THE BURDEN OF THE FUTURE: THE REINVENTION OF THE U.S. FRONTIER AT THE END OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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National myths come from the stories a society creates out of its historical record. We cannot remember everything in the past, and myth is the language in which we call to mind aspects of history that are usable in the present. Cultural critic Richard Slotkin identifies the present era, the late twentieth century, as a "liminal" one in American history. "We are in the process of giving up a myth/ideology that no longer helps us see our way through the modern world, but lack a comparably authoritative system of beliefs to replace what we have lost" (654). The old American myths, with savage Indians on the border and heroic gunfighters on the frontier, no longer serve to guide us through a new set of complexities in the post-Cold War era, in the multicultural United States of America. The myths and ideas that we do need are available to us, largely in texts that have gone relatively unread or unexplicated in previous eras.

In 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner delivered his famous "Frontier Thesis." Turner's essay about the spread of democratic institutions, the great fact of homesteading, and the safety valve of free land, served throughout the twentieth century as a memorable conception of the past. Although the continental frontier was closing as Turner spoke, the international, ideological frontier—the one that would justify the universal, material influence of the American state—was largely uncharted. Five years after Turner's speech, the United States was at war with Spain. A series of international conflicts followed, establishing the American empire. Each American war was conceptualized politically, in some fashion, as a war against the enemies of such Turner-frontier values as "freedom," "democracy," and "free markets." Turner's thesis was not seriously questioned until the 1970s, in the wake of America's defeat in Vietnam.

The post-Vietnam and post-Cold War eras have cast the Turner thesis as an overly simplistic conception of United States culture. Historians have gone back to the historical record in an effort to find something more useful, something that will not make the present cultural climate in the United States seem a failure. For example, social historians have documented that the ideal of permanent settlement on the frontier was just that—an ideal—and that most pioneers moved repeatedly, looking for something better in the next territory, or else they went back home again. The historical record shows that American democracy was not nurtured by settled communities but by a transient population.

It is one hundred years since Turner's thesis. In 1993, we can no longer responsibly put forward the notion that settling the frontier formed the American consciousness. In 1993, we must recognize that it is not the settler but the migrant that embodies values and ideas we call American. I say Americans "must" recognize this because if they do not, their society will be incapable of meeting the hemispheric and international

demands being made at its borders. No one "settles" in the United States. Emigrants who leave home and arrive in America do begin a new life, but it is one in which temporary situations—uprooting and crossing—become permanent modes of thought. The frontier is not necessary to this process; the only freedom Americans must have is the freedom to move.

I

Today I would like to discuss the work of an American author whose texts are becoming more widely read and critically examined each year. Willa Cather died in 1947 and was considered a minor figure in American literature through the 1970s. However, following the national paroxysm of Vietnam, Cather has experienced a regeneration. The reason is simply put: under the influence of the Turner thesis, Cather's frontier novels were marginal. However, in the current climate, as we will see, her conception of U.S. culture is indispensable.

Willa Cather once made an offhand but revealing comment to her friend, Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant. Cather had just met Sergeant in Pittsburgh and the two were becoming friends. This was in 1910, and the two women were in Cather's office at *McClure's* Magazine discussing the new immigrants, "Italian peasants in New York," and comparing them to the Northern or Central Europeans whom Cather had known in Nebraska. They also talked of writers, equally migratory people, according to Cather, and in the recounted conversation, the two subjects are conflated. Perhaps Cather envied her settled friends, but she never sought to emulate them. "'I keep my own suitcases under the bed,' she remarked, with a quick, affectionate smile—'Don't like it—would rather be a lucky Bostonian like you, living in a house, or going to Paris where the good hats come from'" (Sergeant, 43). Apparently, Cather could not even fantasize about "living in a house" without immediately including a trip to Paris. The psychic connection displayed in her comment is emblematic of narrative links made throughout her fiction. The vision of American culture projected in the novels of Willa Cather is one of constant movement, of migrations in time and space, of intellectual transaction and physical uprooting.

Sergeant found Willa Cather a bit eccentric because "rapid motion was essential to her." She would pack those suitcases often: "after a few months in the city, she got wildly homesick for the West. She would dash to see her 'family' . . . and the wheat harvest, and then flee back to Pittsburgh to Isabelle McClung—for fear of dying in a cornfield" (48-49). Sergeant implies that all of Cather's friends knew when "the need to travel was upon her" and she would pack up, and leave (119). Willa Cather's novels project a distinctive context for understanding American culture that is rooted (paradoxically) in the vigilant maintenance of unsettled lives, impermanent connections, and rapid movements in space and time. The idea that Willa Cather projects into our lives today is that the "new world" of America is not so much a world (a cosmos, a home) as it is a motion (a transformation, a journey). No one, then, can be "at home" in this place; no one can consider any part of it a place to be but only and always as space in which *to become*, to transform the self, the site, or the other.

