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NEBRASKA NATURALISM IN JAMESIAN FRAMES

JOHN J. MURPHY

So much has been written about Willa Cather and the influence of the classics and later European literature that one sometimes forgets the American literary climate in which she developed.¹ It was a postromantic age of realism, epitomized by William Dean Howells's attempt to limit fiction to normal characters in commonplace situations, which would make of it, as Cather complained, a "sort of young lady's illusion preserver."² But the new breed of "naturalists," Cather's contemporaries, were in revolt against Howells and his more accomplished contemporary, Henry James, and advocated a return to romance without the chivalric trappings of Walter Scott and Dumas *père*. Frank Norris, the most outspoken of a group that included Jack London, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser, pleaded for a serious response in his pointedly anti-Howells, anti-James statement against so-called realistic

portrayals of the commonplace ("the drama of a broken tea cup, the tragedy of a walk down the block").³ Romance would stress the abnormal in characterization and plot, treating American social problems, the dwellings of the poor, the outcasts, and so on, and would not be restricted to the norm of experience. *McTeague*, the 1899 novel in which Norris tried to fulfill these social responsibilities, was praised by Cather as a "great book," a powerful depiction of "brute strength and brute passions," a "searching analysis of the degeneration of . . . two souls"; she detected his method as Zola's, "perhaps the only truthful literary method of dealing with that part of society which environment and heredity hedge about like the walls of a prison."⁴

One need only review Cather's early story "The Clemency of the Court" (1893) to recognize her penchant for all the trappings of our naturalistic school: the effects of environment, evolutionary theory (the association of beast and man, and the reduction of a human to a bestial level), and adventure punctuated with revolting details (the killing of the dog and the farmer, and the tale of a prisoner in Russia committing suicide by biting deep into his arm, tearing open the veins with his teeth, and

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bleeding to death).⁵ A story like "On the Divide" three years later (1896) is similarly within the revolutionary, anti-Howellsian conventions of the age; it depicts a Norwegian giant who carries off a screaming woman, drinks himself into demonic stupors, and performs suicidal rituals in an oppressively hot, treeless environment where "it causes no sensation . . . when a Dane is found swinging to his own windmill tower, and most of the Poles, after they have become too careless and discouraged to shave themselves keep their razors to cut their throats with." It is appropriate that Willa Cather wrote like this, knowing her independence of mind, her masculine bent, and her introduction to rather primitive conditions when she came to Nebraska a century ago at the age of nine. (One recalls the incident recorded by Mildred Bennett about Willa helping the local doctor during the amputation of a boy's leg.)⁶

But her mature fiction reveals another side of Willa Cather. As William Curtin has noted, the fondness for romance she shared with the young naturalists "put her at odds with William Dean Howells."⁷ Yet she acknowledged his greatness, despite his mildness, and his ability to "make very common little men in sack coats" live, even if he could not create very great ones.⁸ She defended Henry James's as well as Howells's "theories as to the delicacy and decency of literature," and developed for James a reverence that might seem inconsistent with her admiration for the naturalists.⁹ The spell of James materialized after 1896, when, although she lamented his failure to address modern society, modern "degeneracy," and the new woman, she expressed admiration for the perfect control of his art, "as calm and as subtle as the music of Mozart."¹⁰ She had earlier distinguished James with Hawthorne and Poe as our only masters of pure prose, and in a 1913 interview in the *Philadelphia Record* she described James, Mark Twain, and Sarah Orne Jewett as her "favorite American writers."¹¹ In 1911 she attempted in *Alexander's Bridge* to write a Jamesian novel with drawing rooms and clever people; "Henry James and Mrs.

Wharton," she confessed, "were our most interesting novelists."¹²

In fact, the influence of the artistry and perspective of Henry James, directly and through Jewett, defines Cather's approach to her material, an approach that is somewhat contrapuntal to the influences of the young naturalists and her own Nebraska experience. Edward and Lillian Bloom explain the approach Cather shared with James as the "fusion of moral idea and physical reality," and as fictional shaping appropriate to "the inner experience which is the only justifiable substance of fiction."¹³ James appealed to the young Cather's need for cultivation; she said of reading James, "You may not be greatly moved at any time but the most respectable part of your mentality must be awakened, refreshed, interested, satisfied."¹⁴

