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# The Ideology of Cather's Catholic Progressivism: Death Comes for the Archbishop\*

Guy Reynolds

## History and Common Sense

*Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), Cather's fiction about the Catholic mission in the Hispanic Southwest, is a historical novel, but one that approaches its subject in an elusive, teasing manner.<sup>1</sup> The story begins in the aftermath of the Mexican War (1846-48) victory that enabled the United States to annex California and New Mexico, an area that had constituted half of Mexico's territory. The conflict cost thirteen thousand American lives and nearly \$100 million. It epitomized the nascent imperialism encouraged by the doctrine of Manifest Destiny, presaging future wars in the decaying colonies of the old Spanish Empire. Mexico also focused the burgeoning debate over slavery, as politicians argued over whether the new territories should become Free Soil or slave states.<sup>2</sup> Emerson, conscious of this sectionalism (the beginning of the conflict that led to the Civil War), remarked with uncharacteristic pessimism that the United States would conquer Mexico, "but it will be as

the man who swallows the arsenic, which brings him down. . . . Mexico will poison us" (Emerson 430-31).<sup>3</sup>

Melodramatic details of political and military history are, however, largely absent from Cather's irenic novel. Although historical figures who featured in the war and its aftermath appear in the book, either under their own names (Kit Carson) or fictionalized under another (Father Latour represents Lamy, the first archbishop of New Mexico), Cather eschews the dramatic foreground of history. Her novel portrays the hinterland of history; it covers the quotidian background, the everyday ministrations of Fathers Latour and Vaillant as they reform and strengthen their Church. The priests, in fact, see themselves as men on the fringes of history: "As Father Vaillant remarked, at Rome they did not seem to realize that it was no easy matter for two missionaries on horseback to keep up with the march of history" (199). With characteristic Catheresque deflation, Latour's next ride to an important clerical conference is cut short by illness; he returns to his garden in Santa Fe, turned back again from the "march of history." When major historical incidents are mentioned, such as the infamous Bent massacre or the expulsion of the Navajo from their lands, Cather's prose is laconically subdued. Her plain style is notable in a passage where the church leaders discuss the results of the war: "They were talking business; had met, indeed, to discuss an anticipated appeal from the Provincial Council at Baltimore for the founding of an Apostolic Vicarate in New Mexico—a part of North America recently annexed to the United States" (4).

The annexation is undemonstrably mentioned at the end of the sentence, as if it were an aside or an item of interesting but minor news. A flattened tone is typical of the novel's almost parodically "objective" recording of history: terse details of time, place, and event are given. The novel's opening phrase,

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"One summer evening in the year 1848, is a good example of this, as is the similar beginning to book 1, One afternoon in the autumn of 1851." Carefully encapsulating three timescales (year, season, time of day), these sentences seem to represent a self-conscious pastiche, a stylized mimicry of historical fiction's claim to give accurate details of where and when the action took place. This historical positioning allows the reader lacking contextual knowledge to proceed unimpeded, but it also deploys a recognizable discourse, the precise, factual, rigorously empirical prose of nineteenth-century American "Common Sense" writing.

Common Sense philosophy underpinned this prose. Adopting the work of the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers—Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, Thomas Brown, Alexander Gerard—the American educational and critical establishments were schooled in Common Sense principles: the primacy of facts and common sense, observation as the basis of knowledge, careful inference as the extension of that knowledge, and, above all, a distrust of speculation (Martin 107-48). Recent work on Cooper, Hawthorne, and Melville reveals the troubled and ambivalent response of these writers to Common Sense. Faced with a readership of Common Sensibility, the writer was to be confined to what was known and what was logically inferable from that factual basis (Clark 26-38; Manning 53-59). Hence the pressure on Melville to write travelogues (a record of what actually happened, guaranteed by the foregrounded presence of an observing, testifying chronicler) and his reactions to the interdictions against speculation—"Benito Cereno" turns on Delano's Common Sense belief that the situation can be entirely comprehended through what he sees and hears, but a speculative leap of imagination is needed by Delano to pierce through to the reality). Hence also Hawthorne's critique of Common Sense in his preface to *The*

*House of the Seven Gables*, where he defends the speculative play of the novelist's imagination:

When a writer calls his work a Romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a Novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of a man's experience. The former—while as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart—has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. (1)

The term *historical romance* suggests a dialectic between empiricism and imagination, an oxymoronic combination of fact and fancy. Cather polarizes these tendencies in the genre. On the one hand, there is the novel's basis in historical actuality, the incorporation of "real" figures such as Kit Carson and the deployment of a Common Sense discourse to record the minutiae of history. On the other, Cather encompasses experiences outside the range of Common Sense: mystery, miracle, transcendence. Numerous episodes revolve around a sudden insight, the illumination of everyday (Common Sense) reality by what one can only call a spiritual or mystical light. When Latour hears the angelus the timbre of the bell transports him to a different time and place: "Before the nine strokes were done Rome faded, and behind it he sensed something Eastern, with palm trees,—Jerusalem, perhaps, though he had never been there. Keeping his eyes closed, he cherished for a moment this

sudden, pervasive sense of the East. Once before he had been carried out of the body thus to a place far away" (43).

If Common Sense style is metonymic, logically moving along a chain of inferable propositions, then the style here is metaphorical: one sensation replaces another; immediate reality dissolves into another time and place. And that reality might be wholly imaginary—the sense of something Eastern, the intimation of a place never visited. The oxymoronic combination implicit in Hawthorne's preface is here pushed further: a character grounded in historical reality is pictured in a moment of extreme imaginative speculation.

Critics, uncomfortable with the contrasts of this shifting text, have attempted to reconcile these conflicting elements. Early readers were intrigued by the novel's generic ambiguity and strove to place it as history, biography, or fiction; one reviewer even created the hybrid genre *historical biography* (Gilman 2).<sup>4</sup> Later critics studied Cather's sources to illuminate the factual basis of the novel and then analyzed the "romance" aspects of the text, Cather's spiritual and imaginative insights.<sup>5</sup> The result is a Cather who harmonizes contradictory creative impulses and conflates polarities, the writer summed up in Hermione Lee's balanced phrases: "both pioneer and historian, actor and author, female and male voice, receiver and rewriter of history" (Lee 288).

