitly Catholic framework, whereas the other novels are set in quasi-feudal times in which the reader is afforded a glimpse of what Cather deems to be a healthy cultural canopy provided by the Church.

The split Cather diagnoses in the modern world frames the tragic Professor’s House (1925). That novel’s protagonist (Godfrey St. Peter) is saved from death by his devout maid (Augusta), but he will not accept the religious education she has given him at the novel’s dénouement.²⁵ My Mortal Enemy (1926) is the late novel set in modern times in which a Catholic resolution to the world’s split is explicitly canvassed.²⁶ Cather mediates this story through Nellie Birdseye, a simple narrator who comes to understand the significance of the Church for the novel’s heroine. Myra, the heroine, is raised by her Catholic and public-spirited uncle. As she nears the age of marriage, she is taken with the romantic ideal of marrying against her uncle’s wishes and falls for Oswald Henshawe, a free thinker. Myra’s uncle threatens her with disinheritance if she leaves the faith; this adds thrill and romance to her forbidden love. She marries Oswald, and Uncle Driscoll leaves his fortune to a local convent.

Although the romanticism of their marriage suggests bliss, they are not “happier than other people” (14). They move to New York’s Madison Square, where their social circles resemble Madison Square’s (and the modern world’s) double personality: one circle is American and commercial, the other European high society and artistic. Myra’s soul is split too. For every evening party, gorgeous play, and beautiful poem, there is a trail of tears, broken friendships, and lost love. She tries to relive the thrill of her betrothal by playing matchmaker, although she is convinced that it is
“very likely hell will come of it” (26). She scorns unforgiv-
able ex-friends (36–37). Her admired marriage is compi-
icated by her husband’s infidelity. She is light, easy, and
smiling, but equally angry, sarcastic, severe, and remote.
Her civil marriage leaves her spiritually guilt-ridden and
impoverished as she traded God and the Church for
romance and art.

When, ten years later, Oswald’s career crashes and Myra
takes ill, the couple lose their former “friends” who had
embraced them because Oswald was able to finance Myra’s
favored artists. Her fall from this height exposes a deep hole
in her soul that she longs to fill. Oswald and Myra move to
the slums. After being reunited with Nellie, Myra picnics
with her near an oceanside cliff that reminds Myra of
“Gloucester’s cliff” in King Lear (60). After this picnic, a
rapidly declining Myra takes comfort in Heine’s poetry and
other works of art. Heine’s poem mentions a flower grow-
ing on the grave of a suicide, die Armesunderblum (the
poor-sinner’s flower), which Myra feels is her flower (66).
These incidents conjure powerful emotions culminating in
her return to the Church.

Father Fay, Myra’s confessor, wonders whether "some of
the saints of the early Church weren’t a good deal like her.
She’s not at all modern in her make-up” (76). Her pre-
modernity refers to her seeing deeper significance in ordi-
nary things: candles, for instance, do not just give light; they
are “in themselves religious” (76–77). In this same spirit,
she interprets her restlessness as a desire for transcendence:
“Religion is different from everything else; because in reli-
genion seeking is finding” (77). Her formulation of religious
desire resembles biblical passages, the most famous of
which is from Christ’s Sermon on the Mount: “Seek and ye
shall find” (Matthew 7:7). Christ’s formulation suggests
that seeking culminates in finding; the two activities are dis-
tinct. Myra seems to collapse seeking and finding, with the
implication that desire is not different from the fulfillment
of the desire. It is fashionable to see Myra’s turn in this light
and, therefore, to doubt the plausibility of her return to the
Church at the novel’s end. Instead, her seeking—spurred by
her impending death and her deathly marriage—proceeds
from her renewed sense of her need for God and grace. Her
departure from the Church increased her own sense of this
need. This seeking leads to a terrible judgment on her hus-
band, whom she now considers her “mortal enemy” for hav-
ing taken her from the Church. This judgment on her dedi-
cated Oswald and her dismissal of Nellie dramatize her
willingness to deny the world in the same manner as Enid,
although Myra’s severity appears less inhumane given her
spiritual struggle. After dismissing her friends, Myra’s
Negro cabman drives her to an oceanside cliff, where she
dies while grasping an ebony crucifix as she watches the
sunrise over the sea.

