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ONE OF OURS AS AMERICAN NATURALISM

JOHN J. MURPHY

In a comment to Edmund Wilson, Ernest Hemingway ridiculed the war scenes in Willa Cather's *One of Ours* (1922) and implied the general inferiority of her effort: "Look at *One of Ours*," he wrote, complaining about the frivolity of the American reading public. "[Pulitzer] Prize, big sale, people taking it seriously. You were in the war weren't you? Wasn't that last scene in the lines wonderful? Do you know where it came from? The battle scene in *Birth of a Nation*. I identified episode after episode, Catherized. Poor woman she had to get her war experience somewhere."¹ Hemingway was right; Cather's warfare is often trite stuff, but that is not really a major problem, for *One of Ours* is hardly a battle novel. However, Cather can be faulted for underdeveloping her material, belaboring the obvious, violating verisimilitude through "message" dialogue, and allowing her feelings about the war to invade character consciousness. Yet, as the effort of a

mature novelist, *One of Ours* must have another side that makes it worth considering. To avoid understating the weaknesses of the novel, I will review them before suggesting a positive interpretation.

Frequently Cather's failure to develop her material takes the form of summarizing rather than approximating what is going on in her characters' minds. For example, when her hero Claude Wheeler is forced to return to Temple College we are told, "he knew that he was going back to the wrong school, that he was wasting both time and money. If he had to do with strangers, he told himself, he could take up his case and fight for it. He could not assert himself against his father or mother, but he could be bold enough with the rest of the world."² Although we learn significant things about Claude, we feel cheated of character development here; we remain distant, outside, unable to share his experiences. Cather concludes the passage with a question: "Yet, if this were true, why did he continue to live with the tiresome Chapins?" However, Claude seems so remote at this point that we are not sure if he is asking himself this, or if Cather is asking us.

Related to this kind of failure are recurring suggestive inclusions that mystify rather than

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illuminate. For example, after Claude bayonets a dandified German officer and dismisses the picture of a pale, dreamy-eyed young man in his locket as that of a kid brother, Claude's more sophisticated buddy, David Gerhardt, glances at it "with a disdainful expression," but protects Claude from the obvious truth about the officer. Claude then notices that David "looked at him as if he were very much pleased with him,—looked, indeed, as if something pleasant had happened in this room" (p. 367). Claude wonders if David is pleased because he had displayed nerve in going in after the sniper, and we are left wondering also. Was it because of Claude's courage or because of his innocence? Cather's subsequent comment only adds to our confusion: "Claude had often observed that when David had an interesting idea, or a strong twinge of recollection, it made him, for the moment, rather heartless" (p. 368). A few pages later, during one of the rare opportunities Cather's soldiers have to fornicate, David comments, "Do you realize, Claude, you and I are the only men in the Company who haven't got engaged?" (p. 374). How are we to respond to these comments? Do they tell us something about the David-Claude relationship? *One of Ours* is, after all, the story of the rejection of marriage and heterosexual love for the violence of war and for friendship with a member of one's own sex.³ Like Jim Burden and Niel Herbert, Claude fears sex. He had been scared away by the advances of college date Peachy Millmore, and we are told of his "sharp disgust for sensuality. He had an almost Hippolytean pride in candour" (p. 51) that is "whiteness" (in the obsolete sense) and "unstained purity." Including but failing to exploit such incidents as that of the German officer is a fault; "to touch and pass on" would work in a book like *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, but *One of Ours* is a different kind of book.⁴

