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Paul Olson

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, polson2@unl.edu

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My Ántonia as Plains Epic
Paul A. Olson

When I assign My Ántonia, I teach it to the sons and daughters or more distant relatives, in blood or spirit, of the people it treats. I have had relatives of Mrs. Pavelka in my classes, citizens of Red Cloud and Wilber, Czechs who still retain their Czech culture, and classicists at the University of Nebraska who study what Cather studied here. It is thus impossible entirely to make the work of art defamiliarize the experience, as Shklovsky would have it do, nor would I want it to remove the students from their pasts and knowledge of family or milieu (Shklovsky). Indeed, I try first to place them firmly in their own history and ask them to act on that history. But I also seek to introduce them to literary meanings that Cather asks us to see from afar; I use My Ántonia’s references to the classics, to Vergil’s Aeneid and Georgics, to distance them from the parochialism of Nebraska and help them see their history as part of a pattern experienced by travelers and immigrants before, one often repeated on the long corridor of time and discovered there by Homer and Vergil.

To situate the students in their history, I remind them that My Ántonia was published during World War I, with its insistent chauvinism, repression of linguistic and cultural minorities, and elevation of the gun. Some students will have tales of when their families were forced by the Councils of Defense to quit speaking German or Czech, of house porches painted yellow in accusation of cowardice, and of forced purchases of war bonds. I may read sections from One of Ours that deal with the repression of German minorities and pacifists in Nebraska during the period. I ask students to pay particular attention to the uneasy situations of Bayliss, the pacifist (bk. 3, ch. 8), and of Oberlies and Yoeder, German-Americans put on trial for supposedly making disloyal comments about America and the Kaiser (bk. 3, ch. 9). Sometimes I ask students to read Cather’s “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle,” written shortly after My Ántonia and World War I, to give them a sense of Cather’s personal respect for the immigrant European ethnic cultures and her perspective on the period’s cult of material progress and the materially prosperous nation (see esp. 4–8).

I then ask the students to look back at Jim Burden’s view of Czech and German culture, his early response to the Shimerdas’ Czech rye bread and dried mushrooms, his prejudices about central European Catholic belief, and his contempt for the settler’s barren struggle for survival. The point is to make the student examine Jim’s rejection of the tougher aspects of Ántonia’s and Mrs. Shimerda’s immigrant culture and the realism of his sympathy for the delicate, depressed, and, ultimately, maladaptive Mr. Shimerda. Once the students have learned to doubt Jim Burden’s perspective, they may question not only his early negative response to the immigrants but...
also the some of his later, lyrical response to them. Though I set the novel first against World War I, I generally question its relation to World War I's specific forms of chauvinism and militarism only when we reach the last book and see Antonia, surrounded by her fertile Eden, telling Jim that she can't ever shoot a gun anymore. The passage makes its own statement.

_My Antonia_ opens in the 1870s, that is, in the period after the Civil War and during or immediately after the Franco-Prussian War. Since this period forms the fundamental political background to World War I, I ask students to recapture in their minds the cultural and historical events that account for the milieu of the Burden household and the European immigrant households. In the Burdens' case, we look at the Civil War, the Virginia background (11), the southern tradition of courtesy and distance, the simultaneous respect for and condescension toward other cultures (particularly black culture), the Virginia Baptist tradition to which the Burdens belong, and traditional southern classicism. Though compulsory education was not part of the post-Civil War South, families of even modest means employed tutors to educate boys and, sometimes, girls in Greek and Latin literature. The tradition goes from Jefferson through the southern plantation house to recent writers such as William Faulkner, Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, and Robert Penn Warren, who testify to its liveliness in their youths. A standard study such as Reinhold's _Classica Americana_ may be helpful here. Using one informal source of information or another, my students generally form a picture of the milieu from which the Burdens have come. They often have some understanding of how the values of that Virginia milieu support the keeping of hired men who live out the cowboy mythos formulated in _The Virginian_ not too many years before Cather wrote.

