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Modernist Space: Willa Cather's Environmental Imagination in Context*

Guy Reynolds

The organization of space represents the meeting point between the writer and her environment. One of the things that Cather's writing teaches us is that space, especially "natural" space, is always mediated, always shaped. Even if humankind has not yet worked on the landscape (in terms of agriculture or landscaping or settlement), the imagination has already shaped that environment by means of the symbolic language brought to that space. Indeed, as we have understood since Henry Nash Smith published *Virgin Land* in 1950, the discovery and making of America represents perhaps the most extreme example of this process, as Europeans projected an interlocked array of Utopian concepts and constructs onto the "empty" space of the New World.

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Cather's own framing of nature was informed by some very specific, historically particular ideas. These ideas constituted a distinctive, American theory of space, and the human being in its environment, emergent at the start of the last century. Here, Cather takes her place alongside figures such as Gertrude Stein, William James, and Frank Lloyd Wright. My intention is to position Cather in this context, a context forged out of a comparison with other American modernists and, specifically, with the pragmatism of James. Ronald Berman's 1997 book, *The Great Gatsby and Fitzgerald's World of Ideas*, suggested a context for Fitzgerald in the "public philosophy" of William James and his followers (Herbert Croly, Walter Lippmann, Randolph Bourne, John Dewey). If we want to think about Cather and the "ecopoetics" of her writing, we need to position her alongside some of these thinkers in order to understand what was specific to her culture and its historical moment. For Cather's fiction is often concerned with the representation of the psychological processes of the self as it connects with and interacts with environment; Cather emerges as a kind of Midwestern pragmatist, and a distant sister of Gertrude Stein.

The modernity of Cather's environmental imagination is illustrated by a comparison between her fictionalization of American spaces and Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural formation of space. Wright, above all other modernists, is the major artist in the rearticulation of American space at the turn of the century. He was also, of course, a Midwesterner with a similar background to Cather: born a little earlier (1867), into a family who had moved west, and also educated (though not with anything like Cather's success) at a land grant college, the University of Wisconsin. There are, I believe, some striking analogies and affinities between Wright and Cather: although literary historians have not always noted the connection

between the two, architectural historians certainly have. Robert Twombly, for one, cites Wright's attack on turn-of-the-century Chicago houses—"they *lied* about everything," Wright spat—and backs up this quotation with comments from Ole Rolvaag, Sinclair Lewis, and Cather. He notes the mockery of the Forrester house in *A Lost Lady* (Twombly 60- 61): "It was encircled by porches, too narrow for modern notions of comfort," Cather writes, "supported by the fussy, fragile pillars of that time, when every honest stick of timber was tortured by the turning-lathe into something hideous" (8). Put the Forrester house alongside the Marsellus house in *The Professor's House* and you have a very Wright-like attack on the importation of fussy, pseudo-European houses into the Midwestern environment. Take, also, Father Latour's comment on the ruin of Santa Fe, a comment underpinned by a sense of regionalist architecture:

In the old days it had an individuality, a style of its own; a tawny adobe town with a few green trees, set in a half-circle of carnelian-coloured hills; that and no more. But the year 1880 had begun a period of incongruous American building. Now, half the plaza square was still adobe, and half was flimsy wooden buildings with double porches, scroll-work and jack-straw posts and banisters painted white. Father Latour said the wooden houses which had so distressed him in Ohio, had followed him. All this was quite wrong for the Cathedral he had been so many years in building. (270-71)

Is there another novelist who has characters suffer aesthetic "distress" in the face of unpleasant architecture? Cather's satire on domestic style seems to emerge from a position very close to Wright's. For both Cather and Wright, "fit" (a kind of spatial

symbiosis between the man-made and the natural) constitutes the regionalist style. What one takes away from Wright's theoretical writing is a recurrent emphasis on the interdependence of the built and the natural, the human-made and the found. Thus, in a section from *The Living City*, "Architecture and Acreage Together Are Landscape" (a wonderful phrase that could stand as an epigraph to Cather's Western novels), Wright states:

Architectural features of any democratic ground plan for human freedom rise naturally by, and from, topography. This means that buildings would all take on, in endless variety, the nature and character of the ground on which they would stand and, thus inspired, become component parts. Wherever possible all buildings would be integral parts— organic features of the ground—according to place and purpose.(143)

And in his *Autobiography* Wright extends this argument to a more general defence of the "indigenous": "*Indigenous* growth is the essential province of all true Culture" (336).

Where, in Cather's work, do we find the representation of Wright's organic architecture? One place would be in the Native American settlements of the Southwest (also admired by Wright). Cather represents these dwellings as architecturally at one with their surroundings, as "organic features of the ground." Intriguingly, Tom Outland first praises the Cliff City precisely on grounds of design: "I felt that only a strong and aspiring people would have built it, and a people with a feeling for design" (203- 04). Another form of favored dwelling is the human-made space with an apparently ramshackle, deliberately "primitive" organicism that keeps it closely

integrated into the landscape: Ivar's sod hut in *O Pioneers!*, the Shimerdas' dugout, Antonia's fruit cave, Tom's shelter on the mesa (where the grass grows right up to the door, creating a seamless connection with the terrain). All of these dwellings accept the constraints of the environment and find an aesthetic emerging from the necessities of the landscape. As Father Duchene tells Tom, in a phrase that could come from a Wright essay, "Convenience often dictates very sound design" (219).

These places represent an anticipation of Wright's maxim, "Architecture and acreage together are landscape"; and they also mark Cather's integration into a tradition of American environmental writing—the Thoreauvian tradition with its emphasis on frugality, simplicity, and ecology. In fact, in the case of Ivar's hut, the correspondence with Thoreau seems explicit when Cather positions the hut next to a pond. One might read the passage as, effectively, a description of Walden Pond transplanted West and then stamped with an organic sense of space derived from Frank Lloyd Wright. Cather celebrates total symbiosis between the human and the natural: "But for the piece of rusty stovepipe sticking up through the sod, you could have walked over the roof of Ivar's dwelling without dreaming that you were near a human habitation. Ivar had lived for three years in the clay bank, without defiling the face of nature any more than the coyote that had lived there before him had done" (39-40). The fusion of Alexandra's body with the soil at the end of the novel has been prefigured here, with Ivar's house. Both passages celebrate an ecstatic intermingling between self and nature, an interpenetration that quite obviously has its roots in transcendentalism but here finds a home far from New England.

A taxonomy of Cather's prairie dwellings illustrates the affinities with Frank Lloyd Wright: the writer or architect creates regionalist spaces and places harmonized with local environments. Wright's *The Living City* called for houses, "each sympathetically built out of materials native to the Time, the Place, and the Man" (132). It is in this sense that an architectural polemicist such as Reyner Banham writes of "Frank Lloyd Wright as Environmentalist." The human spaces of Cather's prairie novels tend to be low-lying if not subterranean. They merge or fuse with the land. They make radical use of natural resources: wood or the earth itself. They are very much of their own kind and not overly indebted to European models. Outside the Cather house there tends to be a space where the natural and the human-made overlap and coalesce. A further important correspondence is that when Wright thought favorably about tall buildings (he usually fulminated against the skyscraper urbanism of New York), he called for them to be set in "small green-parks of their own, in the countryside" (*The Living City* 133). In other words, he advocated a kind of rural skyscraper or ecological megastructure—the great structure positioned in a pastoral setting. Cather also tried to "green" such colossal buildings by blending them into the landscape: hence the Cliff City of *The Professor's House* or the cathedral at the end of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. These vast constructions merge and blend with their setting. As Latour's architect says, in a phrase one can imagine Frank Lloyd Wright using, "Either a building is a part of a place, or it is not. Once the kinship is there, time will only make it stronger" (272).