On the other hand, Cather frequently overwrites in this novel. In the second section she renders a lively picture of the great harvest, when men, horses, and machines strive in a gigantic effort under a blazing sun. It is one of

the few heroic contexts in Nebraska for Claude: after strenuous work in the fields by day, he "slept like the heroes of old" (p. 137). Meanwhile the war, a similarly heroic cooperative effort, is going forward in Europe and will make Claude "like the hero of the Odyssey" (p. 209). However, Cather mars her admirable juxtaposition of harvesting details and war news by having Claude's farmer friend Ernest Havel label the war as "'the harvest of all that has been planted'" (p. 142). Putting such saws in the mouths of characters destroys verisimilitude of dialogue as well, as when Mademoiselle de Courcy declares to Claude, "'This war has taught us all how little the made things matter. Only the feeling matters'" (p. 329).⁵

This excess leads to serious problems when Cather allows development of character consciousness to serve her own feelings about the war. Sometimes she invents characters as an excuse to make her points, as when the old French shopwoman ruminates for two pages (pp. 277–78) on the disastrous effects of the American invasion "on everybody's integrity." It is worse when major characters become victims of diatribes—for example, when the account of Mrs. Wheeler's final estimate of her dead son begins to embrace rather too obviously Cather's own postwar disillusionment (pp. 389–90). Then there are those insipid passages one wants to pencil out: after a little French boy gazes at Claude and then distresses him by running off, Claude mutters, "'Unless I can learn to talk to the *children* of this country, . . . I'll go home!'" (p. 279). Cather seems to have needed a good editor; the irony is that she herself was a good editor, and that while she was cluttering *One of Ours* with excessive unfiltered feeling and opinion, she was writing the essay "The Novel *Démeublé*," expressing a literary creed of simplification and synthesis.

One gets impatient with *One of Ours* primarily because its author is Willa Cather. Such excesses and confusions as I have detailed are common enough in significant works of some other American novelists, especially the naturalists. For example, in novels like Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Frank Norris's

McTeague, characterization is often violated by diatribes on the biological and moral evolution of man and on contemporary social conditions. These books also contain more than their share of embarrassing dialogue, obvious symbolism, and underdeveloped situations. In *One of Ours*, Cather, like the naturalists, was dealing with contemporary problems, with material unsimplified by time. Perhaps this novel should be considered as her experiment in turn-of-the-century realism and naturalism, and as a touchstone by which we may evaluate her achievement in more characteristic works.

One of Ours is Cather's fullest rendition of the Nebraska that preoccupied her all her life; like a faithful realist, in the Nebraska section she wrote about her native place and the people and events she had known.⁶ In the war section ("The Voyage of the Anchises" and "Bidding the Eagles of the West Fly On"), she turned from the commonplace world to extraordinary events reported to her and to settings that were less familiar. In this novel more than in others, she explored character controlled by external forces and success and failure as results of circumstance more than of character.⁷

We must not condemn the abundantly furnished setting of *One of Ours* on the grounds that Cather expressed a desire to "throw all the furniture out of the window" and because we prefer *My Ántonia* and *A Lost Lady*.⁸ Cather made an important distinction between useless clutter and functional setting in the following passage from "The Novel *Démeublé*":

Tolstoi was almost as great a lover of material things as Balzac. . . . But there is this determining difference: the clothes, the dishes, the haunting interiors of those old Moscow houses, are always so much a part of the emotions of the people that they are perfectly synthesized; they seem to exist, not so much in the author's mind, as in the emotional penumbra of the characters themselves. When it is fused like this, literalness ceases to be literalness—it is merely part of the experience.⁹

Like Tolstoi's Moscow setting, the Nebraska setting in *One of Ours* functions beyond

surface verisimilitude; it is, in fact, the manifestation of Claude's imprisoning environment.