Behind these phrases lies the recurrent critical wish to find that either organic synthesis or the yoking together of contraries is the essence of art. However, Cather's texts can also be read as inconsistent, disrupted, or fractured. Throughout her major novels there is, if anything, an increasing "gappiness" as the texts move towards ever-increasing formal dis-integration. *My Ántonia* (1918) employs the inset story of Peter and Pavel, a digression away from the New World to the European folk

memory of the immigrants. *The Professor's House* (1925) is broken structurally by the interpolation of "Tom Outland's Story," a tale that is temporally, geographically, and narratologically separated from the rest of the novel. Increasingly, Cather showed scant regard for preserving unities, whether of place or time or point of view. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* continues the dis-integrative process, collating a heterogeneous range of discourses: folk talk, historical detail, anecdotes about Mexican and Indian life, the spiritual biographies of Fathers Latour and Vaillant. The novel eschews a strongly plotted narrative line as Cather juxtaposes one discourse against another within a loose, discontinuous format. Constructing her novel in this way, Cather seemed to have strained the definitions of the novel. In fact, she was eventually to defend the form of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which to many seemed to have no form at all, on the grounds that this was a narrative, not a novel. Her defense, written as a letter to *Commonweal* in 1927, extrapolated from Hawthorne's account of the historical romance's imaginative freedom. She displaced his plea for speculative liberty into a discussion of narrative form, claiming for herself absolute compositional freedom: "I am amused that so many of the reviews of this book begin with the statement: 'This book is hard to classify.' Then why bother? Many more assert vehemently that it is not a novel. Myself, I prefer to call it a narrative. In this case I think that term more appropriate" (On Writing 12).

A novel's form is not, however, simply a question of form. The structure of the novel is deeply related to its embodiment of ideological issues. Her experiments with novelistic form have major implications for the ideological meanings of the texts: structure, the architecture of a novel, helps to define its ideological configuration. Narratology has taught us to read for

the oddities in the construction of a text; we now search for moments of incoherence or asymmetry rather than for formal coherence, organic wholeness, or symmetry. At these cruces the text's engagement with ideology is to be found as ideology erupts into the text or is silenced and suppressed. To use a geographical metaphor, we can think of the gaps in her novels as fissures or rents in the terrain of the text.

### **"Primitivism," Catholicism**

*Death Comes for the Archbishop*, a novel about the Southwest and its Pueblo cultures, extends academic efforts to understand Hispanic and Indian America. Turn-of-the-century anthropologists and archaeologists undertook some of their most pioneering work in this hinterland. Cather was familiar with studies by Charles Lummis, whose 1892 text, *Some Strange Corners of Our Country*, was published as the enlarged and suggestively retitled *Mesa, Canon, and Pueblo* in 1925, and Adolph Bandelier, the early explorer of the Santa Fe region, which she adored. One can follow the cultural osmosis whereby this academic primitivism seeped into the culture at large. After universities established departments of anthropology in the 1880s and 1890s, popular magazines responded to public interest in the subject with photographic essays on the dwindling Indian tribes. The Pasadena Eight, a group of Californian photographers, had explored Arizona and New Mexico from the 1870s onward, recording the Hopi snake dance. In Cather's lifetime, Edward S. Curtis's massive twenty-volume record, *The North American Indian* (1907-30), was widely celebrated. Emphatic racial, cultural, and geographical divisions encouraged works that were analogously divided, as if the Southwest were too diverse for the encompassing imagination, and disrupted efforts to enclose the local culture in unified narratives. Thus,

Lummis's *New Mexico David* (1891) is subtitled "Stories and Sketches of the Southwest" and brings together anecdotes, travel sketches, and tales. In *Notes for a New Mythology* (1926) and *Mornings in Mexico* (1927), Haniel Long and D. H. Lawrence eschewed conventional genres, creating instead a bricolage of personal reflection, travelogue, history, and anthropology. In the *American Grain* (1925), William Carlos Williams's iconoclastic history, is another such work-heterogeneous, experimental, a freeing of the multiple voices of American history. As a new area of America (the Southwest) and other peoples (Indians, Mexicans) became part of the American story, writers and artists developed forms that were increasingly polyphonous and "open."<sup>6</sup>

Cather explored this new openness. She exploited Hawthorne's pledge of authorial autonomy (the romance obeys "circumstances . . . of the writer's own choosing or creation"), capitalized upon the polyphonous breadth of other Southwestern works, and in so doing enlarged the range of her fiction to include a subject normally on the fringes of American culture: Catholicism. Catholicism was an unusual subject for an American writer, especially in the 1920s. Traditional Protestant suspicions about the authoritarianism of the papacy (indicated by the Church's links with feudal governments) placed Catholicism and American democracy at opposite ends of the political spectrum. Anti-Catholic feeling went through one of its periodic revivals during the 1920s. Add to this opprobrium and misunderstanding the low regard in which Christianity itself was held by critics and novelists in a period when America's literary intellectuals were alienated from the fervent Protestantism sweeping the country, and one begins to see how idiosyncratic an achievement Cather's novel is. For the Protestant utopianism of progressive social reformers does not seem to

have been widely shared by novelists. When Christianity was written about, it was the object of satire, not celebration. A genre of antievangelical fiction runs from Harold Frederic's *Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), a novel Cather admired, through Howells's *Leatherstocking* (1916) and on to *Elmer Gantry* (1927), the latter a bestseller in the year when Cather's own Christian novel was published (Cather, *World* 709-11; Hart 242). Harold E. Stearns could not find a contributor to write about religion for his 1922 symposium on America, *Civilization in the United States: An Enquiry by Thirty Americans*, and attacked Christianity in "The Country versus the Town" (1921): "Our own rural Middle West is to-day too largely led by the broken-down evangelical cretinism so well exhibited in Mr. Howell's [sic] last novel" (141).

"Evangelical cretinism" was also mocked by Cather, in both her private and her public writing. In a letter of 1896 she scoffed at Presbyterian Pittsburgh, the town where, she wrote, every girl had her church work in the way that other young women had fans or powder boxes (Letter to "Dear Little Neddius"). An early story, "Eric Hermansson's Soul" (1900), satirized fundamentalist Free Gospellers (359-79). In 1907-8 Cather undertook for *McClure's* magazine the supervision of Georgine Milmine's biography of Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science; the series of articles was taken as a satirical attack by church leaders, and the book remains proscribed by Christian Science.

