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A NORTH AMERICAN CONNECTION
WOMEN IN PRAIRIE NOVELS

ANN BARNARD

Canadian poet Eli Mandel has said that the prairie writer is one who points in the direction of the prairie and not necessarily one who always lives there or writes exclusively about that region. Mandel, who suggests that the prairie has as much to do with "state of mind" as with locale and that prairie space is dynamic, cites Margaret Laurence and Robert Kroetsch, among others, as examples of Canadian writers identified with the West who have withdrawn and returned. In the United States, Willa Cather comes to mind as prototype for Mandel's paradigm, and although her later work is not constrained by her fictive return to the prairie, Cather's earlier novels and stories have shaped an American consciousness of prairie space as much as they have been shaped by the place and the concept. Early in the twentieth century, Cather seems to have created a space that other prairie writers would successively modify, including not only well established Canadians such as Laurence and Kroetsch, but, for example, the much earlier Sinclair Ross, until recently obscure, and on the U.S. side the still earlier Sinclair Lewis, whose claim to membership in the prairie genre rests with Main Street. This evolution has produced a classic tradition in the prairie novel, identifiable by its spatial archetypes involving motion and diversity particularly with reference to gender relationships. Not surprisingly, in an essay titled "The Fear of Women in Prairie Fiction," Robert Kroetsch uses Cather's My Antonia and Ross's As for Me and My House to define the peculiarities of male/female polarity as represented in prairie fiction through two traditional images, horse and house, which can be extended to produce new gender insights.

A notable thing about Kroetsch's essay is the absence of concern for the forty-ninth parallel. In his comparison of Cather's and
Ross’s novels, Kroetsch is interested in women, men, the prairie region, and whatever mythos is generated by the convergence of the three. Space is important, inner, outer, and negotiated space, but surveyor’s boundaries are irrelevant to Kroetsch’s horse versus house opposition. Kroetsch’s reading of Cather and Ross focuses not on the politics of nationalism but rather on the politics of gender, i.e. masculine outer space that for the purposes of gender analysis reflects only one end of a polarity, and imperfectly at that. Region, however, is essential to this gender focus, because the prairie region has space, indeed is space, objectively and subliminally, whether its territory sits to the north or south of the border. Also, space implies transcience, the distance involved in getting somewhere, the point of origin in relation to the place of settlement, and the possibility of further beginnings. The sod house is always temporary, its roof untrustworthy, rain falling alike on all its inhabitants. Even into later generations, prairie characters can bear an ancestral recollection of impermanence.

With all of the comings and goings of the prairie setting, the position of the female character shifts away from the stereotype of John Donne’s compass figure, “the fixed foot,” to a new mobility in key with the demands of new territory. From the male perspective, she has become more difficult to identify and therefore more fearsome. The male character must respond to the change and becomes more vulnerable. All of this can lead to a different type of opposition, traveling woman versus insigent man. In The Canadian Postmodern, Linda Hutcheon cites Aritha Van Herk’s No Fixed Address as the obvious example, “an alternative” to Kroetsch’s whorehouse in the woman who likes to travel. In prairie novels that span the generations of the twentieth century and reach into an earlier time, this new opposition is not only a presence but arises out of the ingredients of situation, the prairie revealing itself in the character. In selecting the main street of a small town as metonymy for western civilization, Sinclair Lewis chose a prairie town as epitome. Where else could Main Street’s Carol Kennicott be “conscious of an unbroken sweep of land to the Rockies . . . a dominion which will rise to unexampled greatness when other empires have grown senile”? In addition to Carol, Antonia Shimerda, Alexandra Bergson, Hagar Shipley, Mrs. Bentley, and Anna Dawe, as exemplary prairie characters, are all seekers capable of imagining such empires, even when the road is obscure and the notion leads to denial. The feature that these and other female prairie characters share is change, in direct response to the environment, whereas the male character typically changes, if at all, in response to the female character. In this way the female is focused as subject, as persona, protagonist, or both, depending upon narrative method.