A typical example of Cather's space making occurs when Jim Burden visits Antonia's farm at the end of the novel. Her house is steeply roofed but low-lying: "The roof was so steep that the eaves were not much above the forest of tall holly-

hocks, now brown and in seed. Through July, *Ántonia* said, the house was buried in them" (328). This whole passage is filled with images of verdant, overgrowing foliage, and of human spaces that seem to be within or underneath this growth. Three of the children creep through a hole in the hedge "known only to themselves and hid under the low-branching mulberry bushes" (329). Then *Ántonia* and Jim settle down in the orchard: "It was surrounded by a triple enclosure; the wire fence, then the hedge of thorny locusts, then the mulberry hedge which kept out the hot winds of summer and held fast to the protecting snows of winter. The hedges were so tall that we could see nothing but the blue sky above them, neither the barn roof nor the windmill" (330-31). For a writer with a noted antipathy to Freud, Cather seems to have created some astonishingly symbolic spaces—as critics from Leon Edel to Ellen Moers have noted. Here, the womblike space emphasizes that sense of "return to beginnings" that dominates the end of the novel. Jim's unconscious reiteration of one of *Ántonia*'s first English phrases, "blue sky" (25), confirms a sense of return, of cycles, of closure.

But what is also important is the emphasis on privacy; an organic architecture creates enclosed and intensely turned-in spaces amidst the vastness of the prairies. As with other Cather protagonists, most notably St. Peter, the need to create an environment of privacy is a fundamental dynamic for *Ántonia*. Why, indeed, does *Ántonia* take Jim into a space with a "triple enclosure," if they are in the middle of nowhere? The answer is that, as for many Cather characters, *Ántonia*'s sense of environment is strongly linked to a need for sheltered privacy. The novel began with a very private, enclosed space—the train compartment where Burden and the narrator first talk. It ends with a similar kind of exchange between Burden and *Ántonia*,

as they talk in an enclosed space fashioned from natural materials. In both cases, the openness of the prairie landscape produces an equal and opposite human reaction, as characters seek out inward-looking, private, womblike places.

A common reaction to Wright's houses is to find them unexpectedly low, enclosed, and sometimes even claustrophobic; his houses were designed to offer a great deal of privacy. Robert Twombly suggests that the prairie house "appealed to an apprehensive upper middle class by emphasizing in literal and symbolic ways the security, shelter, privacy, family, mutuality and other values it found increasingly important" (Twombly, "Saving the Family" 59). Those houses designed for the suburbs, such as the Robie house, were fashioned so that those inside could find space where they would not be seen from the street. Wright, acutely conscious of the extremes of the Midwestern weather, created houses resistant to the harshness of winter snow or summer heat; but in so doing, the Wright house, though harmonized with the outer environment, also fostered an intense domesticity. Cather's houses are not as class-specific as Wright's, but they share a sense of the inward and the sheltered. For Cather and Wright, the connection between environment and privacy seems to have had the force of an equation: in creating an organic space, in Wright's words, "native to the Time, the Place," one also fashioned an intensely private realm.

A significant strand in Cather's critical writing privileged the "natural," as she drew comparisons between her work's compositional strategy and the open landscapes of the prairies. Cather's letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant (22 April 1913) answered complaints about the novel's shape: "She agreed with Sergeant's one criticism that the book had no skeleton but defended it on grounds that the country she was writing about

had no skeleton either. There were no rocks or ridges; its black soil ran through one's fingers. It was all soft, and somehow that influenced the mood and the very structure of the novel" (Woodress 155).

