

IMAGINING THE LAND: FIVE VERSIONS OF THE LANDSCAPE IN WILLA CATHER'S *MY ANTONIA*

by
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In *My Antonia*, Willa Cather presents a mythic view of the western American landscape that consists of five distinct images of the land. Considered together, these images suggest a literary history of the Nebraska agricultural frontier, while they also help define such major characters as Antonia and Jim Burden. These portrayals of the land collectively create a rich myth of the landscape that helps explain the continued appeal and resonance of *My Antonia*. This novel provides a literary record of early twentieth-century and late nineteenth-century attitudes toward the western landscape that remain relatively fixed in American cultural life.

Cather presents the first of these landscape images early in her novel, when Jim Burden has nearly completed his journey from the Virginia hills to the Nebraska prairie. When Otto Fuchs transports Jim into the country of Blackhawk, Jim carefully describes the Nebraska landscape:

There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks, or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land, not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made. No, there was nothing but land—slightly undulating, I knew, because often our wheels ground against the brakes as we went down into a hollow and lurched up again on the other side. I had a feeling that the world was left behind, that we had gone over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction. I had never before looked up at

the sky when there was not a familiar mountain ridge against it. But this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it.¹

Here Jim conceives of the Nebraska landscape as raw material, uncultivated and relatively untamed, a place beyond the settlements and far beyond the sophistication of Jim's native Virginia, while he also is overwhelmed by the land's immensity. Jim's sense of his own power diminishes as he contemplates this landscape of horizontal spaces and open sky. Here he felt "erased" and "blotted out."² He imaginatively pictures the Nebraska frontier as overwhelming, rough, yet potentially transformable. It is the raw clay from which pioneer farmers would fashion a new agricultural empire of productive, prosperous farms. The key theme of Jim's description is this—the Nebraska landscape was raw, undeveloped and overwhelming in its immensity.

Jim Burden's early impressions are soon followed by his rendering of the winter landscape of hardship and sterility. While Cather suggests that the winter can be a pleasant time of fellowship and warmth to industrious farmers who lay up ample provisions, the winter landscape for the immigrant Shimerda family was quite forbidding. Reduced to eating prairie dogs, they lived in a dugout, a kind of cave or burrow, with frozen and rotting potatoes.³ Moreover, Jim sees the winter landscape having a negative effect in the small prairie towns. According to Jim,

Winter comes down savagely over a little town on the prairie. The

wind that sweeps in from the open country strips away all the leafy screens that hide one yard from another in summer, and the houses seem to draw closer together. The roofs that looked so far away across the green tree-tops, now stare you in the face, and they are so much uglier than when their angles were softened by vines and shrub.⁴

To Jim the winter landscape of the small town seemed to say to him

that this is reality, whether you like it or not. All these frivolities of summer, the light and shadow, the living mask of green that trembled over everything, they were lies, and this is what was underneath. This is the truth.⁵

Winter is here presented mainly as a harsh, unaesthetic, threatening side to the frontier landscape, something to be overcome, and to hide from—at least temporarily; it is a landscape that depresses the spirits of several of Cather's characters. It is the true myth of winter in the sense identified by Northrup Frye, in which the human spirit is frozen in a time of retreat and the mood is one of sterility and irony.⁶

Contrasting to this stark portrayal is the romanticized landscape of sunsets, aesthetic contours, and imagined metaphorical qualities that Cather inserts throughout the novel but mostly in the first half. Seen through Jim Burden's eyes, the prairie for example, becomes a sea of grass in which "the red of the grass made all the great prairie the color of the wine-stains, or of certain sea-weeds washed up."⁷ "There was so much motion in it," Jim explains, "that the whole country seemed somehow, to be running."⁸ Young Jim, fresh from Virginia,

felt motion in the landscape, in the fresh easy-blowing, moving wind,

and in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping.⁹

Still later in the novel Jim describes the fall afternoons as being characterized by "miles of copper-red grass drenched in sunlight", red gold cornfields, and "haystacks turned rosy."¹⁰ At times like these, Jim felt that "the whole prairie was like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed, like a sudden transfiguration, a lifting up of day."¹¹

Here is a clear case of Jim's creative and sensitive intelligence acting willfully on the landscape. It is the willful romanticizing of the land through the active use of metaphors and symbolic interpretation. It is the same imaginative vision that sees the silhouette of a plow on the setting sun as a symbol of the heroic pioneering spirit—a plow that was "heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun."¹² Clearly this is not fully a real landscape but is instead an imaginative reflection of Jim's own experiences and his thinking about how this landscape should look. Jim takes imaginative leaps, and his desire to be part of "something entire" and to be "dissolved into something complete and great"¹³ certainly contributes to these interpretations. Moreover, this version of the landscape is quixotic and perhaps sentimental, a mixture of subject and object. It is acceptable poetry and even the type of vision that may have attracted some early pioneers. One could easily imagine such a rendering of the landscape as part of railway company advertisements designed to attract immigrants to rural Nebraska.