After Myra’s death, Oswald instructs Nellie to forget the
Myra of the later years and embrace the memory of the
Madison Square Myra. He gives Nellie Myra’s string of
amethysts as a token. However, Nellie finds the secular
jewelry “unlucky” and “chilly,” an indication that she has
been better instructed by taking into account Myra’s whole
life. Whenever Nellie watches the “beginning of a love
story” or sees “a common feeling exalted into beauty by
imagination, generosity, and the flaming courage of
youth,” she remembers Myra’s severe judgment: “Why
must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?” (85).
Romantic longing and merely artistic expression of the
common are mortal enemies to the life-giving canopy con-
stituted by religious opinion.

Although art points to the beautiful and noble, its mean-
ing derives from its connection either to this world or the
next; and what Cather’s art connects itself to makes all the
difference.27 Consciousness of her impending death impels
Myra to confront her discontent. Her return to the Church
depends on her first having had a home in the Church, or on
the prior existence of a canopy wherein her seeking finds
meaning. As Cather establishes the importance of religious
culture to human thriving, her artistic attention turns away
from the theme of how well-educated artists fit into the
world and toward works of art depicting common life illu-
minated by Christian faith. Cather comes to equate artists
divorced from the divine with alienation, so her own art is
henceforth less directly concerned with artists. For histori-
cal and theoretical reasons, Cather must draw a picture of
what a healthy political community is, and for this she
turns, strangely, perhaps, to the neo-feudalism of colonial
Quebec (Shadows on the Rock) and the founding of the
Church in the American Southwest (Death Comes for the
Archbishop). Feudal society provides a unique artistic
opportunity because, under feudalism, religious conven-
tions vivify the natural.

Shadows on the Rock concerns, as Susan Rosowsky argues,
the “modern themes of alienation, loss, despair, and annihi-
lation.”28 These themes are developed in the breach mostly,
in that Cather depicts a society whose protective, traditional
mist of meaning furnishes ready-made opinions with which to
interpret life’s most pressing questions. Just as the theme
of Shadows is modern anomie, so also is the theme perpet-
uation—perpetuating familial traditions after a mother’s death;
transferring Old French and Catholic traditions to the New
World; and perpetuating a life of faith from generation to
generation within the New France. France’s feudalism was
cruel and unjust (26),29 but the novel holds out hope that the
community of New France can purify the life-giving conven-
tions of feudalism while transferring them to the New World
(75). When “an adventurer carries gods with him into a
remote and savage country, the colony he founds will, from
the beginning, have graces, traditions, riches of the mind and
spirit. Its history will shine with bright incidents, slight per-
haps, but precious, as in life itself” (78). A purified Catholi-
cism is the aim of the novel’s devout culture, but that culture
is problematically compromised in the beautiful marriage
between Pierre Charron (who combined the “good manners
of the Old World” and “the dash and daring of the New” (139)) and
Cecile Auclair, the devout daughter of a back-
ward-looking apothecary, near the novel’s end.

The first two books especially show that Quebec’s air is
enchanted. Cathedrals tower over the city, and the
Church’s mores, rituals, and liturgical style insinuate
themselves into the daily lives of the Quebecois. Catholic
dogma constitutes New France’s public opinion. Charac-
 ters are concerned with sin, death, confessions, divine vengeance, miracles, ritual, and relics. Cather describes this life-giving horizon as follows:

[The Quebecois] were still in their accustomed place in the world of the mind (which for each of us is the only world), and they had the same well-ordered universe about them: this all-important earth, created by God for the great purpose, the sun which He made to light it by day, the moon which He made to light it by night,—and the stars, made to beautify the vault of heaven like frosted glass, and to be a clock and compass for man. And in this safe, lovingly arranged and ordered universe (not too vast, though nobly spacious), in this congenial universe, the drama of man went on at Quebec just as at home . . . There was sin, of course, and there was punishment after death; but there was always hope, even for the most depraved. (78)

Within the drama of eternity, everyday sufferings—early death, injuries due to accidents, handicaps, sickness, and hunger—have meaning. Cather does not hide the technological backwardness and material deprivation of this new feudalism. Deprivation serves a pedagogical purpose by enhancing the enjoyment of the rare and by quietly helping one to orient one's desires toward salvation (119–120). Suffering is the school of compassion for the devout (130). This portrait of communal life contains little action or plot, as the novel is designed to display an assimilative moral horizon. Alienation, psychological turmoil, and disappointed ambition, such as Claude's in One of Ours, are seen through the lens of temptation, human imperfection, and God's mercy.

Individual lives pass through the French-Canadian culture, which in turn passes through the individuals; this healthy codependency is the hallmark of a world not split in two. Life within this horizon is fulfilling, passionate, intense, and charitable. The colonial governor purchases new shoes for Jacques, the bastard son of a prostitute, while the community takes a genuine concern for his body and soul. The "stubborn, high-handed, tyrannical, quarrelsome" Bishop Laval rules over his charge like a shepherd over sheep by calling parishioners to daily prayers and by setting an example of pious self-abnegation and charity (60). The chief characters of Shadows—Auclair and Cécile—follow the bishop's example. The Auclair family surrounds itself with the gentilities and relics that lend stability and peace to their lives. Outside of Quebec and its Church lies a terrifying New World without Old World manners, education, stability, and beauty. We get a glimpse of this world when Cécile leaves Quebec for the first time to visit the Hanois, a rough family living in a relatively untamed part of Canada (153–60). Their lack of manners and finery upsets Cécile such that she cuts her three-day visit short. After leaving the kind, untutored Hanois, she realizes that the Church and the mores she causes make "a climate within a climate" and made "the days,—the complexion, the special flavour, the special happiness of each day as it is passed" (160).

As the novel proceeds, Cather draws images of people drinking meaning from the mist enveloping Quebec. Father Hector, for instance, relates the story of how he took a vow of perpetual stability to serve as a missionary among the Hurons. He begins by relating the story of Noel Chabanel, a French linguist and aristocrat who had served the Hurons despite his humiliating inability to learn their language and his contempt for their savage ways. Tempted to return to France and shun the savages, Chabanel instead vowed to serve them until his death—a sacrifice ennobled by the fact that Chabanel had sacrificed so much. Bred to a university position, Father Hector likewise foregoes the tempting comforts of fireside and book to serve the Church in the wilderness (120–24). Here, Cather plants a seed of doubt through the imagination of Auclair, "the philosopher apothecary of Quebec" (3), who wonders "whether there had not been a good deal of misplaced heroism in the Canadian missions,—a waste of rare qualities which did nobody any good." After conjuring this problem, he allows himself to sleep by thinking that his question was akin to that of the disciples who chastised Mary for applying precious ointment on Christ (125). Here, the cultural canopy serves life by foreclosing skepticism.

The most memorable tale, however, concerns the world-denying piety of Jeanne Le Ber, a piety akin to Enid's and Myra's. Affectionate and gentle from her infancy and beautiful in girlhood, Jeanne becomes a recluse without communication with her family or her appointed lover. Her reclusion causes her father to despair and her mother to die with a heavy heart. So world-denying is she that, asked to emerge from her cell to kiss her dying mother, she keeps the door locked but informs her mother that she is "praying for her, night and day" (108). Offered rich foods, she instead fasts. Cather's portrait of this almost inhuman self-abnegation shows that this life has its rewards—heavenly visit the recluse. Her life serves as a beacon to the devout and as an image of a life totally given to God (10–11).