On the surface, we have in *One of Ours* such a thorough and interesting genre picture of life in Nebraska during the second decade of this century that the later Nebraska novels pale by comparison as pictures of the place. From the first page, where Claude opens his eyes to sunlight streaming through curtainless windows, the minutiae are overwhelming. Claude tries to wash in the bowls of two porcelain stands in the washroom, but they are dark with sediment from alkaline water, and he uses a tin basin. He then cleans his mud-crusted Ford car, and drinks weak coffee with his griddle cakes while staring at his father's rumpled shirt bulging carelessly over his belt. Claude proceeds to town in a clean, colored shirt, visits his brother Bayliss, who functions in a little glass cage with a plow catalog handy, and then joins his friend Ernest Havel for beer from bottles cooled in a creek. His brother Ralph polishes new ox-blood shoes with a pocket handkerchief and, while emptying the syrup pitcher over his cakes, discusses the new dairy separator, then dismantled into a series of metal funnels. The Wheeler cellar is full of objects such as batteries, bicycles, and typewriters. Claude constructs a swinging plank shelf there to keep Mahailey's vegetables from the rats.

When Claude takes the train home from Lincoln at Christmas, a bundle of little spruce trees is flung off near the freight office, and the locomotive steam curls against the sky in a deep-violet stain. Chubby Mrs. Voight, the German proprietress of the restaurant near the station, wears frizzled bangs and serves roast chicken and sweet potatoes smothered in gravy. Claude rests his feet on a lead pipe footrest and his elbows on a shiny brown counter containing a pyramid of tough-looking bun sandwiches under a glass globe. He visits the Erlichs in a two-day shirt with a broken-edged collar, and when he accompanies Mrs. Erlich to the recital, her purse contains a lorgnette, a powder box, a handkerchief, smelling salts, and a silver box of peppermint drops, in case she might cough. Mrs. Erlich does her hair over her ears

in two little horns and wears nose glasses over which she peers; the Erlich best-room has many windows and bookcases, papers and boxes of tobacco, and a plaster bust of Byron used as a tie rack. The Wheeler upstairs room, by contrast, has an old carpet, faded chairs, and a secretary book case, and spotty engravings from *Pilgrim's Progress* hang on the wall.

More than in *My Ántonia*, Cather evokes the Lincoln setting and the bustle of the University of Nebraska, notorious in the eyes of Preacher Weldon for athletics, frivolity, and corrupt fraternities. A football game is described in some detail; silly Annabelle Chapin, bedecked in Temple College colors, is cheering and sounding a toy horn from the sidelines. We learn that Claude studies on trolley cars and follow him to the University Library, where female art students whisper and read together in their enclosure. Also, there are more factual details of the land and of farming in *One of Ours* than in either *My Ántonia* or *O Pioneers!* Claude plows, husks, and hauls under a hard-polished sky; he observes burned pastures and sprouting alfalfa, dry cornfields and endless plow furrows, cottonwoods on the point of bursting, twisters of dust rising over brown acres where the earth has been harrowed into powder, larks singing on the fence posts, and heavy horses in rows. From the train, gray homesteads unroll before him "with their stripped, dry cornfields, and the great ploughed stretches where the winter wheat was asleep. A starry sprinkling of snow lay like hoar-frost along the crumbly ridges between the furrows" (p. 33).

Unlike those in the other novels, land and sky descriptions in *One of Ours* are prosaic, lacking the cosmic feeling and cadence of, say, the opening sections of *My Ántonia*. The difference in method between these two novels becomes obvious when Claude's evening meeting with Ernest in the fields is read alongside Jim's farewell scene with Ántonia in "The Pioneer Woman's Story." In the former, the sun

hung above the stubble, all milky and rosy with the heat, like the image of a sun re-

flected in grey water. In the east the full moon had just risen, and its thin silver surface was flushed with pink until it looked exactly like the setting sun. Except for the place each occupied in the heavens, Claude could not have told which was which. They rested upon opposite rims of the world, two bright shields, and regarded each other,—as if they, too, had met by appointment. [P. 141]

After giving this display cursory attention, Claude begins a spirited discussion with his friend about the war in Europe (for which the shields comparison prepares us). The structure of the sentences and the rather clinical feeling of terms like "exactly," "appointment," and "occupied" keep the description factual, whereas Jim Burden's description of a similar phenomenon contains evocative references to "ghost-moon," "luminaries," and "great golden globe." Significantly, the reality of Jim's present situation is transcended as the scene takes on a cosmic dimension:

In that singular light every little tree and shock of wheat, every sunflower stalk and clump of snow-on-the-mountain, drew itself up high and pointed; the very clods and furrows in the fields seemed to stand up sharply. I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there. . . . As I went back alone over that familiar road I could almost believe that a boy and girl ran along beside me, as our shadows used to do, laughing and whispering to each other in the grass.¹⁰

In *One of Ours*, land and sky fail to relieve the trap of environment that clamps down as never before when, under the glare of an acetylene lamp, Wheeler reveals that Claude must drop out of college to manage the farm while he and Ralph establish a ranch in Colorado. There follows a feverish effort to collect furniture, clothes, guns, saddles, books, a phonograph, and other things for Ralph's new place. Fearing that the Wheeler farm will be completely despoiled, Mahailey hides her

pickled peaches and ancestral Virginia quilts of log-cabin, blazing-star, and laurel-leaf patterns. The seemingly excessive and irrelevant details here and elsewhere function on various levels. They stifle Claude and, like the interiors previously described, reflect character "penumbra"—in this instance the materialism of Ralph and his father and the vulnerability Claude shares with Mahailey. Like his hogs in the blizzard, poor Claude is buried alive and struggles unsuccessfully for an outlet in marriage and then successfully in war. In the Denver scene opening the second book, as he observes the Rockies, realizes that the West no longer provides escape, and clenches his fists in arrested action, we understand the crisis proportions of his situation: "Here the sky was like a lid shut down over the world" (p. 104). Release for him will come through violence, not domesticity.

The failure of Claude's marriage and his rejection of domestic life are anticipated in the building of his little house. Its unusually deep cellar suggests a grave, its structural skeleton a prison. The sense of failure settles over Claude long before Enid locks him out on their wedding night; it is evident in the poignant scene where he takes Gladys Farmer through the unfinished rooms, realizing the opportunity he has missed with this kindred spirit. After Enid abandons him for missionary work, the closing of the house exactly midway through the novel indicates the abnegation of the conventional. Covering the overstuffed furniture and beds and rolling up the carpets, Claude realizes "how inherently mournful and ugly such objects were, when the feeling that had made them precious no longer existed! The debris of human life was more worthless and ugly than the dead and decaying things in nature. Rubbish . . . junk . . . his mind could not picture anything that so exposed and condemned all the dreary, weary, ever-repeated actions by which life is continued from day to day" (pp. 192-93).

This passage is crucial because Cather's focus now begins to shift from the familiar and commonplace (the average man in average circumstances) to an adventure that "took a little

fellow from a little town, gave him an air and a swagger, a life like a movie-film,—and then a death like the rebel angels" (p. 319). Like the bird fluttering wildly among the partitions in the unfinished house until it finds a window to escape into the dusk, Claude is trapped by his father, his wife, himself most of all, until the war conveniently provides an outlet. In turning from the confines of realism and, as Norris had pleaded, applying romance to contemporary life, Cather accomplished on a large scale what she had tried in "Paul's Case," where the oppressive life of Cordelia Street, with its dripping spigots, grimy sink tub, ugly yellow wallpaper, creaking bureau, greasy plush collar-box, and picture of Calvin is replaced by an enchanted world, a bewildering medley of color and music, silk garments, and flowers behind glass (no more New York than Claude's war is war) in a thrilling rendezvous with death.¹¹