Related to Jim Burden's early romantic imaginings is a version of the landscape as pastoral utopia. This version appears in "The Hired Girls"

chapter of *My Antonia*. Jim describes late summer scenes in which young people met at the river to swim and socialize. They meet at the swimming area of youthful dreams:

the sandbars, with their clean white beaches and their little groves of willows and cottonwood seedlings, were a sort of No Man's Land, little newly created worlds that belonged to the Black Hawk Boys.¹⁴

Jim goes on to describe this place as a green enclosure where the sunlight flickered so bright through the vine leaves and the woodpecker hammered away in the crooked elm that trailed out over the water.¹⁵

Moreover, this area is also characterized by feelings and sounds reminiscent of classical pastoralism. Jim tells us that he was

overcome by content and drowsiness and by the warm silence about me. There was no sound but the high, sing-song buzz of wild bees and the sunny gurgle of the water underneath.¹⁶

This imagery clearly suggests the idea of perpetual youth, the dreamy soft, idyllic place of youth.

This pastoral version of the landscape is continued with Jim's intellectual awakening under the mentorship of Gaston Cleric. Introduced to Vergil and the *Aeneid*, Jim is attracted to this line from the "Georgics"--"*Primus ego in patriam mecum . . . deducum Musas;*" "for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country." The key notion here is *patria*, which Cleric defined as "A little rural neighborhood on the Mincio where the poet was born."¹⁷ This little country is an idealized and deeply rooted, idyllic rural setting--"his father's fields, sloping down to the river and to the old beech trees with broken tops."¹⁸

This *patria* is Jim's patrimony, his inheritance, and his roots; it is the imagined homeland that nurtured the orphaned boy, a place of rich association and pleasant memory. It becomes a place without winter, threat, or problems--one that is psychologically nurturing. Later, when Jim, as a successful lawyer, returns for periodic visits to Nebraska, it is the memory of this *patria*, with all of its associations, that draws him back. Strong elements of the romantic landscape and their related social associations influence Jim's memories of the frontier prairie.

The final rendering of the prairie landscape in *My Antonia* appears in the final chapter titled "Cuzak's Boys." Antonia, her husband Anton, and their children have taken the raw clay of the frontier prairie and molded it into a patterned, tamed, cultivated landscape--one of prosperous farms characterized by quilt-like sections, healthy crops, and a well developed system of fences. The landscape appears tamed, sculptured, and symmetrical, reflecting the efforts to its ambitious inhabitants. It is a landscape that is akin to the middle landscape identified by Leo Marx in *The Machine in the Garden*--a kind of American ideal representing nature under man's control.¹⁹ On his visit to the Cuzak farm, Jim describes the scene in this way in three separate observations:

Set back on a swell of land on my right, I saw a wide farm-house, with a red barn and an ash grove, and cattle-yards in front that sloped down to the high road.²⁰

The roof [of their farmhouse] was so steep that the eaves were not much above the forest of tall holly hocks, now brown and in seed. . . .²¹

The front yard was enclosed by a thorny locust hedge, and at the gate grew two silvery, mothlike trees of the mimosa family. From here one looked down over the cattle yards with their two long ponds, and over a wide stretch of stubble which they told me was a ryefield in summer.²²

At some distance behind the house were an ash grove and two orchards: a cherry orchard, with gooseberry and currant bushes between the rows, and an apple orchard, sheltered by a high hedge from the hot winds.²³ Antonia also tells Jim about the trees that she and her husband planted to domesticate the land, emphasizing that when they moved into this area the land was treeless.²⁴