Cather was received into the Episcopalian Church in 1922, and much of the creative energy that went into *Death Comes for the Archbishop* arose from a radical transformation in her religious feelings. She wrote about Catholicism when she herself had recently joined a Protestant Church, but the reasons for Cather's attraction toward Rome probably lay in the faith's

cultural and historical significance. For Cather, Catholicism was not the monolithic autocracy caricatured by American nativists; it was instead a repository of European culture, endlessly adapting itself to alien environments. In the early novels, therefore, the Church is akin to the immigrant peoples celebrated and has a similar ideological significance, representing an enriching cultural pluralism.

Cather's Catholicism is a faith of amalgamating, incorporating power, a church founded on the benevolent axioms of cultural heterogeneity and racial difference. Even Catholicism is transformed and hybridized in the new land-Cather is interested, as ever, in the quickening effect of transporting a culture-and in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* she shows how the Church itself changed for the better. The Church, which in its transported form is a progressive force, becomes a medium for the reform of the backward Mexican territories. The novel begins in Europe-in Rome-and follows the transplantation of modern Catholicism to America; it charts the replacement of a feudal despotism by the benevolent autocracy of Rome. Latour, another wanderer, brings a moderate clerical authority to Mexico, supplanting the corrupt priests Martinez and Lucero, who, cut off from Rome, have drifted into petty tyranny. An absolutely deracinated Church, Cather suggests, lacks the tolerance gained from strong ties with Europe; but, as the cardinals' conference implies, a wholly rooted one is moribund. The "Midi Romanesque" church that Latour builds in the New Mexico wilderness symbolizes the harmony of Catholicism and America, the middle way between stasis and movement, rootedness and migration.

Catholicism is an amalgam of different cultures, as Latour realizes when he hears the angelus rung: "The Bishop smiled. 'I am trying to account for the fact that when I heard it this

morning it struck me at once as something oriental. A learned Scotch Jesuit in Montreal told me that our bells, and the introduction of the bell in the service all over Europe, originally came from the East. He said the Templars brought the Angelus back from the Crusades, and it is really an adaptation of a Moslem custom" (45).

Cather exploits cultural fusion to witty effect here; the casual reference to a "learned Scotch Jesuit in Montreal" could only occur in one of her novels. She relativizes Christianity, placing it in conjunction with other religions and unraveling the various cultural skeins in Catholicism. The bell results from a chain of artistic transfers: "The Spaniards handed on their skill to the Mexicans, and the Mexicans have taught the Navajos to work silver; but it all came from the Moors" (45). Spaniards, Mexicans, Navajos, Moors-Cather's cultural archaeology finds a cosmopolitan mix of races behind the manufacture of the bell. Cather frequently interprets events through a multiracial or multicultural stencil. At the start of the novel, when the Mexican mission is being discussed in Europe, the Catholic clergy is presented as representing a spread of cultures. As the reader's eye moves down the passage, a characteristic mixture of races stands out:

They were talking business; had met, indeed, to discuss an anticipated appeal from the Provincial Council at Baltimore for the founding of an Apostolic Vicariate in New Mexico—a part of North America recently annexed to the United States. This new territory was vague to all of them, even to the missionary Bishop. The Italian and French Cardinals spoke of it as *Le Mexique*, and the Spanish host referred to it as "New Spain." Their interest in the projected Vicariate was tepid, and had to be continually revived by the missionary, Father Ferrand;

Irish by birth, French by ancestry—a man of wide wanderings and notable achievement in the New World, an Odysseus of the Church. The language spoken was French—the time had already gone by when Cardinals could conveniently discuss contemporary matters in Latin. The French and Italian Cardinals were men in vigorous middle life—the Norman full-belted and ruddy, the Venetian spare and sallow and hook-nosed. Their host, García María de Allende, was still a young man. He was dark in colouring, but the long Spanish face, that looked out from many canvases in his ancestral portrait gallery, was in the young Cardinal much modified through his English mother. With his *caffè oscuro* eyes, he had a fresh, pleasant English mouth, and an open manner. (4-5)

These paragraphs reveal a profusion of national or provincial identities: Italian, French, Spanish, Irish, English, Norman, Venetian. An apparently simple exercise in physiognomic description, the passage counterpoints accuracy about racial origin against a fondness for the hybrid-Father Ferrand, "Irish by birth, French by ancestry," and García María de Allende, the Spaniard with the English mother. Cather discriminates among her priests with an anthropological precision, defining them through racial and geographical origin as if they were members of different tribes.

America's nineteenth-century theories of civilization had projected a hierarchical model of race. *Stadialism* demarcated and ranked races through numerous stages. This constellation of ideas, formulated by the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers and given a fictional representation in Walter Scott's novels, suggested that society evolved through distinct stages: a barbarian stage gave way to increasingly sophisticated cul-

tures, agricultural then industrial, until present-day urban society was reached. The United States seemed to be a startling confirmation of this theory; a traveler moving across the country could see the various stages, spread across the terrain. Hence Thomas Jefferson's famous panoramic overview (1824):

Let a philosophic observer commence a journey from the savages of the Rocky Mountains, eastwardly towards our sea-coast. These he would observe in the earliest stage of association living under no law but that of nature, subsisting and covering themselves with the flesh and skins of wild beasts. He would find those on our frontiers in the pastoral state, raising domestic animals to supply the defects of hunting. Then succeed our own semi-barbarous citizens, the pioneers of the advance civilization, and so in his progress he would meet the gradual shades of improving man until he would reach his, as yet, most improved state in our seaport towns. This, in fact, is equivalent to a survey, in time of the progress of man from the infancy of creation to the present day. (Jefferson 74-75)

The American patchwork of Indian, pioneer, and urban settlements seems to confirm the stadialist thesis. The indigent Indian population serves as an index whereby the gap between earlier and later stages can be gauged. Stadialism envisaged linear progress, the ascent of civilization through increasingly sophisticated stages toward ultimate perfectibility.