These stories—and others from book 3, "The Long Winter"—highlight Quebec's air as a problematic solution to the world's contradictions. To broaden the comparison with One of Ours, the "trenches" are replaced by a beautiful, not unproblematic devotion in Cather's Quebec. Devotion can lead to inhumane excesses and credulity, though it makes life happier, more sociable, and more dignified. Quebec's community of devotion is more sustainable, less deadly, and more philosophically defensible than the community of discipline in the trenches. Quebec serves high ideals, encourages mutual service and love, and provides a better canvas for beauty. Cather puts forth in Shadows the prerequisites for a life-lending communal canopy: the conventions of Catholicism; a measure of political and religious hierarchy; social consensus enforced through public opinion; the ability and desire to rest, contemplate, and meditate; and a willingness to distinguish the high from the low.

From the perspective of skeptical philosophy—a perspective that Cather quietly introduces into the book—Quebec's air appears preposterously devout and individual sacrificing serves no purpose. Enter Pierre Charron, whose name adorns book four. Pierre Charron is named for a sixteenth-century French skeptic and companion of Michel de Montaigne. In fact, according to legend, Montaigne died in Charron's arms and bestowed on Charron the family coat of arms. A restless and adventurous fur trader, Cather's Charron holds old ideas of clan loyalty and friendship. His atti-
tude toward religion proceeds from his clannishness, not from devotion. "For him, family was the first and final thing in the human lot; and it was so engrained with religion that he could only say . . . 'Religion for the fireside, freedom for the woods'" (141). He embraces civil religion while he claims that he could do without any religious authority.

Cather also shows that this feudal world is disintegrating as the novel ends. The book ends with the death of the King's appointed governor of colonial France, Count Frontenac. The count was a man of the Old World, in that, like Myra, he believed in things unseen. From childhood, the court had known of something "in himself and in other men that this world did not explain. Even the Indians had to make a story to account for something in their lives that did not come out of their appetites: conceptions of courage, duty, honour . . . These ideas came from some unknown source, and they were not the least part of life" (200–1). For the count, the Church explained these matters. This kind of submission in spiritual matters, already weakening in political matters, is also a hallmark of the dying old order. As a returning bishop relates, "'at home the old age is dying, but the new is still hidden . . . The changes in the nations are all those of the old growing older'" (227–28).

The new order emerging is represented by the civil Charron. Without the authority of parchment and seal and without the stamp from the throne, Charron has the authority that comes "from knowledge of the country and its people; from knowledge, and from a kind of passion. His daring and his pride seemed to [Cecile] even more splendid than Count Frontenac's" (217). Charron's marriage to Cecile represents the melding of civil religion and genuine devotion, which, for Cather, marks a kind of improvement and a kind of decline. It is improvement because it serves more people in justice and might moderate the excesses in Quebec's devotional culture. It is decline, however, because it represents the fracturing of the feudal cultural canopy and moves civilization toward its bourgeois future. Charting Cather's declinist thesis in her works, it is a small move from Charron's adventurousness to Captain Forrester's honorable building in A Lost Lady, which devolves into the bourgeois world of Ivy Peters and Bayliss Wheeler. This is the tragic dissolution of a world split in two for Cather.

CONCLUSION: TRAGEDY AND PERSPECTIVE

Cather's solemnity, as reflected in her sympathetic treatment of feudal Quebec, bespeaks her assessment of the possibility of ennobling life in a "world split" between bourgeois decadence and grand culture. She edifies those inclined to revere "yesterday's seven thousand years," and she makes the past beautiful and young to encourage nostalgic backward looking.31 Unlike Evelyn Waugh (Cather's contemporary), who often made sport of rootless, superficial modern souls, Cather treats the loss of faith as a tragedy, a loss of inestimable value. She does not invoke the debunking corrosive of postmodern psychology to unsettle complacent characters. The mood she creates is closer to tragedy than comedy; she writes with pity rather than scorn, sympathy rather than ridicule. Cather cultivates a sense of reverence for the loyalty, spiritedness, and depth of passion characteristic of feudal society.