My thesis is that Willa Cather used the romantic, adventurous material called for by the naturalists to rescue the nation's fiction from the tragedy of the broken teacup and the adventure of an afternoon call, but that she enclosed it, framed it, and viewed it from the Jamesian perspective. In *My Antonia*, for example, we immediately recognize the naturalistic bent of the material: the narrator meets and befriends the daughter of a Bohemian immigrant family impoverished by a scheming countryman; the family members are reduced to animal level, almost freezing and starving during the winter, and depending upon handouts from their neighbors. The father, unable to cope with this alien environment, shoots himself in the head, leaving his daughter to be brutalized by field work. When she goes to work in town, one employer attempts to rape her; she meets a railroad conductor who impregnates and then abandons her. She returns to the family farm in disgrace to bear her child alone one evening after a day in the field. Tucked into this story are tales of the killing of a rattlesnake; wolves attacking and eating a wedding party; a deranged wife pursuing the local seductress across the prairie with a butcher knife; a tramp throwing himself into the blades of a thresher; and so on. The inchoate if popular deterministic

and evolutionary doctrines espoused by the naturalists (partially, one suspects, for effect) and implicit in early Cather stories like "The Clemency of the Court" and "On the Divide" are evident in the webbed fingers of Antonia's brother Marek, the phrenological assessment of pianist d'Arnault's skull, Mr. Shimerda's inability to cope with the bitter prairie winter, and the sexual permissiveness his daughter seems to share with her mother, who had conceived Ambrosch out of wedlock.¹⁵

Cather's treatment of this sensational material I would label Jamesian, particularly in the cultivated consciousness she bestows upon narrator Jim Burden, who is passive, self-absorbed, and prone to idealize women—traits variously evident in such Jamesian consciousness reflectors as Ralph Touchett in *The Portrait of a Lady*, John Marcher in "The Beast in the Jungle," and Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*. Like Godfrey St. Peter and Tom Outland in *The Professor's House*, Archbishop Jean Marie Latour, and to a lesser extent Niel Herbert in *A Lost Lady* and Nellie Birdseye in *My Mortal Enemy*, Jim Burden is a superior being, endowed to an extraordinary degree, as Dorothea Krook says of Jamesian heroes and heroines, with the gifts of "intelligence, imagination, sensibility, and a rare delicacy of moral insight" bound up with an "inordinate capacity for *being* and *seeing*"—"the eye of the soul [moving] perpetually back and forth, between the activity of apprehending the objective world and the activity of apprehending its own apprehensions." Further, James makes his characters "articulate about all that they see and understand."¹⁶ All this does not mean, Krook cautions us, that these characters are so intelligent and so conscious that they are never blind or never suffer uncertainties or make mistakes. One might call them highly civilized, conversant with the best in literature and the fine arts, to which they frequently refer to explain what they see and understand. Their function strikes us as somewhat passive, and nowhere does the American western experience seem as passive as when Cather filters it through the consciousness of Jim Burden,

whose almost exclusive function in the novel is to react.

The intentional, consciousness-filtering method of Cather is best understood through certain basic aspects of impressionism in painting and their affinity to the method of James. The impressionist painters emphasized light and color in their paintings and approached objects from various angles; more important, they employed the broken brushwork technique that requires viewing from a distance to assemble the pieces and compose the picture.¹⁷ James once declared that he had grown determined to give "not . . . my own personal account of the affair at hand, but . . . my account of someone's impression of it . . . through the opportunity and the sensibility of some more or less detached, some not strictly involved, though thoroughly interested and intelligent witness or reporter."¹⁸

Such a perspective goes beyond the mere assembling and composing of what is physically witnessed. The journey from the physical world to the realm of consciousness is obvious, for example, in Cather's "A Wagner Matinee" (1904), one of the stories she wrote during her Jamesian phase. When narrator Clark takes his Aunt Georgiana to the symphony concert in Boston, the description he gives of the audience resembles an impressionistic painting: "One lost the contour of faces and figures, indeed any effect of line whatever, and there was only the colour of bodices past counting, the shimmer of fabrics soft and firm, silky and sheer; red, mauve, pink, blue, lilac, purple, ecru, rose, yellow, cream, and white, all the colours that an impressionist finds in a sunlit landscape, with here and there the dead shadow of a frock coat. My Aunt Georgiana regarded them as though they had been so many daubs of tube-paint on a palette."¹⁹ The last line of the passage suggests Clark's tendency to explore his aunt's consciousness through impressions of the sights and sounds of the physical world around her, and this reveals his own predilections for viewing her life as a disastrous waste. We begin with the physical world but travel inward.