Jim Burden's ideas of the land clearly influence his behavior and derive, to a significant degree, from his past experiences. Indeed, as Jim's own personal and psychological situation changes as he grows into adulthood, so do his conceptions of the landscape, and, to some extent, his depictions of the landscape reflect his changing personality and moods. When he is young, insecure, and newly orphaned, he sees it as immense, overwhelming, raw and powerful; when he arrives from Virginia, he is nearly alone in immense space. Later, when still young, relatively friendless and a bit unsure of himself in his grandparents' home, he sees the winter as harsh and sterile, despite the occasional family fellowship that he also notices. Moreover, in his period of late adolescence when his personal powers appeared to be at their height and he is in the bloom of youth, he sees the land as pastoral, idyllic and eternally youthful—a place that will neither age nor change. Finally, when his marriage is arid and his career seemingly unsatisfying, he returns to a landscape

that he sees as symmetrical, placid, prosperous, and nurturing—one that seems to offer some things absent from his own personal life. Without a true home in his youth and orphaned early, Jim lacks roots. In a sense, his most positive experiences have been associated with the prairie; he remembers primarily, but not exclusively, the positive aspects of the Nebraska landscape as though he were remembering a good parent.

In contrast, Antonia's attitude toward the landscape, always more realistic than Jim's and learned through hard work, helps her to understand both its potential and its malleability. She knows that it—like a child—must be nurtured and cultivated with great patience. For example, she viewed the trees that grew around her property as though they were her "children."²⁵ Antonia has the power to transform the land, becoming with her family's help a farmer-artist—a kind of landscape architect in the broadest sense—one who through hard work helps to tame, fence, cultivate, design, and nurture the land, while she also nurtures her family. Indeed, her children and her buildings are integrated into the scene, both modifying the land and being modified by it. Through hard work and acceptance of her stage in life, she is able to create something valuable both as a farmer and a mother and in the process to redeem herself from her earlier fall from grace that resulted from her affair with Larry Donovan. She also knows the power of the land firsthand, having lived in a dugout during a harsh winter and having laboriously worked the land for survival and family support, while Jim attended school and lived in relative luxury. Antonia had little reason to romanticize the landscape; she had to accept it on its own terms instead, learning to exploit

its potential and to accommodate its power.

Placed in sequence in the order in which Jim envisioned them, the versions of the landscape that I have discussed can be understood as Willa Cather's myth of the prairie frontier. If I place these distinct renderings of the landscape in this sequence, listed below, we have a literary model of the evolution of western attitudes toward the land:

1. The landscape is envisioned as wild, untamed, and raw. This version of the land attracted homesteaders and other settlers; it was the landscape of potential and future prosperity.

2. The landscape is seen in terms of the myth of winter, marked by hardship, death, and sterility. This is the inevitable realistic landscape that settlers had to confront and conquer somehow; it is the anti-romantic side of the prairie.

3. The landscape is conceived romantically and given symbolic and metaphorical qualities. This is a landscape after the raw soil has been shaped and the winter world tamed and conquered. Control over the land creates conditions for such imaginative renderings.

4. The land is endowed with pastoral, idyllic qualities. Such a

landscape can be imagined at an advanced stage of frontier development. The frontier must be tamed to a considerable extent and the sense of threat removed.

5. The landscape is textured and cultivated, blending art, nature, and physical and intellectual effort. This version of the land is the direct result of years of dedication, cultivation, and shaping. It is a combination of realistic attitudes and hard work that also seems to appeal to the romantic imagination.

This sequence comprises Cather's myth of the Nebraska frontier landscape, a record of imagining the land in which images become larger than life and boundaries between myth and reality profoundly blur. Her western immigrant-narrator, Jim Burden, begins by noticing the land's potential, only to be disappointed by the harsh prairie climate. Next, he sees that land tamed and its weather overcome, allowing him to dream, imagine, and incorporate these imaginings with images of the increasingly cultivated prairie. The final set of images--the middle landscape--implies victory over obstacles and a sense of completion. It is a pleasant, safe, and productive place to which Jim repeatedly returns for sustenance.

NOTES

1. Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1954), 7-8.
2. *Ibid.*, 8
3. *Ibid.*, 71
4. *Ibid.*, 173
5. *Ibid.*,
6. Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 223.
7. Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, 15.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 16
10. *Ibid.*, 40

11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 245
13. Ibid., 18
14. Ibid., 234
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 235
17. Ibid., 264
18. Ibid.
19. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 113.
20. Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, 329.
21. Ibid., 339
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 340
25. Ibid.