For reasons of history, the characteristic east to west thrust of American prairie fiction is not as apparent in the Canadian counterpart. According to Jean Barman, between 1911 and 1921 over half of the population in Manitoba came directly from continental Europe and the United States, while in Saskatchewan and Alberta the percentage was even higher, although eventually, beginning in the 1920s and increasing thereafter, substantial migration has occurred from the prairie provinces to British Columbia. Hagar Shipley of Margaret Laurence’s The Stone Angel does go farther west beyond the prairies, as do many other Canadian characters, but Vancouver is not where the Canadian wilderness lies and no romantic conquest can be claimed simply by going there. In Willa Cather’s novels, the wonder is that the prairie has been tamed so quickly; in Canadian fiction, the wonder is that it can be tamed at all. In his preface to The Bush Garden, Northrop Frye focused on region as source of identity while positioning Canada the nation between northern wilderness and southern political giant. The giant, conversely, has generally turned its eyes westward, and in that gaze is an assumption of progress born from the myth of manifest destiny. Yet in spite of differences in directional
orientation, female prairie characters resemble each other on both sides of the border because they start with essentially the same equipment for making their way in a new territory.

Two chroniclers of the Canadian pioneer woman’s experience, Catherine Parr Traill and Susanna Moodie, abundantly warned that new settlers from Britain were likely to be middle class and ill adapted to life in the Ontario bush of the early nineteen hundreds. Traill advised men to consult with their wives before deciding upon emigration, and Moodie alluded to the “Canadian mania” that sent many unprepared people into an unfamiliar and formidable environment. The same could be said for the westward push farther south, as more recent comments attest. In the autobiography Earth Horizon, Mary Hunter Austin tells the saga of an ancestor named Polly McAdams, who “set out to bake Johnny-cake and wear linsey-woolsey of her own weaving in the wilds of Illinois.” Yet these early women of the midwest, says Austin, led quite different, “more gracious and abounding,” lives before venturing west, and must have been unaccustomed, not only to the physical hardships, but to the new social egalitarianism. According to Austin, their immediate descendents also frequently rose to the occasion, as in the case of Polly’s daughter Hannah, who was Austin’s grandmother. When fire destroyed her husband’s pharmacy, Hannah was on hand at daybreak selling homemade gingerbread to the spectators. In The Diviners, Margaret Laurence’s Morag Gunn wonders at the fortitude and ingenuity of Catherine Parr Traill in much the way that Austin marvels at her own forebears. Although not all women were so undaunted and only a few would become articulate voices, many were, as Sandra Myres has assessed them in Westering Women, perceptive about the land they were entering, particularly the prairie region, and not significantly different from men in their reactions. “It is clear from their own words,” says Myres, “that women approached the wilderness with many preconceptions and with both apprehension and optimism.”