"The Voyage of the Anchises" and "Bidding the Eagles of the West Fly On" are substantially different from the Nebraska section in method and content. From the outset, as Claude views shipbuilding from the train approaching the New Jersey shore, the effect is unreal; the activity along the shore is strangely "like a dream" (p. 230). At the beginning of the voyage, the profile of Manhattan looks "unsubstantial and illusionary" in the "opal-coloured" vapor, until a sudden clearing reveals golden towers and a bronze idol in the sea (pp. 232-34). The colors Cather employs throughout these books are significantly painterly to suggest the illusory nature of Claude's escape; they are bizarre, startling, more brilliant, and more impressionistic than the genre coloring common in the Nebraska books. The purple sun sets into a violet sea; the yellow sky comes down like a gold curtain on dark blue stone water with pale green robin's-egg smears. In the pearl-colored tints of the morning, the "dream" ships escorting the fleet are soft and iridescent as the insides of sea shells. When there are deaths at sea from the outbreak of influenza, glittering indigo and purple walls of water become mysterious burial places. In dreamlike silence, Corporal Tannhauser's body

slips into a lead-colored chasm without a splash. Cather's sea during the voyage frequently recalls Stephen Crane's in *The Open Boat*.

Since the war is a violent context, such dream pieces are alternated with grotesque sequences, as when the horror of Tannhauser's death is described: "His congested eyeballs were rolled back in his head and only the yellowish whites were visible. His mouth was open and his tongue hung out at one side" (p. 256). This prepares us for details like the constantly reappearing hand sticking out of the trench, the corpses buzzing with flies that invade the mouths and ears of living soldiers, the gas from decaying bodies bubbling through the muddy swimming hole when Claude dislodges the helmet at the bottom, and the shooting of the little girl by the German sniper—peacefully eating chocolate given her by Sergeant Hicks, she throws up her hands, runs a few steps, and falls, "blood and brains oozing out in her yellow hair" (p. 365). Similarly grotesque are the portraits of the psychopath Phillips, the terrified little Belgian girl, the consumptive mother nursing her bloodless baby, and the old priest's niece who shoots herself through the temples because of her love for a Bavarian officer.

Framing these horrors are bucolic scenes rendered impressionistically. They depict everyday life within the sound of the guns and serve as idyllic counterparts of the domestic life rejected in Nebraska. For example, dinner at the Jouberts' is a cheerful, garden affair beneath a cherry tree (the kind of tree Claude's father chopped down) after rain has brightened the scene:

The cherry tree shook down bright drops on the tablecloth when the breeze stirred. The mother cat dozed on the red cushion in Madame Joubert's sewing chair, and the pigeons fluttered down to snap up earthworms that wriggled in the wet sand. The shadow of the house fell over the dinner-table, but the tree-tops stood up in full sunlight, and the yellow sun poured on the earth wall and the cream-coloured roses. Their petals, ruffled by the rain, gave out a wet-spicy smell. [P. 302]

The scene at the Red Cross installation where Claude meets Mademoiselle de Courcy is similar in effect, except for the intrusion of American items. Mademoiselle's storeroom contains "rows of coffee tins, condensed milk, canned vegetables and meat, all the American trade names [Claude] knew so well; names which seemed doubly familiar and 'reliable' here, so far from home" (p. 328). These items return us to Nebraska and make the contrast between the two sides of *One of Ours* quite clear—one realistic, the other naturalistic and romantic.

There is significant textual evidence throughout *One of Ours* to support a naturalistic interpretation. Not only is the novel pessimistic in its view of American culture, but it is based on the assumption that man is controlled by outside forces and has little opportunity for choice. John Randall's observation that Claude "is not of the sort to make things happen . . . he is at a far remove from those whirling dynamos of energy, Alexandra and Ántonia" suggests that Cather's hero is a victim and that his failure might be more a question of circumstance than of character.¹² Being raised a Wheeler has made him awkward, insecure, and sensitive to ridicule, and it has driven him to violence as a recourse. His constant bitterness about the effects of his upbringing is particularly obvious in his relationships with more accomplished and worldly types. When David Gerhardt plays the violin at the Fleury's, for example, Claude is smitten with envy and "felt that a man might have been made of him, but nobody had taken the trouble to do it; tongue-tied, foot-tied, hand-tied. If one were born into this world like a bear cub or a bull calf, one could only paw and upset things, break and destroy, all one's life" (pp. 355-56). This Wheeler curse is merely aggravated by a cluster of outside events: the acquiring of the Colorado ranch, forcing Claude to quit college and manage the Nebraska farm, "a trap . . . sprung on him" (p. 60); the blizzard collapsing the hog-house roof and killing the hogs, which "humiliated him . . . because they had been left in his charge" (p. 88); and the bolting of the mules, "the authors of his fate" (p. 215),