What did novelists make of stadialism? George Dekker's study, *The American Historical Romance*, which looks at writers from Cooper up to Cather and Faulkner, proposes that stadialism formed the historiographical and racial matrix that underpinned a great tradition of American novels. Dekker claims

that stadialism "was not racist-quite the contrary" and that it fostered an inquisitive, quasi-anthropological outlook. Believing that modern society had emerged step by step from earlier civilizations, the stadialist was de facto interested in "savage" peoples; the "primitive" illuminated the modern. Moreover, as Dekker points out, the novelist, an heir of romanticism, often had a sympathetic concern for "the savage and barbarian peoples doomed by progress." Nominally siding with the progressive forces (the city-dwellers, the "civilized"), the novelist in fact found much to admire in out-moded cultures, which seemed to retain an integrity and passion lost by later stages (Dekker 73-98).<sup>7</sup>

When Dekker discusses Cather the intellectual grip of his stadialist model on specific novels seems to slacken. The underlying limitation of Dekker's thesis is that stadialism was essentially an eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century paradigm; it provides a philosophical and historical context for American fiction that undoubtedly existed around 1800 but grew less relevant as the century wore on. By the twentieth century its configurations had changed drastically, and few novelists illustrate the paradigmatic shift away from stadialism to the extent that Cather does. Fundamentally, Cather revises difference and categorization. She applies to her European tribes an anthropologist's discrimination, and whereas until now difference had been enlisted in theories of control and repression, here difference is affirmed for its own sake. Indeed, Cather's hierarchy is a hierarchy of cultural relativism; individuals and races are evaluated according to their ability to migrate, transplant themselves, and absorb foreign influences.

In one section Latour meets the old Mexican woman Sada, who has been prevented from entering the local church by her Protestant Anglo master (the unflattering picture of Protes-



tantism continues Cather's early satires). Latour takes Sada into the church: "Never, as he afterward told Father Vaillant, had it been permitted him to behold such deep experience of the holy joy of religion as on that pale December night. He was able to feel, kneeling beside her, the preciousness of the things of the altar to her who was without possessions; the tapers, the image of the Virgin, the figures of the saints, the Cross that took away indignity from suffering and made pain and poverty a means of fellowship with Christ" (217).

The epiphany occurs on a December night, in the company of an apparently mundane character; the scene exemplifies Cather's interest in the transcendental insight emerging out of the ordinary moment. Latour, God's vicar, himself experiences God's presence vicariously through Sada, and the setting is cluttered with other examples of the vicarious: the Virgin, saints, the Cross. Cather provided a gloss on the scene in her *Commonweal* letter: "But a novel, it seems to me, is merely a work of imagination in which a writer tries to present the experiences and emotions of a group of people by the light of his own. That is what he really does, whether his method is 'objective' or 'subjective'" (*On Writing* 12-13). Or, as Cather wrote in a letter late in her career, stories are made from the grafting of an outside figure onto part of the writer's self (Letter to Mr. Phillipson).

Cather's aesthetic principles predisposed her to a favorable view of Catholicism. An art based on empathy resembles a faith of vicarious spirituality; both require a broadening of the imagination as the consciousness extends itself beyond the self into the sensibility of another. Furthermore, her notion of empathy was transformed into an ideological principle; she developed empathy into a form of "only connect" liberalism attuned to moments when cultural or racial gaps are at least

temporarily bridged. This notion is not given an explicit formulation, nor is it projected as watery, vague sentimentality. In brief, parablelike vignettes such as the story of Sada the novel indirectly builds up a composite and detailed fresco of the varieties of empathy. When the European priest empathizes with the Mexican peasant, the difference and rewards of crossing cultural and personal barriers are movingly intimated. The bridging takes place in silence; Latour and Sada arrive at mutuality, an unspoken communion, through the objects in the church: tapers, Madonna, Cross. Cather here seems presciently sensitive to language and to the potentially blinding, authoritarian power of a discourse that attempts to comprehend and explain alien cultures or the Other.

As Edward Said's *Orientalism* famously demonstrated, Western observers, in the very act of creating a discourse to understand the Orient, effectively appropriated those foreign civilizations with a subjugating, colonizing language. Said asserts that there is no such "real thing as 'the Orient,'" since it has been "excluded, displaced" by the written statements of Orientalists; that "both learned and imaginative writing are never free, but are limited in their imagery, assumptions, and intentions"; and, therefore, that every nineteenth-century European "in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric" (21, 201-2, 204).

Before we reach the episode about Sada, we read passages describing the angelus, the casting of the bell, and the conflation of Christianity and Islam. Cather has already demonstrated how Western faith has been touched upon and changed by the Other. The Sada incident deepens these observations, teasing out the implications of multiculturalism at the level of personal encounters. (The effect is similar to that in *My Ántonia*,

where immigration and assimilation—the so-called Americanization process—are grounded in comic scenes about language learning.) Latour, faced with an enigmatic and alien culture that demands interpretation, is in a position very much like that of Said's Orientalists. But what is notable in the Sada episode is the creation of a discourse, a medium for understanding, outside of European written or spoken language. The symbols of the Catholic Church are by usage European (though Cather shows how even a Catholic ritual like the ringing of the angelus has its origin in the oriental religion of Islam), but the gist of the passage is that these objects can be appropriated by Sada and transferred from Europe to New Mexico. Empathy and cultural transmission reverse the usual trend of European encounters with the Other; Sada masters the presiding language (here, the symbols of Catholic worship), and Latour becomes a passive recipient (it is "permitted him to behold").