But if my students are relatively clear about what happened in this country during the World War I and Civil War periods, they are much less certain in their knowledge of the conflict between the new liberal order and the ancien régime of the nineteenth century: Europe from Napoleon I's rise around 1800 to Napoleon III's fall in 1870. To encourage students to examine this dimension of the novel, I call attention to a number of details: (1) Otto Fuchs's background in Austria and Bismarck, North Dakota, and his (or his mother's) sentimental middle European Catholicism, represented in his Christmas-tree ornaments and his contempt for Czechs (131); (2) Mr. Shimerda's affection for his fellow Slavs, Pavel and Peter, his life as a weaver in Bohemia (20), his reliance on aesthetic experience for solace in contrast to his family's reliance on the Catholic Church, and his musical service on a semifeudal estate; (3) Jelinek's service in an Austro-Prussian war (probably the Seven Weeks' War of 1866); (4) Cuzak's life as a Czech journeyman, pushed out of his family's guild into a Viennese guild that prepares him for his service as a scab in New York; (5) Lena Lingard's double root in the
Norwegian clergy and in pagan or secular Lapp people; and (6) Mrs. Harling's origin in Christiana, Norway, where pietism flourished during Hauge's lifetime and long after his death.

To give the students tools for interpreting these references, I ask them to find accounts in encyclopedias or popular history books of the post-Napoleonic efforts to revive the liberal movement and eliminate central Europe's semi-feudal system of landed estates. I also ask them to examine the reaction to the liberal movement in the period 1830–70, particularly in Prussia, Austria, and the Scandinavian countries. Because Ántonia is Czech, I usually concentrate on the Bohemian liberal independence movement and Austrian Hapsburg conservative repression, the interaction between the conservative Catholic Bohemian and the Bohemian freethinker aesthetic movements in the movement for Czech freedom, and the conflicts between Prussia and Austria that were to determine whether conservative central Europe would be predominantly Catholic or Protestant. These topics assist the students in understanding the Shimerdas and Otto Fuchs in particular. To understand Mr. Shimerda's attraction to Peter and Pavel, I examine the Pan-Slavic movement binding Bohemia to Russia, and to account for the Shimerdas' immigrating, I look both at the uprisings in the textile industry in Prague, which destabilized that industry (see Peck), and at the difficulty of acquiring land in the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. Finally, to account for Lena Lingard and Mrs. Harling, I briefly examine the conflicts between Puritanical pietism and "pagan" Romanticism in the Scandinavian countries by looking at the Hauge movement in Norway with its emphasis on grace, personal piety, conversion, and abstention from drinking, dancing, and other "worldly" sins, and at the saga- and myth-based romanticism of Atterbom, Wergeland, Bjornson, and Hans Christian Andersen in some moods. Often in Scandinavian literature, the Lapps (Lena Lingard's ancestors) are used as metaphors for this more Dionysiac tradition. In short, 1870 is a mirror of 1918.

The students may then, in discussion, see the characters of the novel as carrying the culture and the conflicts of the Old World with them to the frontier, but they also see the frontier rendered by Cather as potentially a more fluid place than Europe. It is governed more by a cultural than by a political conservatism; the ancien régime's political reaction and imperialism exist only in the Wick Cutters and the Krajieks, never in the whole system. Some students see the repetition of Old World conflicts on the frontier as entirely accidental, as not related to the 1870s or to World War I, and I do not try to persuade them otherwise. Furthermore, my students usually do not agree—cannot agree—as to whether this European background implies any systematic political statement by Cather about World War I or the political movements of the nineteenth century. They see clearly that the children of the imperial powers, who would have killed one another had
they stayed in Europe, are forced to construct an uneasy sense of community in the presence of frontier hardship and that this phenomenon, in turn, comments on the inevitability or lack thereof of what George Kennan has described as one of history’s most unnecessary wars.

The defamiliarization of the familiar comes in Cather’s reliance on epic and georgic and on the second, ancient perspective through which Jim Burden sees the events of the novel. Most of my students have never read the Aeneid or the Georgics. They are products of the education Cather deplores in “Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle.” A few have read the Odyssey because it was commonly included in a ninth-grade curriculum once popularly taught in Nebraska. I provide summaries and excerpts to give the students something to go on. As I have argued elsewhere, Cather invents in My Ántonia a “georgic epic,” as Fielding had invented a “comic epic in prose,” an epic that has a woman as hero and fields for monster-filled waters (Paul A. Olson, “Epic”).