injuring him and making him vulnerable to Enid's attentions.

Both Claude's perceptiveness and blindness give perspective to his character and clarify Cather's theme. He is clearly aware of some of the circumstances determining him, "that his energy, was spent in resisting unalterable conditions, and in unavailing efforts to subdue his own nature" (p. 90). He feels that he, like Gladys Farmer, is among the children of the moon, "with their unappeased longings and futile dreams, . . . a finer race than the children of the sun" (pp. 178-79), but doomed to search "the world outside" for something "to answer to [their] own feelings" (p. 134) and to be at the mercy of people like his father and his brother Bayliss. Bad luck, like the black barn cat, clings to Claude, who lacks the ability to shake it off: "Everything he touched went wrong under his hand—always had" (p. 189). The war is the outside event that brings reprieve; it provides "the right road at last" and a sense of "fateful purpose" (pp. 265-66). Perhaps the war is the best course for Claude, but its apparent rectitude and worthiness as the answer to his feelings, "giving one a chance to correct one's ideas about life and to plan the future" (p. 259), is Cather's great irony. The futility of Claude's scheme to remain in France after the war, his prayer for David's life, and his conviction that he has become a leader of men contributes to the overwhelming pessimism of *One of Ours*. "There was no chance for the kind of life he wanted at home, where people were always buying and selling, building and pulling down," he muses near the end. "He had begun to believe that the Americans were a people of shallow emotions" (p. 345). There was no chance *anywhere* for the kind of life Claude wanted; he was doomed to share with his countrymen the severe limitation he detected in them.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Wilson's *The Shores of Light*

(New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1952), p. 118.

2. *One of Ours* (New York: Random House, Vintage, 1971), p. 29. Subsequent references are to this edition and appear within the text.

3. See Stanley Cooperman, *World War I and the American Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967), pp. 129-37, for a discussion of erotic war motivation in *One of Ours*.

4. Willa Cather, "On *Death Comes for the Archbishop*," in *On Writing* (New York: Knopf, 1949), p. 9.

5. Cather's soldier dialogue is also poor. When Claude tells Colonel Scott that his men will appreciate being given "the nastiest bit of line" to hold, the Colonel responds, "They'd better, by thunder!" (p. 378). At another time, Lieutenant Bird expresses his disgust by exclaiming, "Pshaw!" (p. 240). Certainly we cannot blame Griffith's silent film for such lapses.

6. See Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather*, rev. ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), pp. 14-16, 42-43, 57, 120, on Cather's sources for the Wheelers, Mahailey, the Erlichs, and the Royce mill.

7. I am using George Perkins's "Introduction: The Form and Content of American Realism," in *Realistic American Short Fiction*, ed. by Perkins (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1973), pp. 1-17, for my working definitions of realism and naturalism. According to Perkins, naturalism is distinguished from realism in that it eschews the commonplace and embraces a deterministic philosophy.

8. Willa Cather, "The Novel *Démeublé*," in *On Writing*, p. 42.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

10. *My Ántonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Sentry, 1961), pp. 221-23.

11. See Frank Norris, "A Plea for Romantic Fiction," in "Criticism and Fiction" by William Dean Howells and "The Responsibilities of the Novelist" by Frank Norris (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), pp. 279-82.

12. John H. Randall III, *The Landscape and the Looking Glass: Willa Cather's Search for Value* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), p. 181.