Jim Burden's initial response to the Nebraska

landscape is decidedly impressionistic in this way. (Italics are mine in the following passages.) "There *seemed* to be nothing to see. . . . If there was a road, *I* could not make it out in the faint starlight. . . . nothing but land—slightly undulating, *I knew*, because often our wheels ground against the brake as we went down into a hollow and lurched up again on the other side."²⁰ Note that Jim is describing his impressions of the place rather than the place itself. At this point he tells us of his feeling of isolation from Virginia, and we are led momentarily away from Nebraska and toward images of Virginia. Later, he feels that the prairie grass is the country "as the water is the sea" and compares its redness to "wine-stains" (p. 15). Note how all descriptions of the country are centered in Jim's responses and the images they generate in him. The insistence on bright color, especially shades of yellow shimmering in the sunlight, is indeed painterly: "As far as *we could see*, the miles of copper-red grass were drenched in sunlight that was stronger and fiercer than at any other time of the day. The blond cornfields were red gold, the haystacks turned rosy and threw long shadows. The whole prairie was like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed. That hour always had the exaltation of victory, of triumphant ending, like a hero's death—heroes who died young and gloriously. It was a sudden transfiguration, a lifting-up of day" (p. 40). The fleeting momentary vision, the rich color, and the scattered details resembling the broken brush technique all come together for us in the perceiving consciousness. Jim describes details of the landscape at different times of day and through the four seasons, walking around his subject like a good impressionist, taking in its full effect while leaving it open-ended.

Character descriptions in *My Ántonia* are also impressionistic, taking us beyond the eye and into the mind and involving us in the values, judgments, interpretations, and past experiences of the perceiver in his attempt to go beyond the surface of what he sees and hears. Grandpa Burden, for example, "was not demonstrative. *I felt* at once his deliberateness and

personal dignity, and was a little in awe of him. The thing *one immediately noticed* about him was his beautiful, crinkly, snow-white beard. *I once heard* a missionary say it was like the beard of an Arabian sheik. His bald crown only made it more *impressive*" (pp. 11-12). Grandma Burden "was a spare, tall woman, a little stooped, and she was apt to carry her head thrust forward in an attitude of attention, *as if* she were looking for something, or listening to something, far away. As I grew older, *I came to believe* that it was only because she was so often thinking of things that were far away. . . . Her laugh . . . was high, and *perhaps a little strident*, but there was a lively intelligence in it" (pp. 10-11).

The introduction of Lena Lingard is also a painterly impression, even to its frame: "A plump, fair-skinned girl was standing in the doorway. She *looked* demure and pretty, and *made a graceful picture* in her blue cashmere dress and little blue hat, with a plaid shawl drawn neatly about her shoulders and a clumsy pocketbook in her hand" (p. 159). (One is reminded here of Ned Rosier's view of Isabel Archer in a doorway frame in chapter 37 of James's *The Portrait of a Lady*.)

The reader can gauge the inward progress of Cather's novel by comparing the initial, objective description of Ántonia, a girl holding oilcloth bundles within a family group illuminated by the red glow of the locomotive fire box (pp. 5-6), to the more impressionistic description of her eyes as "big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood. Her skin was brown, too, and in her cheeks she had a glow of rich, dark colour. Her brown hair was curly and wild *looking*" (p. 23). By the last book, the portrayal of Ántonia has become even more subjective and internalized: "As I confronted her, the changes grew less apparent *to me*, her identity stronger. She was there, in the full vigor of her personality, battered but not diminished, looking at me, speaking to me in the husky, breathy voice *I remembered* so well" (p. 331-32). It is interesting to compare these descriptions to Isabel Archer's initial impression

of her future husband Gilbert Osmond in James's *The Portrait of a Lady*, or her initial impression of Madame Merle, who sets her up as Osmond's victim.

The perceiving consciousness in Cather's world, as in James's, are artists in that they communicate to us not only what they see and hear, appropriately investing it with feeling, but arrange it so that the scattered impressions can be assembled toward the effects they desire—in other words, they do not merely respond to the world, they make the world. This process is illustrated in James's *The Ambassadors*, just before the climax, when Lambert Strether travels by train into the French countryside in order to find the elements he once saw assembled in an impressionistic landscape painting at a Boston gallery. When he discovers "the particular note required," he gets off the train and assembles the landscape according to his memory of the painting: "The oblong gilt frame disposed its enclosing lines; the poplars and willows, the reeds and river—a river of which he didn't know, and didn't want to know, the name—fell into a composition, full of felicity, within them; the sky was silver and turquoise and varnish; the village on the left was white and the church on the right was grey; it was all there, in short—it was what he wanted: it was Tremont Street, it was France, it was Lambinet [Émile Lambinet, the painter]. Moreover he was freely walking about in it."²¹