When Cather compared *O Pioneers!* to the "all soft" landscape of the prairies, she articulated a form of organic modernism. This organic theory privileges the natural and the apparently shapeless over the clearer forms and narrative shapes championed by one of her masters, Henry James. Cather's 1913 letter might be read as a revision of James's 1907 preface to the New York edition of *The Portrait of a Lady*. There, James had also used the image of soil nurturing the work of fiction. But for James, "soil" correlated with the novelist's individual creativity: "the kind and the degree of the artist's prime sensibility, which is the soil out of which his subject springs" (7). James then went on to his celebrated discussion of the "house of fiction," with its million windows looking down on the "human scene" (8). James uses the "house of fiction" as a trope to emphasize form, shape, and architectural structure; he was impatient with the apparent formlessness of the English novel and wanted to forge an Anglo-American aesthetic with the French novel's exactitude. Nowhere does Cather reveal more her struggle with James's influence and her final overthrow of "the master" than here. For James, "soil" had a very solipsistic connotation; it corresponded with the artist's "sensibility." But Cather uses "soil" in a folk-cultural, regionalist sense (I cannot dare to think what James would have made of the analogy with the prairies). Although the late James was moving toward greater narrative fluidity, he would surely have rejected the environmental determinism and proud provincialism of Cather's argument—her sense that regional geography generates literary form.

Cather's reasoning might be termed "organic modernism." The environment of Nebraska is used as an analog for novelistic form; landscape might even *create* form. I have argued elsewhere that Cather, for a writer of westward settlement, had a remarkably non-anthropocentric model of the interconnections between the human and the natural: she could envisage landscape acting upon the human, rather than the more familiar model, which tended to reverse this process (Reynolds 52-54). Cather emphasizes, too, a kind of formlessness: "It was all soft." In an interview with John Chapin Mosher, Cather had said of the immigrant and pluralist communities of Nebraska that the "hard molds of American provincialism" might be broken up in the Midwest (94); we might extend this argument to the "hard molds" of narrative architecture. For Cather and Wright both believed that in the Midwest the "hard molds" of received form (architectural and narrative) would be broken up and remade. And so, using this environmental logic, a new language of flow, organicism, and flexibility entered their aesthetic lexicon.

The popular image of Cather tends to see her as a rather homely writer; and much recent criticism has sought to accept homeliness or domesticity by seeing these features as inherently marked by a distinctive female culture. Critics then read Cather as a sophisticated modifier of an American female tradition of the home and the domestic. In this respect, Judith Fryer's work on Cather and space deepens the approach of 1970s feminists by means of a critical reading that redeems the female cultures of the late nineteenth century. This Cather emerges out of the late Victorian female, spatial culture of Sarah Orne Jewett. There is the same emphasis on the domestic, and particularly on a womanly domesticity at the center of a rich sentimental culture.

This is a powerful argument about Cather's spaces. But what if Cather's work also marked out a radically new, modernistic conception of space? What if her Midwestern environments, rather than being rooted in a familiar cultural site (homemaking, pioneering, the female world of American space making), were in fact more akin to the spatializing tactics of radical modernists— artists working in literature but also in architecture and painting? We have already seen affinities between Cather and Wright; and it is clear that Cather's narrative experimentation used the example of the prairie space to move away from received notions of realism. Pursuing this line a little further, one notes how Cather uses the environments of the West and Southwest to move toward a kind of abstraction in her work.

Most contemporary travelers first see the American prairies from the air, and from this perspective the landscape has a curiously abstract pattern: huge blocks of colour, arranged as if by some gigantic artist obsessed by geometry. The clean edges and abstract forms of the fields, seen from the air, make the telling point that this is in many ways one of the most unnatural landscapes in the world. The settlement of the prairies quickly turned an unshaped landscape into a place so sculpted and formed by the processes of modern agriculture that it attained a strange disembodiment. The Midwest is akin to the Dutch landscapes celebrated by the abstract painter Piet Mondrian (an artist who eventually moved to New York and immersed himself in American modernity). Mondrian's jazzy, colorful abstracts are often seen as being "produced" by the landscape of Holland—a flat, essentially man-made, intensively farmed landscape of grids and lines and squares. Similarly, Cather found in the shaping of the Western environment a form of abstraction that became part of her modernistic space