The first thing we might take from Cather is the reminder that we cannot remember everything and so we must decide what it is we will allow ourselves to forget. An incident in a story entitled "The Best Years" makes plain the idea of willful forgetting.

The superintendent of schools, Miss Evangeline Knightly, is visiting the classroom of Lesley Ferguesson:

> Miss Knightly made a joking little talk to the children and told them about a very bright little girl in Scotland who knew nearly a whole play of Shakespeare's by heart, but who wrote in her diary: "Nine times nine is the Devil"; which proved, she said, that there are two kinds of memory, and God is very good to anyone to whom he gives both kinds. (86-87)

One's past, and the history of the culture itself, teems with incidents and events that may be remembered or discarded, that can be told or untold. The survival and vitality of the present generation depend upon the uses to which these spiritual and ideological resources are put. Cather's America is one that has no common past, only a set of conflicting stories and disparate origins. Her emphasis on migration—including the great fact of immigration—reinforces the idea that the past must often be forgotten if one is to succeed in transferring self and value to a new environment.

The United States receives its cultural vitality largely from the movements of its people. Great historical epochs are measured by shifts in population: the arrival of the Puritans, the importation of African slaves, movement into the Western territories, the removal of Native American populations (and the significant assignment of these peoples to *reservations*, or homes that are not permitted to move), the migration of Southern blacks to Northern cities, and the recent shift in population from the Northeast to the Southern rim. Demographic statistics show that no other "settled" people are so willing to move and actually do move so often. In fact, the right to move is protected by the U.S. Constitution, according to a United States Supreme Court decision: "The right to travel is part of the 'liberty' of which the citizen cannot be deprived without due process of law under the Fifth Amendment." In *Kent vs. Dulles* (1958) the Court explained the origins of this right. "Freedom of movement across frontiers in either direction, and inside frontiers as well, was a part of our heritage .... Freedom of travel is, indeed, an important aspect of the citizen's liberty" (qtd. in Auerbach, 325).

Americans are protected by Constitutional law first to be safe from unlawful seizure inside their homes, and also to be free of interference when they wish to transfer their homes from one place to another. Home is not a matter of permanence in the United States. To be an American is to accept the condition of the provisional home, or more succinctly, of homelessness. Home in the United States is something of an abstraction, an ideology; it may be, as well, a future destination or a place left behind as an actuality.

Willa Cather cast a large portion of her fiction over the idea of American homelessness. In the three novels I will discuss today, *O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Cather provides a vision of America that rests quite firmly on the metaphysics of homelessness and human movement, both physical and intellectual. The profile of the pioneer that Cather draws rests upon a presupposition of continued mobility in both the material and intellectual dimensions of existence. What the frontier novels project are the roots and manifestations of American homelessness.

Regional affinities that depend upon place are common to the United States—there are committed Southerners and New Englanders and Mid-Westerners—but national loyalty is completely movable, and one is not more or less of an "American" dependent

upon where one happens to live. On the contrary, an American's national identity increases with movement as it becomes more difficult to claim a regional membership or to identify in an absolute sense with a locality. Furthermore, one cannot trace history to find the original, ideal American because tracing back only leads to "strange people" who are not Americans at all. One can only project into the future for the original American, the American who exists in the *best* days of the nation, in the ideal conception. The source of American unity is in the future, not the past, which is why the study of history in America is always potentially divisive.

In Cather's pioneer novels we are concerned with the psychological and historical erasure of the person who *settles*; and, with the emergence of the pioneer who *roams*, who cannot have a home because at the very core of his or her self-definition is mobility and homelessness.

Cather is not, however, telling the story of the mysterious stranger or the man who wanders out of hatred or for revenge. Cather's iconographic pioneer Alexandra Bergson, in *O Pioneers!* (1913), is a settler who establishes a home on the Nebraska plains, buys land and becomes "rich, just by sitting still" and watching the land value appreciate over time (87). However, despite her outward display of rootedness, Alexandra's single, recurring fantasy is "the illusion of being lifted up bodily and carried lightly by some one very strong." Her inner character is thus signaled by a desire to be mobile, to be light enough to be taken away in the arms of someone who is in motion. It is reductive—and much too literal—to see this solely as a sexual fantasy, although the sexual meaning is unmistakably present. "It was a man, certainly, who carried her," the passage continues, "but he was like no man she knew; he was much larger and stronger and swifter, and he carried her as easily as if she were a sheaf of wheat" (153).