Transformed not by ideology but by circumstance, pioneering women could not undo their experience or comfortably deny that a metamorphosis had occurred. Moodie’s early and somewhat annoyed references to “the saucy familiarity of servants” point to a subtext of gender egalitarianism, while Austin’s later allusion to the disappearance of servants signals an overtly feminist intent. The fading of the domestic servant class tended to place women on the same level in an environment where everyone’s work was important. When women experienced apprehension and optimism in much the same way as men and for approximately the same reasons, a new mythology was in the making that would be the wellspring for centrality of the female character in prairie fiction. This is suggested in the title of Willa Cather’s My Ántonia. The my of My Ántonia expresses familiarity but not possession, for Jim Burden is attracted to Ántonia because she, unlike the dull town girls who have not tamed the prairie, cannot be owned. My Ántonia is, of course, my (Jim’s) version of Ántonia, but this in turn is sifted through the “I” of the introduction, who may be read as Cather or as anyone. Ántonia’s story thereby becomes corporate myth. Indeed Jim is in awe of Ántonia, and therefore obsessed to tell her story as a way of discovering his own identity in a prairie experience which, as he states at novel’s end, they both “possessed.” This sense of awe on the part of the principal male character reflects a paradoxical response toward the female who cannot be stereotyped, who has broken the bounds of the old myths and replaced them with a story that is distinctive­ly her own. Ántonia’s pioneer experience has prepared her to turn adversity into advantage, and eventually to select a life of domesticity rather than to be coerced into it. In this power of choice she is complemented by her more urban and independent friends, Lena and Tiny, who late in the novel promote Jim’s renewed interest in locating his old friend. “I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly,” Ántonia tells Jim during that final meeting.
Of the several female characters whom I have identified as examples, Mrs. Bentley of Sinclair Ross’s *As for Me and My House*, Hagar Shipley of Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel*, and Anna Dawe of Robert Kroetsch’s *Badlands* are first person narrators, although in the last instance Kroetsch has complicated the storytelling by positioning Anna as mediator for her father, thereby calling attention to the compromised nature of first person narrative, which implies the narrator as editor. Because Mrs. Bentley, Hagar, and Anna are editing their own texts, they focus on externals, Mrs. Bentley’s husband, Hagar’s Manawaka past, and Anna’s father, in a process of internalization that eventually leads to epiphany. Among my examples the apparent Canadian/American split in terms of narrative method may be a reflection of the fact that the Canadian novels were written later and is probably less significant than the commonality of the novels that my selected characters represent. All of these novels in one sense or another pointedly endow their principal women with voices. On the American side of things, Antonia Shimerda, Alexandra Bergson, and Carol Kennicott are at the center of their own stories and by no means mute. Antonia is identified as the member of her family designated by the father to learn English in order to communicate with the new world, and in the earlier *O Pioneers!* Cather directly establishes Alexandra Bergson as indisputable protagonist. In similar fashion it is Carol Kennicott’s encounter with Gopher Prairie that is the focus of *Main Street*.

In extending Robert Kroetsch’s horse and house opposition, a main task for all of these female characters might be seen as getting out of the house and onto the horse. Prairie houses are particularly isolated; distance must somehow be navigated, traversed, if the story is to be told and culture is to be transmitted. Even town houses have a somber and lonely character, as in *Horizon* and *Gopher Prairie*, where the very names bestowed upon the towns describe the prairie itself rather than the human inhabitants. Carol Kennicott’s and Mrs. Bentley’s first impressions of their new settings are peculiarly similar. “I’ll make it all jolly,” says Carol, although her reaction to the house is really a sense “of dinginess and lugubriousness and airlessness.” “It’s the disordered house and the bare walls that depress me,” says Mrs. Bentley. “I keep looking at the leak in the ceiling, and the dark wet patch as it gradually seeps its way towards the wall.” Having accompanied her husband for twelve years to a succession of similar towns, Mrs. Bentley has already known Main Street and makes no gesture of optimism, yet for both Carol and Mrs. Bentley, the human dimension has been dwarfed and the musty environment of the prairie house becomes a false icon for the immensity of nature. Although Mrs. Bentley has a voice she is nameless, a shadow of her husband’s surname into which, at least in the beginning, she psychically escapes, while Carol, who refuses to become a shadow of Will Kennicott, attempts a physical escape after abortive efforts to remake Gopher Prairie, only to be drawn back again, not by Kennicott but by a desire to make peace with the prairie environment in its human and natural aspects. At the duck hunt near the novel’s conclusion, she accepts initiation into the customs of Gopher Prairie, becoming a member of the clan, “a woman of Main Street,” while still proclaiming at novel’s end her psychic freedom: “I’ve never excused my failures by sneering at my aspirations.” Finally Mrs. Bentley also reconciles the human and the natural dimensions, thereby laying to rest a problem with which she has struggled throughout the novel. Ross’s *As for Me and My House* is an overlay of two circles, the one of space, *Horizon*, in the words of Mary Austin “the incalculable blue ring of sky meeting earth, which is the source of experience,” and the other of time, the span of a year. Mrs. Bentley traces the cycle of the seasons and, in the midst of the drought-ridden Great Depression, perceives nature as signifier for human futility, until she breaks the cycle by taking the deceased Judith’s illegitimate child as her own and confronting her husband Philip with her knowledge that he is the father. “I’ve fought it out with myself and
won at last." Although success in both instances is equivocal, Carol and Mrs. Bentley eventually distinguish between mindless escape and mindful action.