making. So the most triumphant passages in Cather's prairie novels are not just about the interaction of the human and the earthly (as at the end of *O Pioneers!*), but are also about the creation of these strangely abstract, painterly shapes within the land. When Alexandra Bergson begins to create her farmstead, the space around the house has a formalistic, neatly symmetrical pattern. Settlement is the creation of "order," expressed through symmetry: "When you go out of the house into the flower garden, there you feel again the order and fine arrangement manifest all over the great farm; in the fencing and hedging, in the windbreaks and sheds, in the symmetrical pasture ponds, planted with scrub willows to give shade to the cattle in fly-time. There is even a white row of beehives in the orchard, under the walnut trees" (81).

One senses Cather's eye picking out the geometry latent within the landscape, the patterns of fencing and hedging, the lines and rows of the garden. Such patterns are both created and natural; and if fashioned by Alexandra, they quickly seem to become part of an established landscape. This is one reason why the Divide is so central a term in Cather's reading of environment: the Divide is both latent within the land, but it also becomes part of the way in which we use land. It is natural and man-made. And a "divide" is also a line or a boundary. Reading Cather's descriptions of landscape one constantly senses this interest in lines, grids, boundaries: lines inherent in the land or imposed by man, but all tending toward abstract geometry. Thus Cather maps the prairie in terms of lines emerging out of plains; and she envisages the Washington of *The Professor's House* as a place of stifling boundaries and divisions.

If this is one way in which Cather's picturing of landscape seems modernist, then another way is the contrasting tech-

nique whereby landscape is dissolved into color, losing shape and determinacy. This is the abstraction that marks her descriptions of the Southwest in *The Professor's House*. Tom's ecstatic encounter with the mesa is exactly of this kind: the detail of landscape merges into a wash of different shades:

The grey sage-brush and the blue-grey rock around me were already in shadow, but high above me the canyon walls were dyed flame-color with the sunset, and the Cliff City lay in a gold haze against its dark cavern. In a few minutes it, too, was grey, and only the rim rock at the top held the red light. When that was gone, I could still see the copper glow in the piñons along the edge of the top ledges. The arc of sky over the canyon was silvery blue, with its pale yellow moon, and presently stars shivered into it, like crystals dropped into perfectly clear water. (250)

On first reading, the paragraph seems to be a rare case of poor writing by Cather. Why does every object have to carry an epithet? Isn't the passage overinsistent, repetitive, overwritten? But we know that she revised exhaustively, and the reader has to trust her as she creates a very strange effect in this passage. Cather, it seems to me, tries to achieve an impressionism by dissolving detail into color. Actual objects within the landscape are simply overwhelmed by this colorful cascade. And color itself eventually stands for a whole way of being: "Troubles enough came afterward, but there was that summer, high and blue, a life in itself." (253). The passage is, of course, painterly, a word-picture, but it is painterly in a contemporary way, as environment is registered in terms of dominant color as much as by shape. Cather almost becomes a writerly counterpart to Cézanne or even, in her most fervent synthesis of mood and

color, Mark Rothko's prose forebear. Note, too, the lovely effect at the end of the paragraph, where the textures are simply washed away into clearness, as golds and reds and blues give way to reflected stars, "like crystals dropped into perfectly clear water": a form of metaphysical conceit, where clearness drops into clearness.