The students need some sense of what the Aeneid is and what the Georgics say to understand what Cather is doing with ancient literature. I introduce sea-travel passages from Aeneid, book 3, to place beside Cather’s description of the wavy plains in book 1; Dido’s suicide (bk. 4) to place beside Shimerda’s; Aeneas’s shield predicting the future of Rome (bk. 8) beside the plow silhouetted on the horizon predicting the future of the plains; some of the monster passages in Aeneid, book 3, beside the passages describing plains monsters such as the serpent. I place Vergil’s “tears in the nature of things” beside Shimerda’s response to the captured green insect to whom he listens “full of sadness, of pity for things” (42). Turning to the Georgics, I give the students excerpts from book 1 on the tilling of fields and the life of the farmer, from book 2 on trees and vineyards and the satisfaction of the farmer, and from book 4 on vegetables. I supply the passage from Georgics, book 3, that includes the motto of My Ántonia (Optima dies . . . prima fugit) and allow the students to discuss Vergil’s point about the lives of herds and of people. I do the same for the passages about bringing the muse to the patria that begin book 3, and finally I turn to the section where Cleric compares the Aeneid and the Georgics, much to the advantage of the latter (bk. 3, ch. 2), and ask what Burden’s choice of the Georgics means for his epic.

I cannot teach students everything at once, and I do not try. I use Vergil to give a perspective. I try to get the students to look carefully at what use Cather makes of Gaston Cleric, a classicist at the University of Nebraska for whom the texts of antique poetry are never mere texts but are meant to make Jim Burden and his other students imagine ancient life. I usually read and discuss the description of Cleric as teacher, one who “could bring the drama of antique life before one out of the shadows” (261).

Clearly, the defamiliarized has a function in Cleric’s life. But I also read
and discuss the passage where Jim Burden meditates on the meaning of the classical world and of the *Aeneid* as “mother to me and nurse in poetry,” and I ask the students to consider why a second set of pictures (the reverse of the second *Aeneid* picture that appears in Tom Outland’s imagination) arises behind the text of the *Aeneid* (262). The heroic forms that fill Jim Burden’s imagination are a “strengthened and amplified” Jake and Otto and Russian Peter, the avatars of a new epoch in a new world, unlike the dead Trojan races. Some students are simply puzzled as to why Black Hawk intrudes on Jim Burden’s recollection of the epic; some attribute his vision of his childhood to homesickness; and some see that Jim and Ántonia are reliving a heroic pattern.

I ask students to consider why, later in the book, Ántonia is described as “a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races” (353)—that is, like the epic heroes—and why she is apotheosized in Jim Burden’s memory in “immemorial human attitudes” that one recognizes as “universal and true.” The students then work out in what sense she is like the founders of early races, what is the essence of her heroic character, and how her heroism differs from that popularly held up to admiration during World War I. Generally, they speak of her strength, persistence, bravery, and individual fight; of her creation of a new-old culture; and of her physical stamina and wisdom. Students may remark how these heroic qualities take peculiarly female forms in Ántonia.

In the *Aeneid*, as in most major epics, the other major actor aside from the hero is destiny. I am not certain exactly how to deal with destiny in *My Ántonia*, but I try. I point out that Jim Burden seems to have the perception that he is dealing imaginatively with material that somehow deserves to stand by Vergil, or at least by the epics that posit a controlling destiny: “For Ántonia and for me this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past” (372). Burden constructs this meditation on destiny as he looks at the road over which he and Ántonia have come since as children they first arrived on the frontier, as his memory recapitulates it with such vividness that he can touch its feelings, can by contemplating it “come home to himself” and know “what a little circle man’s experience is” (371–72). It is not clear, however, what Jim Burden means by the word *destiny*—the popular conception (“We were destined to meet”), the Vergilian stoic idea, or what. I do not have an answer to this question; I do try to go through the book looking for passages where a future pattern is adumbrated.