The irony of stifling enclosure in midst of enormous space drives our six characters out of doors, where they respond variously to the physical and mental landscape. The prairie environment itself sends contradictory, often polarized, messages: on the one hand the nurturing earth mother and on the other, masculine power and distance. According to Sara Brooks Sundberg’s report on the “Rural Home Survey” of 1922, the average Manitoba farm woman in the survey “lived twenty-seven miles from the nearest hospital, eight miles from the closest doctor and seven miles from the nearest market.” Well into the twentieth century, prairie women were, and often still are, daily reminded of space as an obstacle to be endured or overcome, a function of everyday experience that translates into literature as the female quest-conquest for and of space, an Alexandra Bergson or a Hagar Shipley or an Anna Dawe.

Published a half century apart, O Pioneers! and The Stone Angel revise the traditional quest hero into the persons of Alexandra and Hagar, both of whom struggle with nature and prevail, although differently. Two only daughters of virtually nonexistent mothers, and both sprung, it seems, almost full blown from the sides if not the heads of their fathers, they are each characterized by isolation and strength of will. Whereas the bare struggle for physical survival has been won when The Stone Angel opens, in the exposition of O Pioneers! it is still in progress, so that the immediate challenges confronting Alexandra and Hagar differ. Because John Bergson is dying and the family’s situation is at best precarious, he displays confidence in Alexandra by putting her in charge of other family members, while Jason Currie exhibits pride in his daughter by sending her to finishing school in Toronto, where she learns all manner of things useless to life in the prairie environment. Therefore Alexandra’s task is to perform and Hagar’s to confront the will of the father. In either case, little help is to be had from the mother, as the eyes of Alexandra’s mother are turned backward to the old country, and Hagar’s mother is represented only by the sightless stone angel, also an import from Europe. Alexandra spends her youth creating a place, the farm that she must defend eventually against her own brothers, while Hagar spends her life seeking a place, only to find it in herself, never in “the Shipley place” or even the Vancouver house that passes to her son Marvin and his wife. The violent death of the “favorite son” (Alexandra’s brother Emil and Hagar’s son John) signifies in each case the protagonist’s inner struggle with unresolved passion. Final reconciliation occurs for Alexandra through the substitution of the lover, Carl Linstrum, for the dead brother, but The Stone Angel is the beginning of a five-book saga and therefore its denouement is more tentative, Hagar’s aged voice in the wilderness anticipating the later Diviners. Unlike Laurence’s The Stone Angel, Willa Cather’s O Pioneers! brushing precipitously close to romanticism in its resolution, yet both novels establish female protagonists who fight lonely battles and, aided only by the ancient shamans of these novels, Ivar and Mr. Lees, emerge both credible and heroic.

For evident reasons, prairie characters of both genders tend to be solitary figures, yet isolation is for the female character exacerbated by the circumstances of gender. In the words of Kroetsch’s Anna Dawe, “women are not supposed to have stories.” The disappointing obscurity of the female story is suggested by Margaret Atwood in Surfacing, when the narrator who is on a quest to discover the truth about her missing father scans her deceased mother’s diary for clues to the past, only to discover that her mother’s notes are mostly routine comments on the weather. In the shadow of the sightless and voiceless stone angel, the female character turns to messages that have been deposited by the father.