Daniel Singal, in a suggestive essay on American modernism, has sought to give a specific picture of this cultural formation by emphasising the national rather than the international features of modernism in the United States. He stresses its philosophical roots in the pragmatism of John Dewey and William James. In particular, he contends that James brought forward a concern with psychological process and with varied emotional and mental states of being. Singal isolates modernism's "Jamesian stream" which "centers its interest on the individual consciousness, celebrates spontaneity, authenticity, and the probing of new realms of personal experience" (17-18). Jamesian modernism bears on Cather, especially in the "new realms of personal experience" that feature so heavily in passages about the interplay of consciousness and environment. She had read William James as a young woman, and one commentator has described her as a "devoted disciple" of his work in the 1890s (Seibel 202). Scholars have noted specific connections between Cather's work and James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*; her interest in James's friend and mentor Henri Bergson has also been charted by Tom Quirk.¹ But the broader relevance of Jamesian psychology to Willa Cather remains unremarked.

What, then, would Cather have found in the William James she read in the 1890s, and how did this encounter affect the way her environmental imagination was formed? James, when he broke through to national prominence, popularized the

“new psychology.” Cather would have found a fascination with the interplay between body and sensation; an interest in the subconscious or preconscious mind; speculation about the “will” and how we marshal the will to forge an active moral life. James was famously obsessed by energy and how we command or focus our energies. Ronald Berman, writing about his influence on Fitzgerald, summarizes these theories as “contemporary ideas of nervous energy, anxiety, and their moral effects” (142). What particularly interests me about Cather as an environmental writer is how often the self that interacts with the environment is very much the new self emerging from James’s writings about psychology. She might have come across these ideas in the essays that brought James to a wider readership, for instance the essays he wrote for *Scribner’s Magazine* in the 1880s and 1890s. “What the Will Effects” (1888) and “The Hidden Self” (1890) seem uncannily close, in their analysis of consciousness, to Cather’s explorations of selfhood. These essays analyzed the interplay between consciousness and unconsciousness, and the opposition between voluntary and involuntary action. For the apprentice writer at the turn of a new century, Jamesian psychology now offered a bracing, radical introduction to wholly new ways of configuring personality. In particular (and here the influence of James on Cather’s creation of figures such as Tom Outland or Thea Kronborg is evident), he rooted psychological process in the body and its reactions. He argued that “all our activity belongs at bottom to the type of reflex action, and that all our consciousness accompanies a chain of events of which the first was an incoming current in some sensory nerve, and of which the last will be a discharge into some muscle, blood-vessel, or gland” (“What the Will Effects” 217). Psychology as bodily process.

William James’s followers explored this dynamic in the fields of psychology and moral philosophy. James’s emphasis on the will led to his disciples using “will,” and a supposed failure of will, as tools to examine contemporary culture. Walter Lippmann’s popular 1914 study, *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest*, called for a restitution of will to the American character. At the same time as Lippmann was developing James’s ideas along the lines of a cultural critique, Cather embarked on a series of novels that fictionalized the Jamesian dialectic between “drift and mastery.” The rhythm of life, as seen in her fiction, is that adumbrated in James’s essays. Characters move from cycles of torpor, daydream, reverie, and anxiety into a kind of energized, determined action. A typical Cather character commits himself or herself to mastery. Thus, the mastery of engineering skill and scholarship in *The Professor’s House*; mastery of the voice and art in *The Song of the Lark*; mastery of the land and the making of a farm (*My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!*). Protagonists from Alexandra Bergson through to Latour master their subject, finally. But the foreground of these texts is often taken up with a characteristically Catheresque meditation on “drift”: on nervous anxiety, loss of control, reverie, dream, or nostalgia. Cather’s defense of *My Ántonia* was that it was a means to explore the “other side of the rug, the pattern that is supposed not to count in a story” (Interview with Flora Merrill 77). This comment is a defense of novelistic form. But for Cather, the “other side” also had a general, metaphoric significance, and when she wrote about the self and its response to nature, the “other side” seems to correspond to a Jamesian or Lippmann-like idea of “drift.” Cather was fascinated by the ordinary, moment-by-moment experience of being in the Western landscape. Although the novels explore, on one level, mastery over

landscape (a suggestion given most notably in the invocation of Whitman in *O Pioneers!*), line by line and paragraph by paragraph Cather is fascinated by a quotidian, anti-heroic interplay between self and environment. Gertrude Stein says in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* that, “the normal is so much more simply complicated and interesting” than the abnormal (92). One way to link Cather and Stein is to think of them as female writers who defended the ordinary and “normal” experiences of everyday life as being “complicated and interesting.” For Cather, this meant a poeticizing of the everyday experiences of simply being in the West and the Southwest (a maneuver absolutely in accord with pragmatism’s desire to enrich and poeticize everyday experience).