In Cather's intellectual milieu there were similar attempts to explore the problematic relationships between colonist and colonized, civilized and "primitive," European and Indian. Comparison with these other texts enables us to position *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and to evaluate what I have called its "only connect" liberalism. Cather researched the novel during a stay with the ubiquitous Mabel Dodge Luhan in Taos, New Mexico, in 1925. D. H. Lawrence was the most famous guest at the artists' colony Luhan had established; the two novelists met in New Mexico, and each worked on a book about the indigenous Indian culture of the area.<sup>8</sup> Lawrence's *Mornings in Mexico* (also published in 1927) celebrates the utter difference, or Otherness, of the Indians. At the start of the book Lawrence watches a monkey but rejects the evolutionary connection between it and him: "He's different. There's no rope of evolution linking him to you like a navel string. No! Between you

and him there's a cataclysm and another dimension. It's no good. You can't link him up. Never will. It's the other dimension" (15). The "other dimension" is at the heart of Lawrence's thoughts about race and culture; he founds his theories on this idea of radical otherness. He then tries to understand Indian culture without subsuming it under the Western order of things, while he castigates other European observers for the sentimentality of their writing about primitivism. Sentimentality hints at a reconciliation of the Indian and the European, but for Lawrence there can be no such rapprochement. He endlessly reiterates the point that Indian and European mentalities are utterly divorced: "The Indian way of consciousness is different from and fatal to our way of consciousness. Our way of consciousness is different from and fatal to the Indian. The two ways, the two streams are never to be united. They are not even to be reconciled. There is no bridge, no canal of connexion" (55).

The difficulty with this is that the more Lawrence insists upon difference, the more he writes the Indian into his own discourse; the separateness Lawrence insists upon is bridged by his need to mobilize the Indian for didactic purposes. Because Lawrence continually uses primitivism to attack atrophied civilization, the reader is always aware of his vatic, intercessory voice. No matter how much we are told that "there is no bridge, no canal of connexion," this voice constitutes that very connection; Lawrence cannot resist positioning himself as someone who knows, who has the privileged inside knowledge and is able to describe Indians to the ignorant European. And in the moment of positioning himself Lawrence undoes his own claims to distance and disconnection.

Lawrence is trapped in the interpretive cul-de-sac described by Edward Said: attempts to understand the Other are

acts of power, and the discourse itself is so ridden with the colonizer's ideology that it becomes another form of colonization. Said's analysis presents a traditional humanist hope-that works of art enable the artist and reader to enter into or understand cultures other than their own-as ultimately futile. The upshot of Said's argument is, first, to devalue the power of local or individual resistance to the dominant ideology (we are all ineluctably conditioned by an a priori discourse) and, second, to present cultures as essentially insular and atomized. Cather, on the other hand, anticipates the issues dealt with in Said's work (the collision of cultures, the decoding of the Other) but holds back from endorsing his extreme conclusions. Her fiction dramatizes the act of knowing; her characters are shown in the process of exploring alien culture; the dominating Orientalist discourse is deferred. Characters are likely to be mystified by what they find or to lapse into silence; Cather suggests that a productive nescience, a profitable bewilderment, occurs when the Western intelligence meets Indian or Mexican culture. Latour realizes that the Indians' religious inheritance cannot be abruptly erased by receiving them into the Church; there are areas beyond empathy and outside the range of cultural transfer. "The Bishop seldom questioned Jacinto about his thoughts or beliefs. He didn't think it polite, and he believed it to be useless. There was no way in which he could transfer his own memories of European civilization into the Indian mind, and he was quite willing to believe that behind Jacinto there was a long tradition, a story of experience, which no language could translate to him" (92.).

Translation was important to Cather as proof that people can transmit their language and literature to other nations and races. For Cather, a much-translated writer, the translation of her work into different languages provided another oppor-

tunity to see transmission and cultural reformulation at work. She was, for instance, pleased with the foreign reception of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, and she boasted that *My Ántonia* had been translated into eight languages (Cather, Letters to Carrie Sherwood). Thus, to admit that translation is not possible might at first seem to signal a severe defeat, but Cather makes the hiatus into a form of unspoken communication. She writes, just before the passage quoted above, "They relapsed into the silence which was their usual form of intercourse" (91-92). Tolerant reticence might be a means to communicate (the title of one section-"Stone Lips"-catches this paradoxical sense of mute communication). These silences or lacunae are a way for Cather to explore the gaps in understanding between two markedly different cultures. Writing about silence, Cather faced the problem of how to write about the failure of communication. The pressure of language, as *Mornings in Mexico* demonstrated, is to *keep on*, to fill up the silence. Accepting the limitations of the realist text, Cather's solution was to write silences into her prose, dramatizing these hiatuses and fissures in understanding.

Stadialism and savagism would not have countenanced the encounter between Latour and Jacinto; figures from different phases of societal evolution, they would have been kept apart, within their demarcated stages. The new interest in the Southwest and its primitive civilizations loosened this hierarchy, blurring boundaries to allow the meeting of previously polarized cultures. Ironically, though, Americans-anthropologists, photographers, and writers-began to appreciate the Indians just at the point when their culture was dying out, finally extinguished after a century of exterminations and forced removals. The new primitivism focused on a way of life that was, or was about to be, lost. The stadialist had felt a lingering

fondness for the outmoded civilization, but this nostalgia now gained a keener edge. Anthropology, photography, and writing became the media to record America's loss of its indigenous peoples. A fundamental question then arose: as civilizations progress, is there an unavoidable loss of admirable qualities (of integrity, passion, community—the qualities often associated with the “primitive”)? If there is loss, is it balanced by the gains of entering a more advanced phase of civilization?

Cather dramatized these questions. In the late 1920s she was drawn to the dilemma of societal progress. *The Professor's House* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* are mapped to represent that dilemma, being divided between the “primitive” and the civilized, the Southwest and the East Coast or Europe, agrarian and technological communities. On one side, mesas and cliff-dweller settlements; on the other, the civilized centers of progressive power (bureaucracy, business, academe). It is to the issue of progress that I now want to return.

### ***Death Comes for the Archbishop and Progress***

On first reading, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* seems to endorse progress. Entitling one section “The Old Regime” and including episodes that, with the precision of moral exempla, delineate the corruption of the Mexican clergy (“The Legend of Fray Baltazar”), Cather foregrounds the conflict of old and new authorities. Her alterations to the historical actuality serve to sharpen this conflict. The real Padre Martinez was not as bad as Cather makes him, and she probably overstates the inadequacies of the old regime (Scott 66-67). Her exaggeration of his evil heightens the novel's morality-play structure, the schematic contrast between good and bad priests.