This ordering, designing, arranging approach is not only evident in *My Ántonia* in painterly passages like the one where Jim Burden describes the pattern in the grass after the first snow fall—"like strokes of Chinese white on canvas" (p. 62)—but in Jim's overall assembling of materials. Seasonal changes as well as cultural phases have been noted as organizing elements in Cather's novel, but I am not aware of any analysis of Jim's splicing of the parts of his narrative, so that the center of the first book is arranged around two blizzards that function as framing devices. The first blizzard provides a setting for Christmas, during which the birth of Christ is celebrated and the human

and animal figures of the crèche are displayed on the tree. Mr. Shimerda comes to visit the Burdens in this episode and prays before the candles on the tree. The winter thaw separates this from the next picture framed by snow, in which Mr. Shimerda kills himself in a barn with animals, and a lantern is hung over his body, before which the family members kneel and pray.

This impressionistic approach to material—this Jamesian filtering of material through consciousness—when applied to the naturalistic material that was Cather's "bent," explains why we are usually distanced from violence in *My Ántonia* and why a book so unrepresentative of what Howells would term the norm of American life hardly strikes us as a sensational book. When Pavel tells his horrible story of the wolves, we focus through Jim on Pavel's "contemptuous, unfriendly expression" toward Peter, Pavel's excitement during the telling, the release of his rage, and his story's effect on Jim and Ántonia, who clasps Jim's hand under the table (pp. 54–55). When old Shimerda commits suicide, the attention is on Jim's reflections on the journey of the soul, possible motives, his reminiscence of the old man's visit at Christmas, and imagined scenes in the Old World reconstructed from scattered details provided Jim by Ántonia.

The two incidents in which Jim encounters violence firsthand are his struggles with the snake and with Wick Cutter; yet even in these the emphasis is on their effect on him, his nausea, his resentment of Ántonia, his pride, or his shame. However, these are exceptional episodes and worthy of comment because in them there is a fusion of two literary worlds. In the Jamesian world, sexual passion is outlawed; hence the killing of the snake can be read as the rejection of sexual passion, even though it surfaces again in Wick Cutter's attack. Viewing sexual passion in terms of the snake, as Blanche Gelfant has, also associates sex with evil.²² Although Frank Norris called for explorations of the mystery of sex as well as of the depths of the heart and soul, he and his fellow naturalists, as Stanley Cooperman has indicated,

regarded sex as evil.²³ Norris, writes Cooperman, "was motivated far more directly by Calvinist-Christian guilt than by scientific naturalism; the naturalism, indeed, was superimposed upon the older determinism only on the verbal level. . . . Norris himself . . . is torn between affirmation of 'purity' and masochistic fascination for the physical, setting up the duality between 'nature' (evil) and 'spirit' (good)."²⁴ Donald Pizer similarly notes that for Norris, "sensual pleasure and gross sexual desire [were] vestige[s] of man's animal past hindering his gradual evolution toward the dominance of spirit over body."²⁵

As a paradigm of sexual suppression and rechanneling, the Samson d'Arnault episode in *My Antonia* would hardly shock either the author of "The Turn of the Screw" or the author of *McTeague*. D'Arnault's piano is his substitute woman and his pursuit of its seductive siren song leads him to its body: "He touched it softly, and it answered softly, kindly. He shivered and stood still. Then he began to feel it all over, ran his finger-tips along the slippery sides, embraced the carved legs, tried to get some conception of its shape and size, of the space it occupied in primeval night. It was cold and hard, and like nothing else in his black universe. He went back to its mouth, began at one end of the keyboard and felt his way down into the mellow thunder, as far as he could go. He seemed to know that it must be done with the fingers, not with the fists or the feet. He approached this highly artificial instrument through a mere instinct, and coupled himself to it, as if he knew it was to piece him out and make a whole creature of him" (pp. 187-88). This episode is strategically placed immediately before the Italians set up the dancing pavilion, before Antonia's sexual blossoming and Jim's frustration with his inability to respond sexually to her. Here, through Jamesian sublimation, Cather follows Norris's dictum to plumb the mystery of sex and search the innermost temple of the soul of man.