At its most heightened, indeed ecstatic, Cather’s nature writing envisages a harmony between drift and mastery. The ancient landscapes of the Southwest produce, above all, states of consciousness that balance the drive to master the environment and the desire to drift through the natural world. The Cather protagonist achieves self-mastery, even as (s)he is acted upon and shaped by environment; action is both transitive and intransitive, switching ceaselessly between meditation and mastery. One such moment occurs in *The Song of the Lark*, in the Panther Cañon episode, where Thea moves from doing nothing to violent activity: “She was thinking of nothing at all. Her mind, like her body, was full of warmth, lassitude, physical content” gives way to “Thea sprang to her feet as if she had been thrown up from the rock by volcanic action” (398-99). Cather figures her protagonist as if she were molten rock. And the climax of Tom Outland’s time on the mesa is all to do with this sense of synthesis, of yoking together opposites as one moves through landscape. Outland is curiously passive (he lies down on a rock and spends much of his time contemplating in

almost Buddhist quietness), but he is also very active (he studies and creates a liveable space in the wilderness). He alternates between being an actor or a “doer,” and being a recipient (a creature acted upon by environment). Human activity and the natural scene achieve a state of perfect balance, as when Outland imagines the page of the book superimposed on the landscape behind: “I can always see two pictures: the one on the page, and another behind that” (252). This image echoes the image of the plowshare against the sun in *My Ántonia*: the man-made object caught iconically against a natural scene, with both the human and the natural brought into a spectacular synchronicity.

Outland finally represents an idealized dissolution of the boundaries between the physical and the mental, and between the spiritual and instrumental. Connections between Cather’s fictional exploration of the self-in-environment and William James’s work are absolutely explicit at such points, since the resolution of the Cartesian split between mind and body also obsessed the philosopher. “Tom Outland’s Story” almost reads like a prose poem written in reply to “What the Will Effects” or “The Hidden Self,” as Cather creates a supple idiom to entwine landscape description with analysis of those elusive, barely conscious states of mind described by James:

I remember those things, because, in a sense, that was the first night I was ever really on the mesa at all—the first night that all of me was there. This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole. It all came together in my understanding, as a series of experiments do when you begin to see where they are leading. Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. It was posses-

sion. The excitement of my first discovery was a very pale feeling compared to this one. (250-51)

The central sentence of this passage (“It was possession.”) rests at the heart of Cather’s environmental imagination, precisely because it is so perfect and crystalline in its ambiguity. Who is doing the possessing? Outland or the environment? Both, in a sense, “possess” the other. Outland sees the landscape “whole,” and as a descendant of a whole array of romantic viewers of the sublime, from Wordsworth to Thoreau, he takes possession of landscape by seeing it. But at the same time, Outland is possessed himself by landscape, as he imagines himself as a vessel filled by light (a curiously feminine image to apply to the American male pioneer): “I was full to the brim, and needed dark and sleep” (251-52). The ambiguity here encapsulates the paradox of an “environmental imagination,” since an “environmental imagination” is at once an imagination of the environment and an imagination formed or created by the environment. Cather worked repeatedly toward this doubled state, finding a heightened, mystical state-of-being when we are both formed by and in mastery of the environment.

Note

1. A brief survey of key works charting the intertextual connections between Cather, on one hand, and William James and Henri Bergson on the other would include Quirk, Wassermann, and Curtin.

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