Other modifications of her historical sources affect the politics of the novel; Cather gives us her own idiosyncratic reading of the

progress of civilization. Lamy, the prototype of Latour, had been strongly identified with the Americanization of the Southwest. An ultramontane (i.e., an advocate of firm papal power), his authority was harnessed to the extension of American influence throughout the new territories; he worked as an agent of centralized spiritual and temporal power. The U.S. government in turn supported Lamy's efforts (Scott 121-46). Cather, however, plays down Latour's links with the government; Americanization is referred to but once, and then Latour claims that the Church is the best medium for this policy: “The church can do more than the Fort to make these poor Mexicans ‘good Americans’. And it is for the people's good; there is no other way in which they can better their condition” (36).

Latour is less fervent and more pragmatic than the historical Lamy. Cather's progressivism is apolitical; she takes the politics out of progress by suppressing or eliding the ideological implications of her sources. The novel's correlation of corrupt administration, private vice, and reforming zeal reminds us that Cather had worked for *McClure's* during the heyday of muckraking. Like the muckraking journalists who exposed the political and business scandals of early-twentieth-century America, Cather attacks maladministration and champions reform but refuses to enter into wider political debate. Latour's pragmatic, nonpartisan reforms echo the missions of Cather's fellow journalists, for example, Lincoln Steffens. Exposing municipal corruption in *The Shame of the Cities* (1904), Steffens rejected “a ready-made reform scheme,” adding that “the only editorial scheme we [the muckrakers] had was to study a few choice examples of bad city government” (Steffens 233).<sup>9</sup> Although the tone is different, this is the spirit of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*: a circumscribed analysis in which the faults of a system are personalized or moralized rather than being

interpreted in terms of underlying economic or political structures. Hence Cather's highly individualized images of evil: corruption becomes the manifestation of personal turpitude, a grotesque defect denoted by virulent physical appearance. Thus, Buck Scales "was tall, gaunt and ill-formed, with a snake-like neck, terminating in a small, bony head. Under his close-clipped hair this repellent head showed a number of thick ridges, as if the skull joinings were overgrown by layers of superfluous bone. With its small, rudimentary ears, this head had a positively malignant look" (67). Cather's externalized, reified portrait of malice could come from a scheme of humors, and the allegorical name Buck Scales emphasizes this character's reptilian two-dimensionality. Instead of social process and interaction, Cather projects a frozen, tableau-like image of personal corruption.

But elsewhere another form of progress emerges as Cather develops a more pointedly political sense of injustice and reform. Her treatment of Kit Carson is a case in point. She undermines Carson's heroic status. He had passed into American mythology as soon as his explorations of the West were reported in John Frémont's journals in the 1840s, and after he served in the Mexican War Carson became a national hero. In *Moby Dick*, published just after the war, Melville mock-heroically refers to Carson when Ishmael asks whether Hercules, described as "that antique Crockett and Kit Carson," should be admitted into the pantheon of whalers (373). As Carson became a prototypical American hero, his many biographers iconized a muscular Christian devoid of the usual cowboy vices.<sup>10</sup> Cather's Carson is demythologized. He is smaller and slighter than Latour expects, and a Catholic (nineteenth-century biographers glossed over this fact); and his role in the capture of the Navajo in their ancestral lands is squarely

acknowledged: "Carson followed them down into the hidden world between those towering walls of red sandstone, spoiled their stores, destroyed their deep-sheltered corn-fields, cut down the terraced peach orchards so dear to them. When they saw all that was sacred to them laid waste, the Navajos lost heart. They did not surrender; they simply ceased to fight, and were taken. Carson was a soldier under orders, and he did a soldier's brutal work" (293-94).

Whereas there was a seamless correspondence between Buck Scales's appearance and his character, in this case there is disparity: Carson's "far-seeing blue eyes" and mouth of "singular refinement" (75) belie his "brutal work." Evil becomes a complex matter since appearance and reality do not match. Latour says at the end of his life that "I have lived to see two great wrongs righted; I have seen the end of black slavery, and I have seen the Navajos restored to their own country" (292). Carson's removal of the Navajo constituted one of the "great wrongs," but to look at him one would never have guessed his involvement in wrongdoing. It is important that his actions are presented as the result of a larger process of political decision making; Carson is an employee and not an autonomous free agent. He is "a soldier under orders" doing "a soldier's brutal work." The implication is that potential good is corrupted by institutional duty, by the political machine. Buck Scales's corruption seemed to arise from the very shape of his body; Carson's body is pure, but his actions are warped into badness by political imperatives. As Latour thinks of the Indian wars, "a political machine and immense capital were employed to keep it going" (292).

The problem with these comments is that they sit uneasily alongside the novel's earlier presentations of individualized corruption. The tone of the novel is disrupted. After Latour's

reforms to the contingencies of the situation are accommodated, his meditation on progress in the Southwest suggests a trenchant, idealistic, politicized overview. We can see that Cather's ironic undercutting of Carson (she replaces the myth with a historically culpable figure) has led her toward the kind of political questions that the rest of the text seems to have overlooked. She has, in fact, raised the very questions provoked by the Mexican War that were to lead to the Civil War, questions about exploitation, expansion, and slavery. Having apparently turned away from these topics, Cather turns back to them, but too late in her text to grasp fully the implications of Latour's comments. Hence the contradictions besetting *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Cather condemns the corruption of the old regime, making Lucero and Martinez unequivocally evil, but she also records the savagery of the new order, for instance, in the hunting down of the Navajo. From a stadialist perspective this might seem readily explicable. Stadialism accepted the savagery of the old and the inevitable harshness of the new because it believed that there was underlying movement toward better civilizations. Cather therefore seems to be taking a classically stadialist line on the evils of historical progress. But as we saw earlier, in much of the novel Cather works against the stadialist model, notably in her sympathetic portraits of "primitive" peoples. Behind this contradiction lies a basic paradox: Cather simultaneously envisages the history of the Southwest as a matter of personalities and a matter of ideologies. It is possible to read the novel in either way, and finally one has to recognize the astigmatism of this text: Cather cannot quite focus her conflicting interpretations of American history.