World War I was caused by, and accelerated, the destruction of the community of shared meaning necessary to ennable bourgeois life. Cather believes liberal education cannot provide the essential shared meaning because its efficacy depends on a larger cultural canopy that orders and gives meaning. Hers is a communitarian-aristocratic critique of democratic capitalism, emphasizing capitalism's destructiveness of the conditions of human happiness and the partiality of its claim to justice. In response to the triumph of democratic capitalism, her art satisfies and spurs the longings for greatness and for community, even as it shows that these longings cannot be easily satisfied in modern society. Her political science, as developed in Shadows, charts the conditions under which communities of depth and feeling can exist. Satisfying desires for greatness and community presupposes the existence of strong, pervasive religious conviction; a measure of deference to political and religious authority; and a willingness to recognize and laud noble behavior and punish and censure ignoble behavior. Unlike today's squishy communitarianism, hers is a communitarianism with teeth. The problem, for Cather, is that the conditions of community and human greatness are undermined by science's chilly arrogance, which distracts people from that something inside them that escapes scientific control and which levels traditions that sustain life. Science, for Cather, appears at the crest of a larger cultural wave, one that shakes authority and fosters religious skepticism.

This being said, Cather unalterably opposed Fascist or Communist attempts to reinstitute "face-to-face" societies in modern times (as her letters from the 1930s show).32 Tempted by feudalism, Cather does not succumb.33 Her unwillingness to advocate a radical return to the past bespeaks her moderation. Much Protestantism was imbued with democratic morality, but not with beauty or love. Catholicism, in contrast to the cold speculations of Protestantism, vivifies human sensibilities by adapting itself to the senses, enjoining religious observances, and providing a coherent reference for the apparently chaotic world. Although not Catholic, Cather finds it necessary to approach the divine through the beautiful conventions of Catholicism—for it is the love of the beautiful that prepares the heart for a good life. Cather's beautiful novels cultivate this love of beauty through a clear-eyed nostalgia imbued with an understanding of the human good.

NOTES

1. Only Shadows on the Rock (New York: Vintage, 1995; set in colonial Quebec) and One of Ours (New York: Vintage, 1995; set in France during World War I in the latter part of the book) are exceptions to this rule.
4. As Cather asks how the change in Western civilization "came about," she takes Arnold, among others, to be a representative of the old order overthrown and devalued. See "148 Charles Street," in Not Under Forty, 74.
5. Cather, One of Ours, 328. See also Shadows on the Rock, 50, 78–79, and 83–84.


9. Jim continues: "The life that went on in [the town] seemed to me made up of evasions and negations; shifts to save cooking, to save washing and cleaning, devices to propitiate the tongue of gossip . . . People's speech, their voices, their very glances, became furtive and repressed. Every individual taste, every natural appetite, was briddled by caution. The people asleep in those houses, I thought, tried to live like mice in their own kitchens; to make no noise, to leave no trace, to slip over the surface of things in the dark." Cather, My Ántonia (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 164.


11. This despite the fact that Neil Herbert could build the contrast between Captain Forrester and Ivy Peters in part because he received a classical education from his uncle’s Bohn classics, as Cather describes stirringly in A Lost Lady, 66-68. The pertinent point is that Neil proves more ineffectual than Burden or Odenburg in supporting the greatness in American democratic life that has come to be dominated by ivy.

12. Claude's name bespeaks the two sides of the world’s split—a marriage of French civilization (Claude) with American technological development (Wheeler).

13. "The statue of Kit Carson on horseback, down in the Square, point- ed westward: but there was no West, in that sense, any more" (100). All references in this section are to One of Ours.