Deep in the heart of Cather's epic American settler is the belief and faith in "the mightiest of all lovers" (210), the one who "lifted and carried" the pioneer into the cultural paradox of homeless settlement. This lover may be a sexual phenomenon, but like all of human sexuality, it possesses cultural significance; it signals the intersection of human nature and human history.

In *O Pioneers!* Cather defines the meaning of "pioneer" in America by addressing "the great fact [of] the land itself" (11). This great fact is reflective of the minds that face it, and in many ways *O Pioneers!* is a study of the quality of mind that arises as a result of the combination of homelessness and rootedness. "For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of the geologic ages," Cather writes of the meeting of the "great fact" and the "great mind" of Alexandra, "a human face was set toward it with love and yearning . . . . Then the Genius of the Divide, the great free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before" (50). This "Genius," this "great free spirit" is equivalent to the "mightiest of all lovers" in Alexandra's fantasy of carriage, breathing across the continent toward historical change and animating her own epoch-making consciousness. The Genius of the Divide, in Cather's formulation, had yielded itself not to the nomadic homelessness of the plains Indian, nor to the Christian mission of the Spaniard, nor to the ambition of the Anglo-American hunter; but only to the intellect that combines all these practices, to the mind rooted in homelessness.

Two main characters in *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra Bergson and Carl Linstrum, embody this American paradox. Alexandra claims that she will never again emigrate; she says she will never move off the Divide. However, she will measure her success in

part by her provision, to her brother Emil, of the resources necessary to emigrate. Emil, she thinks, is one "who had not been tied to the plow, and who had a personality apart from the soil. And that, she reflected, was what she had worked for" (158).

Carl is the homeless man; he says, "there are thousands of rolling stones like me. We are all alike; we have no ties, we know nobody, we own nothing." These wandering Americans, he says, "have no house, no place, no people of our own," and all they manage to do "is to pay our rent, the exorbitant rent" of the transient (91-92). Carl overstates his condition, but so does Alexandra as she counters with her statement of rootedness: "We pay a high rent too, although we pay differently. We grow hard and heavy here. We don't move lightly and easily as you do, and our minds get stiff" (92).

The Catherian "Great Divide," made emblematic by Carl and Alexandra, is the one between homelessness and rootedness. Each envies the other but neither can or will trade places with the other. Cather's answer, communicated in the conventional terms of romantic resolution, is for these two to conjoin and to accomplish the great American solution of rooted homelessness.

The ideology of homelessness is worked out extensively in *O Pioneers!* As a cultural doctrine, homelessness contains a complex set of interlocking ideas, including the need to root oneself so that the next generation can migrate, and the compulsion to move on so that the next generation can establish roots. What Cather sees here as a source of strength, other observers have identified as a major defect in American culture. But not so with Cather. Out of houses "set about haphazard on the tough prairie sod," none of which "had any appearance of permanence" (3), comes, in Cather's imagination, a new consciousness that finds stability in transience.

The American philosopher John McDermott, on the other hand, defines homelessness as our "deepest contemporary ontological problem," with ramifications across consciousness. "The human abode becomes a jerry-built neighborhood in the vast reaches of cosmic unintelligibility. Our sky is a diaphanous roof to nowhere. `Seize the time' is now joined by `seize the place,' for neither is given to us. Human life is home-made" (69). The trait of unsettlement has made many American writers nervous, locating within it a national defect, a core imperfection. Observers from other cultures have concluded as well that Americans have no sense of place, no respect for origins. Indeed, the condition of wandering, in western civilization, is not a coveted one. Sophocles, for example, reserved for Oedipus the curse of homelessness as penalty for his greatest transgression: "No man will ever be rooted from the earth as brutally as you." No modern nation has ever rooted itself so deeply and overtly in movement as that of McDermott's "jerry-built neighborhood" or Cather's "haphazard" culture of impermanence.