At the troubled core of the progressive ideology (where, as I said earlier, the relative worth of old and new civilizations is evaluated and where the benefits or losses of progress are

finally accounted for) Cather found herself unable to resolve this contradiction. She then moved away from the Common Sense, laconic style of the historical romance, finding that this medium could not account for the conflicting, paradoxical pressures of progressivism. Occasionally a compromise could be found within the boundaries of Common Sense. With the story of the Navajo, Cather illustrated the persistence of the old ways (the Navajo are accommodated in their government reservations) and a shift into a new phase of civilization (the U.S. administration is, after all, responsible for the Southwest). But other Indian tribes presented less purchase for Cather's desire to find a middle way between the old and the new. Hence Jacinto's dying pueblo:

It seemed much more likely that the contagious diseases brought by white men were the real cause of the shrinkage of the tribe. Among the Indians, measles, scarlatina and whooping-cough were as deadly as typhus or cholera. Certainly, the tribe was decreasing every year. Jacinto's house was at one end of the living pueblo; behind it were long rock ridges of dead pueblo,—empty houses ruined by weather and now scarcely more than piles of earth and stone. The population of the living streets was less than one hundred adults. (123)

In this tale of decline and fall the white men's diseases are to blame. In the text, an asterisk at the end of the last sentence ("one hundred adults") takes the reader to a footnote: "In actual fact, the dying pueblo of Pecos was abandoned some years before the American occupation of New Mexico." That is, although the extinction of Pecos is clearly attributed to white civilization, it is disengaged from American imperialism; Cather separates the U.S. involvement in the Southwest from

Indian deaths caused by European diseases. All this is later explained in the main body of the text, since Cather goes on to discuss Coronado's expedition to the area, thereby pinpointing the Spanish origin of the various contagions. Cather, then, chooses to refute emphatically the United States' role in this destruction, even to the extent of breaking up her prose with a footnoted insertion. The footnote authoritatively overrides the main body of the text, supplanting fictional history with the "objective" history of footnotes, facts, and authenticated chronology. In effect this is a convoluted negotiation of the progressive dilemma: Cather acknowledges the white man's destruction of the Indian settlements but circuitously evades the question of American involvement. The fact that Cather uses a footnote to achieve this solution shows how much strain the progressive dilemma put on her prose. The disruptions, contradictions, and anomalies of "progress" fissure the even surface of Cather's prose. Indeed, at this point the problem cannot be contained within the main body of the text.

A progressive contradiction is recognized and focused, but in order to "solve" the problem Cather shifts into a different discourse, the overriding footnote. Elsewhere, especially when she is writing about superseded or outmoded civilizations, her writing becomes symbolic, mythic, or parablelike. Her "transparent," laconically factual style is then disrupted by an ambiguous, shifting, layered mode. Cather returned at several points in her career to a story that repeatedly produced this discourse: the myth of the Enchanted Mesa was the subject of an early story, "The Enchanted Bluff" (1909), and of a section of *The Professor's House*, and it recurs in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. It is the story of how an Indian tribe, in fear and defiance of the outside world, withdrew onto an isolated rock, where they died from hunger after the only stairway from their

fortress was destroyed:

All this plain, the Bishop gathered, had once been the scene of a periodic man-hunt; these Indians, born in fear and dying by violence for generations, had at last taken this leap away from the earth, and on that rock had found the hope of all suffering and tormented creatures-safety. They came down to the plain to hunt and to grow their crops, but there was always a place to go back to. If a band of Navajos were on the Ácoma's trail, there was still one hope; if he could reach his rock sanctuary! On the winding stone stairway up the cliff, a handful of men could keep off a multitude. The rock of Ácoma had never been taken by a foe but once,-by Spaniards in armour. It was very different from a mountain fastness; more lonely, more stark and grim, more appealing to the imagination. The rock, when one came to think of it, was the utmost expression of human need; even more feeling yearned for it; it was the highest comparison of loyalty in love and friendship. Christ Himself had used that comparison for the disciple to whom He gave the keys of His Church. And the Hebrews of the Old Testament, always being carried captive into foreign lands,-their rock was an idea of God, the only thing their conquerors could not take from them.

Already the Bishop had observed in Indian life a strange literalness, often shocking and disconcerting. The Ácomas, who must share the universal human yearning for something permanent, enduring, without shadow of change,-they had their idea in substance. They actually lived upon their Rock; were born upon it and died upon it. There was an element of exaggeration

in anything so simple! (97-98)

The rock embodies the Indians' faith, devotion, and steadfastness; to Latour the rock exemplifies the "strange literalness" of Indian life. Latour, or the narrator-the style becomes noticeably more indirect as the passage proceeds, making it difficult to attribute the thoughts to one or the other-speak a heightened, sacred language. With phrases such as "when one came to think of it," the prose mimes a kind of biblical exegesis, an extended interpretation of the rock's significance. That meaning is largely theological. In heightened religious language and with devotional intensity the passage occludes the historical status of the rock, its place in a story of conquest and resistance. All that is left is fleeting references to the pursuing Navajo and the "Spaniards in armour" who finally took the fortress.

It seems that the mesa's importance is as a theological symbol; but the Enchanted Mesa suggested itself in *The Professor's House* as a tale about the primitive peoples of America and their defeat by white civilization. The story of the mesa provided a vehicle for Cather to ask questions about this historical process. Should the earlier communities be mourned? Why had they failed to survive? Patricia Lee Yongue believes that Cather then used the Enchanted Mesa story to answer these questions. The story of the cliff dwellers in *The Professor's House* is, in Yongue's view, a cautionary tale about societies that fail to progress. The cliff dwellers "allowed their beautiful, naturally-endowed culture to deteriorate into a waste land by all avoidance of technological change . . . by failure to make any effort to save themselves or actively to expand their customs to the rest of the New World" (Yongue 27-39). Technological acumen and territorial acquisitiveness, qualities absent from cliff-dweller life, were of course the foundation of America's nineteenth-

century progress. Cather, Yongue argues, transformed the mesa story into an exemplary parable about the value of Yankee progress. The cliff dwellers had not been sufficiently similar to the civilization that overtook them; if they had been, they might have survived.