Dorothea Krook has compared the world of Wordsworth and the world of James as illus-

trative of two opposing principles of what she calls "poetic idealisation." Wordsworth "deliberately chose to exhibit 'the essential passions of the heart' in and through a class of people representing the simplest, most primitive, most *uncomplicated* human material available to him as a poet." According to Wordsworth's principle, "the 'ideal' man for the purposes of poetry—the man through whom the fundamental passions can be most instructively and most beautifully exhibited—is the man who stands as close as possible to the 'beautiful and permanent forms of nature,' whose life is innocent equally of the surface encrustations and the internal complexities of more involved forms of life."²⁶ "The principle of idealisation that regulates the art of Henry James," continues Krook, "stands at the opposite pole to the Wordsworthian. James does not say, Strip and reduce; he says instead, Load. Load your human material (he says), first with all the external appurtenances of civilisation. . . . Then, on top of these cultivated tastes and habits, give them also the most refined sensibilities, the most delicate perceptions, and a developed power of articulating all that they feel and see; and, passing in this way from the external appurtenances of civilisation to the internal, endow them with gifts of insight and powers of discrimination and analysis, in the field of moral relations in particular, far exceeding the reach of men in real life. Finally, endow them with the supreme gift of consciousness—specifically, self-consciousness." Krook maintains that the Wordsworthian world and the Jamesian world are irreconcilable, "mutually exclusive as modes of rendering the fundamental realities of the human condition."

I think that in Cather somewhat corresponding worlds are brought together and reconciled: Antonia represents the Wordsworthian ideal, and Jim the Jamesian consciousness. Cather's "naturalism" lies within the context of the primitive conditions she experienced in Nebraska, and the "Jamesian" filters framing such conditions were developed through her wide reading and saturation in the fine arts.

NOTES

1. For classical sources and influences, see references in my article, "Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Cather's *A Lost Lady*," *American Literature* 53 (1981): 72-86. For European influences on Cather, see Bernice Slote's "An Exploration of Cather's Early Writing," *Great Plains Quarterly* 2 (1982): 210-17; also David Stouck's "Willa Cather and the Impressionist Novel," in *Critical Essays on Willa Cather*, ed. John J. Murphy (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), pp. 48-66.

2. *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893-1902*, ed. William M. Curtin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), p. 258.

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

4. Cather, *World and Parish*, pp. 605-8.

5. "The Clemency of the Court" and "On the Divide" are reprinted in *Willa Cather's Collected Short Fiction, 1892-1912*, ed. Virginia Faulkner (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), pp. 515-22 and 493-504.

6. Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Bison Books, 1961), pp. 111-14.

7. Cather, *World and Parish*, p. 258.

8. *The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather's First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893-96*, ed. Bernice Slote (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), pp. 281, 180, 407.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 378.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 361.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 382, 446.

12. Willa Cather, "My First Novels [There Were Two]," in *On Writing: Critical Studies of Writing as an Art* (1949; New York: Knopf, 1962), p. 93.

13. Edward Bloom and Lillian Bloom, *Willa Cather's Gift of Sympathy* (Carbondale: South-

ern Illinois University Press, Arcturus Books, 1964), p. 243.

14. Cather, *World and Parish*, p. 486.

15. In "The Form and Content of American Realism," the introduction to *Realistic American Short Fiction* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1972), George Perkins writes of the naturalists: "In some measure philosophical determinists everyone (though no very great case could be made for the clarity or consistency of their thinking), they wrote novels and short stories in which the heroes were victims and personal success was a triumph not of character but of circumstance" (p. 10).

16. Dorothea Krook, *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 15-16, 22.

17. James J. Kirschke, *Henry James and Impressionism* (Troy, N.Y.: Whitston, 1981), p. 4.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

19. Cather, *Collected Short Fiction*, p. 238.

20. Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, Sentry Edition, 1961), p.

7. Subsequent references to this edition are included in my text.

21. Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (New York: W. W. Norton, Critical Edition, 1964), p. 302.

22. Blanche Gelfant, "The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Antonia*," *American Literature* 43 (March 1971): 69-71.

23. Norris, "Plea for Romantic Fiction," p. 282.

24. Stanley Cooperman, "Frank Norris and the Werewolf of Guilt," *Modern Language Quarterly* 20 (September 1959): 253.

25. Donald Pizer, "Evolutionary Ethical Dualism in Frank Norris' *Vandover and the Brute* and *McTeague*," *PMLA* 76 (December 1961): 552.

26. Krook, *Ordeal of Consciousness*, pp. 19-22.