14. Consider his discussion with Ernst Havel (46) and his thesis on Joan of Arc (53-55).

15. Academic critics have been too harsh to Enid E. K. Brown, in Willa Cather: A Critical Biography (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 220, oversarges when he calls Enid a "loveless bigoted girl"; John H. Randall, in The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 165, also oversimplifies in comparing Enid's "saying-saying" pietism to the "saying-religion" of Catholicism. Enid is neither loveless nor bigoted. Hers is a Christian love, caritas, as Claude realizes (172); her apparent bigotry (seen in her Prohibition activity) is not like Baylins's, which is motivated by spite. Enid's commitment to Prohibition is in keeping with her desire to ensure that people understand that their true home is not in this world. Her un-Christian inhumanity lies in placing these activities above her marriage vows, vows she undertook against her inclinations in deference to the comfortable, cunning Brother Weldon.

16. Enid is a Protestant manifestation of the ascetic, anti-nature religious spirit Cather depicts in Shadows on the Rock, in which Jeanné Le Ber, a beautiful young maiden, leaves her family and her noble suitor for a life of reclusive, solitary piety in a convent.

17. Consider Claude’s backwardness as seen in his love for the old grist mill (102, 124).

18. Consider Brown, Willa Cather, 225; and Sally P. Harvey, Redeeming the American Dream: The Novels of Willa Cather (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University, 1995), 68-69.

19. Cather was familiar with Henri Bergson, perhaps France’s greatest thinker of this period, who saw in the war an opportunity to realize elan vital and bring forth the moral regeneration of Europe. Roland N. Stromberg, in Redemption by War: Intellectuals and 1914 (Lawrence, KS: Regen’s, 1982), chronicles the enthusiasm with which most European intellectuals—such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, George Simmel, Igor Strawinsky, and countless others—viewed the war as a chance to shake the souls of people, to prepare people for spiritual things, to relieve the boredom of modern mechanized civilization, and to restore a sense of human solidarity.

20. As if to emphasize that adversaries in the Great War share a common culture, Cather places works of German poetry repeatedly on the coffee tables of the dedicated Frenchmen.

21. This is also Godfrey St. Peter’s judgment about the death of his prize student in the Great War in The Professor’s House (New York: Vintage, 1953), 236-37: “Had he lived, [he] must have been put to other uses. His fellow scientists, his wife, the town and State, would have required many duties of him. He would have had to write thousands of useless letters. Frame thousands of false excuses . . . He had escaped all that. He had made something new in the world—and the rewards, the meaningless conventional gestures, he had left to others.”

22. Consider the comparison between Cather and Spengler’s The Decline of the West as it is developed by Matthias Schubnell, “The Decline of America: Willa Cather’s Spenglerian Vision in Professor’s House,” in Cather Studies, ed. Susan J. Rosowski (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), vol. 2, 92-117.


24. Consider Tocqueville’s Democracy in America, ed. and trans. Harvey C. Mansfield Jr. and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 463: “One must therefore not expect poetry in democratic peoples to live on legends, to be nourished by traditions and ancient memories . . . It lacks all these resources; but man remains, and he is enough for it. Human destinies, man, taken apart from his time and his country and placed before nature and God with his passions, his doubts, his unheard-of prosperity, and his incomprehensible miseries, will become the principal and almost unique object of poetry for these peoples.”

25. Engelman, Tom, unpublished article (Department of Political Science, Loyola University).


27. Artists divorced from the divine are led to self-indulgence, exploitation, and ignominious death as in Cather’s Lucy Gayheart (New York: Vintage, 1995).


29. All subsequent references are to Shadows on the Rock.


32. Cather will prohibits the publishing of her letters until 2014, although short synopses of her letters can be found in A Calendar of the Letters of Willa Cather, ed. Janis P. Stout (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002). See the calendar for letters 1442, 1491, 1608, and especially 1496.

33. Cather’s close relationship and artistic kinship with Norwegian-Catholic novelist Sigrid Undset, Nobel Prize winner for her Kristen Lavransdatter trilogy (Oslo, Norway: Aschehoeg, 1920-1922), is important in this connection.