It is surely more convincing to interpret the cliff dwellers and the Enchanted Mesa as expressions of Cather's nostalgia for older and "purer" civilizations. The lack of commercialism or covetousness, the dedication to craftsmanship, the pacific sense of community—all of these qualities were admired by Cather. We might even interpret the story as a kind of utopian fiction. After all, the cliff dwellers are presented as an idealistic ur-Christian community. Their utopian, godly settlement is another version of the American "city on the hill," the theocratic community at one with itself and with the landscape in which it is placed. Cather's heightened rhetoric signals her own fascination with (and yearning for?) this utopia. But then there is the fall of the rock to the invading Spaniards. One does not have to agree completely with Yongue to admit that Cather is interested in the fall of the ideal community; in the moment of envisaging her city on the hill she cannot hold off awareness of the city's inevitable demise.

The cliff-dweller settlement, like *Ántonia's* homestead on the prairies, demonstrates Cather's interest in what we might call a fragile or compromised utopianism. In these cultured and harmonious communities she imagined her own version of the American ideal society; but in both cases the utopia is circumscribed. *Ántonia's* home, beautifully poised between the Old and New Worlds and their languages, is an idealized projection of a liberal Americanization that would accommodate European ways in the New World. Yet the simple fact that this utopia extends to just one house, and not the wider society,



shows that the dream was limited. The Enchanted Mesa likewise possessed a doubleness in Cather's imagination: the incarnation of a craft-based, theocratic utopia; the disintegration of that ideal, whether through a combination of insularity and rapacious mobility, as here, or through the community's own cruelties, as in *The Professor's House*. Cather interlarded the two versions (utopia and dystopia), producing the layered parables of the rock and the Enchanted Mesa. And the reason that the Enchanted Mesa can sustain a variety of interpretations—theological exemplum, progressive dystopia, or nostalgic idyll—is that Cather is caught between conflicting discourses. She is simultaneously drawn toward idealism and disillusion, trying to imagine a progressive ideal even as she turns back on herself and undermines those ideals. The writer's imagination is attracted toward an ideal that it knows cannot be sustained.

Cather's narrative relaxation, her ability to accommodate or incorporate elements that seemed to be beyond the immediate scope of her ostensible themes, led to a liberal openness in her fiction. We have seen how this led her to define her text as a narrative rather than as a novel. Now, however, we can also see that expansiveness might become a form of evasion. Unable to unravel the dilemma of progress, Cather accreted various answers instead of resolving the central issues. She described her novel as an exploration of narrative, deploying examples of archaic forms of story such as the legend or the frieze. The "essence" of this method, she wrote, is "not to hold the note . . . but to touch and pass on." She wanted "to do something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment . . . something without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition" (*On Writing* 9). Her formalist claims have been honored by critics who read the novel either as an homage to older storytelling or as a modernist experi-

ment. For Mary-Ann and David Stouck the novel utilizes the medieval "paratactic" structures identified by Eric Auerbach, "a series of loosely related 'pictures,' each of which captures a gesture from a decisive moment in the subject's life" (Stouck and Stouck 293-307). And for Hermione Lee this structure is not an antiquarian idiosyncrasy but "a sophisticated version of symbolism, a modernist refusal of naturalism" (270).<sup>11</sup>

Neither homage to medieval storytelling nor modernist abjuration of traditional narrative seems to me a fully satisfactory reading. Is the formal experiment simply a structural idiosyncrasy, or does it have broader implications? Might it not affect the ways Cather represents American history? We have already seen that the swerve from naturalism to symbolism, noted by Lee, has much to do with the inability of straightforward realist prose to contain the conflicting pressures of Cather's America. The discussions of the novel's form quoted above posit a formalism hermetically sealed off from the historical matrix in which Cather wrote. Yet the novel's form cannot be isolated from the issues of race, primitivism, Catholicism, and progress. In the novel's form we find the embodiment of Cather's thought, the grammar and syntax with which and through which she articulated her investigation into America's past.

The novel's discontinuous storyline, discrete tableaux and anecdotes, interpolated legends and historical asides, and lack of dynamic plot or taut structure give it an open, paratactic form. Parataxis presents a story without the hierarchical structure to combine and rank its constituent elements; it is the opposite of a historiography, which causally locks one event onto another in a chain of historical connection. Even if at certain points the text is clear about its ideological stance (e.g., about Carson and the Navajo), the episodic construction iso-

lates these moments, because Cather has chosen "not to hold the note . . . but to touch and pass on." Faced with the jostling, contradictory evidence about the benefits of American progress, Cather favored narrative structures that revealed ideological tensions but refused to work out solutions to these dilemmas. The narrative structure becomes the embodiment of her simultaneous opening up and occlusion of the progressive dilemma. As we have seen, the text incorporates the new primitivism, carrying with it a tolerant receptivity to Indian culture, racial heterogeneity, and Catholicism—all of which are aspects of American culture that narrow definitions of American progress would have excluded. Nonetheless, Cather cannot finally combine, incorporate, or reconcile her own perspectives on progress, and her open text shades into an evasive text.<sup>12</sup>

## Notes

1. All references in the text are to the 1981 Virago paperback reprint of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.
2. Details of the Mexican War and its aftermath are in McPherson 47–77.
3. For an exposition of Manifest Destiny (as territorial expansion, as democratic mission) see Merk.
4. Arnold (50–57) summarizes the reactions of other reviewers to *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.
5. For sources and the historical material with which Cather worked see Bloom and Bloom 479–506, Horgan, and Scott. Critics who then use this material alongside a reading of the novel's spiritual and "romance" elements include David Stouck (*Willa Cather's Imagination* 129–49) and Woodress (391–411).
6. Mitchell (140–50) discusses the new Southwestern

primitivism.

7. The classic study of nineteenth-century attitudes toward the "savage" is Pearce.

8. Cather wrote in a letter of 4 August 1932 to Carrie Sherwood that she knew Lawrence well and liked him. She said that he was undoubtedly the most gifted author of his generation but that he let his prejudices get the better of him.

9. On muckraking and the wider context of progressivism see Bates 51–52, Ekirch 58–63, Filler, Noble, and Thompson.

10. On Carson and his secular canonization see Smith 81–89 and Tuska and Piekarski 91–92.

11. On Cather's modernist techniques see Rose.

12. My discussion of the ideological configurations of fictional form is indebted to John Barrell's discussion of the georgic, a classical genre Cather alluded to and borrowed from. The georgic "had also traditionally been ventilated by digressions, and was thus hospitable to a diversity of topics . . . to represent the diversity of modern experience" (90).

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