For Anna Dawe, this means William Dawe’s field notes, which, as Anna reports in the exposition of Badlands, she and her mother studied
together, reading “not only the words but the squashed mosquitoes, the spiders’ legs, the stains of thick black coffee, even the blood.” Indeed we are told that to William Dawe, who styled himself as a man of action, words were an inconvenient necessity. Moreover William Dawe’s quest for dinosaur remains signifies a still more distant and inscrutable past. Therefore Anna must interpret the cryptic notebooks and in so doing endow them with a life of her own imaginative making until the tale and her commentary on the tale merge in her personal recreation of the father’s adventure. When Anna decides to find “that other Anna,” about whom she has read in the field notes and of whom she is the namesake, and to embark with her on their own adventure that eventually leads them to the headwaters of the Red Deer River, she enters and transforms the story of the father. A male adventure tale becomes a female adventure tale, the male story wafted away like the old grizzly bear in the helicopter net, “his prick and testicles hung over us like a handful of dead-ripe berries. Only then can the two Annas throw away, commit back to nature, the field notes and photographs that each has carried for reminders of the past, and “not once look back.”

Opening up new mythic space through stories that do not lend themselves to established interpretations, Robert Kroetsch exemplifies his critical eclecticism by means of what David Creelman has called his “decentering” of myth. By putting patriarchy off balance, Badlands carnivalizes and transforms the traditional gender relationships, not only father/daughter but lover/mistress as well. Yet a similar effect results from a more conventionally written novel when Mrs. Bentley decides to adopt the son of her husband’s mistress. Both Anna and Mrs. Bentley have spent their years of biological fertility in waiting for some sign from the father/husband/lover, some action toward them, only to experience egocentricity and indifference. Anna and Mrs. Bentley are not freed by William Dawe or Philip Bentley but by their own actions, which release them from enclosure, and certainly in Anna’s instance, from dependence. Although Anna is more emphatically freed, Mrs. Bentley expresses her transformed relationship to the male other in the enigmatic remark that resolves As for Me and My House. “Sometimes you won’t know which of us is which,” says Philip Bentley of his son. “I want it so,” she answers, and in so saying declares herself protagonist as well as persona, thereby upsetting the conventional expectation, Philip as subject/object.

Robert Kroetsch’s deconstruction of patriarchal mythology in the conclusion of Badlands, as Dorothy Seaton has observed, not only counters but demolishes the male discourses of that novel. Anna Dawe’s narrative therefore is enabled to center and fuse as one subject the two Annas, pilgrim and native, much as the last ritual exchange of Scottish plaid pin and Métis hunting knife in Laurence’s Diviners performs this function for that novel and for the entire saga that The Stone Angel initiates. The dying thoughts of Hagar Shipley are focused on choice as sign for identity: if I can choose, then I exist. In prairie novels, the central female characters respond to the environment by making decisions that assert choice as the opposite of stereotype, openness in contradistinction to the closed system of patriarchy. Both Antonia and Alexandra defy stereotypes in their selection of lifestyles, including their affinity for outdoor work and refusal to be categorized by gender. “I do not care that your grandmother say it makes me like a man,” Jim Burden quotes Antonia as saying.

Prairie women overstep boundaries and are in that sense unbound. Carol Kennicott, who is as much an immigrant to the prairie as Antonia or Alexandra, withdraws from Gopher Prairie in order to return to it, prepared to compromise with Main Street and even derive some pleasure from its folkways. Yet of her infant daughter she says, “Think what that baby will see and meddle with before she dies in the year 2000!” Much as Carol finally acknowledges Main Street’s right to exist, Mrs. Bentley eventually is empowered by the prairie
space that she has sometimes regarded as dismal and daunting. Struggling with her awareness that Philip has fathered Judith’s child, she goes for a walk in the prairie on Christmas Eve, and feeling that the natural world is conscious of her presence, imagines herself as a new pioneer. “It gave me a lost, elemental feeling, as if I were the first of my kind ever to venture here.”

This centering of the female character, which places the male character in the position of other, distances the reader from the patriarch and allows new territory for interpretation of both genders. Among my selected prairie novels, only Jason Currie and John Bergson, as figures from the past, are stereotypical patriarchs. William Dawe as presented by Anna is mimetic and comedic, while Carl Linstrum must replicate John Bergson’s frontier quest by escaping to Alaska, only to return again to Alexandra, and Jim Burden, as Robert Kroetsch has pointed out, rides about the prairie on his trains. Traditional masculinity is by no means valorized in other male characters of these books. Mrs. Bentley allows Philip to do carpenter work, knowing that he is no Christ figure, that “He hasn’t the hands for it,” much as Carol Kennicott forgives her husband’s efforts to play act the role of family patriarch, as in the breakfast argument over their son Hugh’s “education.” “Kennicott had forgotten it in ten minutes; and she forgot it—this time.”