Another way I approach the question of destiny is by asking students to wrestle with Burden’s conception of art as setting the form for civilization.
In the introduction, Jim Burden is represented as a disappointed legal counsel for one of the “great western railways”; the legal portfolio he presents to Willa Cather tells the life not of a failed lawyer, however, but of a poet of the patria—of the patriotic in its original meaning: “Primus ego in patriam mecum . . . deducam Musas” (“for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country [patria]”):

Cleric had explained to us that “patria” here meant, not a nation or even a province, but the little rural neighbourhood on the Mincio where the poet was born. This was not a boast, but a hope, at once bold and devoutly humble, that he might bring the Muse (but lately come to Italy from the cloudy Grecian mountains), not to the capital, the palatia Romana, but to his own little “country”; to his father’s field. . . . (264)

Cleric goes on to speculate that Vergil in dying remembered this passage and “decreed that the great canvas [of the Aeneid], crowded with figures of gods and men, should be burned rather than survive him unperfected” (264). I point out that Cleric and, probably, Jim Burden see the militaristic canvas of the Aeneid as imperfect, when put beside the Georgics’ perfection. The dying poet turned his mind to his “perfect utterance,” the Georgics, “where the pen was fitted to the matter as the plough is to the furrow” (264). As he gave up his life, he is said to “have said to himself, with the thankfulness of a good man, ‘I was the first to bring the Muse into my country,’ ” that is, his patria (264).

Later, as he sees Lena Lingard in the lamplight, Burden understands his muse. He thinks of her as in a dream, “coming across the harvest-field in her short skirt”; with her comes an echo of the Vergilian motto, Optima dies . . . prima fugit. With her comes also the memory of the Danish laundry girls and the three Bohemian Marys. Suddenly he understands what the muse is: “It came over me, as it had never done before, the relationship between girls like those and the poetry of Virgil. If there were no girls like them in the world, there would be no poetry” (270). Poetry and art emerge from concrete experience of a certain order—the Danes, the Marys—and return to concrete experience in poetry telling one how to plow. I try to get my classes to wrestle with Burden’s conceptions of poetry and art: what the patria means against the background of World War I, what bringing the muse into Black Hawk society means, what the quotation from the Georgics means—whether each of these ideas is a sentimental bit of nostalgia or a profound statement on art—and what sexual and/or aesthetic motive is behind Jim Burden’s casting Lena and the other frontier women in the role of the muses.
Whatever aesthetic theory students construct from these meditations on the art of civilizing and the muses that inspire it, they see pretty clearly that Jim Burden's experience of Ántonia is a heroic reliving of the *Aeneid* or *Odyssey*. Yet the novel has a different ending from the old epics. What *My Ántonia* finally values is not heroic military enterprise, as found in World War I, in 1870, or in the founding of Rome—not the work of Thanatos, but that of Eros. The novel's heroic work requires planting grains and gardens and raising livestock—the stuff of the *Georgics*. I then ask the students to go back to Vergil to observe how far the *Georgics* and *Aeneid* analogies go: whether the prairie sea's "wine red" is part of it; whether the suicide and funeral of Shimerda work into the pattern; how Larry Donovan's seduction works; how the visit to Black Hawk, the plow image, the visions of Ántonia in the fields and later of Ántonia in her fruitful orchard relate to epic or heroic perspectives. Some students see all these elements as fitting into a pattern as clear as Joyce's in Stuart Gilbert's account of *Ulysses*. Others say that the analogies are purely fortuitous. What is important is that they have had to deal with how persons construct meaning for their lives by playing between art and history. They have had to look at the process of development in the 1870s on the frontier. And they have had to look at Cather's mirror of the civilizing process set before the barbarous world of World War I, even as Vergil's mirror is set before the rough world of the 1870s in Jim's life.

I end my discussion with an effort to have my students evaluate Cather's reasons for her double perspective, classical and nineteenth-century European, on the events of a novel written in World War I and set at their back doors. I consider the structure of the book, looking particularly at what books 1, 3, and 5 have to do with one another structurally. What can I get across to my students of this? They can see that Cather, in the context of the imperialism of World War I, creates a hero in Ántonia who is like the founder of early races but looks forward to no empire and loves no fight save the fight for survival.