On the other hand, maternal voicelessness has assured that matriarchal traditions are not carried forward with the same set of rules as patriarchy. Hagar, Antonia, and Alexandra are equivocal as matriarchal figures. “Pride was my wilderness,” says Hagar, a wilderness to which she deliberately returns to discover that she is no longer Hagar the outcast but angel/mother to her son Marvin’s Jacob. “I will not let thee go, except thou bless me,” says Marvin to the dying Hagar. In similar fashion, Jim Burden must return to Antonia’s house in order to be fulfilled, and Carl Linstrum finds his ultimate adventure not in Alaska but in union with Alexandra. “Well, keep your bloody paper horses,” exclaims Hagar Shipley’s husband, Bram, who is mystified by the mere drawings of horses that his wife covets. The awkwardness of the male character in the presence of the female marks the shifting ground of gender relationships.

Arguably such early twentieth century writers as Cather and Lewis are inspired by influences different from those motivating Kroetsch and even Ross or Laurence. Realism dominates the earlier work, overlaid with vestiges of, and in the case of Lewis reactions against, nineteenth century romanticism. Yet within the diverse milieux of Ross, Laurence, and Kroetsch are present, among other operants, also Cather and Lewis. This is evident in the intertextuality of As for Me and My House, which appeared twenty-one years after Main Street was published and the main streets of North America had become synecdochal for a lifestyle. Not only is Sinclair Ross aware of Sinclair Lewis’s novel but Mrs. Bentley has read it too, so that the frequent references to Main Street in the Ross novel, abstracted from any reference to Lewis, or for that matter to Horizon, are credible and serve to extend the scope of Mrs. Bentley’s gaze beyond the confines of one prairie town. No doubt Lewis’s Main Street will be on the shelves of Philip Bentley’s bookstore.

The notion that human dimensions are transformed by encounters with new space finds an emphatic portrayal in the female characters of prairie fiction, yet regional literature, however much it may transcend its roots, depends upon societal agreement to the validity of the region itself. Faulkner is a Southern writer because of public belief in the authenticity of the South as a distinct region. In the first half of the twentieth century, Cather and to some extent Lewis contributed to a midwestern regionalism less clearly defined than Faulkner’s South and more transient, positioned between seaboard colonialism and the West recently won. Cather, in the later novel Death Comes for the Archbishop, followed the logic of this progression by turning to the American Southwest and,
incidentally, abandoning the female protagonist. In comparison, the prevalent Canadian use of the term prairie to describe North America's central corridor embraces stable specifics of geography that have inspired fiction on both sides of the border, and the centered female character of the Canadian prairie genre continues to thrive, for example, in the novels of Sharon Butala and Aritha Van Herk and the short fiction of Edna Alford.

Whatever books are included in the prairie genre, the novels of Cather, Lewis, Ross, Laurence, and Kroetsch have helped to define the consciousness of a region and are distinguished not only by their reference to physical space but by the positioning of the female character within that space. The westering woman responds to the environment by understanding herself as explorer, as pioneer. Yet as Helen Buss has observed in “Who are you, Mrs Bentley?”, the woman who would “fly free” does so from within the structure of patriarchy and must therefore subvert the rules of patriarchy in order to achieve her goals. By centering the female character, endowing her either with a direct voice (Mrs. Bentley) or a mediated voice (Ántonia), prairie novels upset the expectations of traditional discourse and open a door to new perceptions of gender.

NOTES

10. Moodie, Roughing It (note 7 above), p. 14; Austin, Earth Horizon (note 8 above) p. 16.
18. Ibid., pp. 2, 269, 270.
23. Lewis, Main Street (note 4 above), p. 450; Ross, As for Me (note 12 above), p. 148.