Peter Berger concurs with McDermott's observations, equating modernism with "a spreading condition of homelessness" (138). The symptoms of this condition are profound. Berger cites four major effects: (1) the loss of religious authority through pluralistic exposure to competing truths; (2) a debilitating metaphysical and psychological nostalgia "for a condition of being at home" (82); (3) a rise in moral and ethical relativism (because "what was considered right in one stage of the individual's social career becomes wrong in the next" [184]); and (4) a general, devastating decline in a sense of purpose and direction to human life. According to Berger, "we no longer have beliefs that bestow meanings with certainty" on the human condition, and this, he says, produces a kind of cosmic homelessness. Reactions to this shared sense of universal displacement encompass a wide range of "demodernization quests" that seek

"new ways of 'being at home' in society," including such media focal points as "global village," "tribalism," and "family" values (214).

The redefinition of "home" and "family" have been important preoccupations in the late twentieth century and will doubtlessly continue into the twenty-first. McDonald's Restaurants have capitalized on this phenomenon, and the corporation consistently equates its service with "home" values. No matter where an American is compelled to move, and no matter what city she finds herself in, she can always go home to McDonald's and get the same tasting food, the same atmosphere in terms of decor, smells, and a choice of adolescent or grandparental servants. For if we define "home" as a place of stability, permanence, and consistency, most Americans are more likely to find it outside the American family than within it.

Both McDermott and Berger find this condition problematic and each speculates as to the changes in the human condition signalled by the development. Through Cather, however, we can recognize the emergence of homeless values not simply in terms of the destruction of old ways but contributing to another stage in human development—perhaps even liberational. But this can be accomplished only once the passing of cultural norms (beliefs, behaviors, traditions) is identified not as unfortunate but inevitable. A transitory culture holds to a transitory conception of truth.

It is the belief in permanence that serves destructive ends in the world; the quest for finality and absolute certainty has spread devastation and death to individuals and to entire civilizations. The idea that travel and migration lead inevitably to a *destination*, or a "home," results in the identification of cosmic homelessness as a philosophical problem, or a modernist anxiety, rather than as a liberating revelation of a fundamental condition of human life. After all, why should human beings feel as if the universe, the continent, the nation, the region, or the city is their home? The idea of "home" itself may be an expression of the delusion of permanence by which human beings attempt to mitigate mortality. We are passing through and, like Cather's pioneer town, we are "trying not to be blown away" (3) by circumstances or by the choices we make.

The condition of homelessness is a primary meaning of the frontier heritage of the United States. Long after the closing of the frontier announced by Turner in 1893, the idea that opportunity exists in another place and that success comes through migration has persisted in America. The United States Congress had to entice Americans to settle with an offer of free land to homesteaders in the 19th-century. Homesteading was intended to correct a situation: most Americans kept moving. The hero in countless American western movies—films that purported to celebrate "home" and community—always moved on at the end, into the sunset, on to the next town. The image of the cowboy riding away from the community soothes any American stuck at home, waiting for his or her chance to hit the road.

This "image of an 'elsewhere' with its idealized possibilities" is an ideology that "inspirits the whole society and continues to define the American experience" (Morrison and Wheeler 76). The legacy of the pioneer lies in a migratory mode of consciousness, "a frontier of the mind—an abiding vision of some other *place* where the past can be discounted and the future shaped at will. The promise embodied in that legacy induces movement for a certain few, and their movement keeps the promise alive for all" (82). Life under these conditions becomes a "perpetual odyssey" from one place to another. The phenomenon has been called "restlessness" and "mobility" and "cosmic homelessness"; but by whatever label, the activity itself is an expression of a

profoundly altered sense of the relation between person and place. The curse on Oedipus becomes the stamp of Americanization.

Alexandra articulates the sense of place that informs *O Pioneers!*: "The land belongs to the future," she claims, and here we might equate "the land" with the nation itself, a nation that has no existence apart from its future. "We come and go, but the land is always here. And the people who love it and understand it are the people who own it—for a little while" (229). If, as Cather declares at the beginning of the novel, "the great fact was the land itself," and if, as Alexandra asserts at the end of the novel, "The land belongs to the future," then the logic of *O Pioneers!* is that the "great fact" of pioneering and settlement in the United States is the future. The culture is thus defined more in terms of its prospects than its achievements.

Historians, in studying human migration, have concentrated their stories on destination. The Franks and the Gauls are interesting because they settled and became France. The Visigoths hold interest once they settled in Spain. The conventions of narrative history are such that it is difficult for us to imagine the *history* of a people who do not settle anywhere and "become" a civilization—such as the seagoing Vikings or, closer to Cather, the nomadic Navajos of the Great Plains. The history of America, we are told, begins in the imagination of Europeans, in Thomas More's *Utopia*, not in the wandering, uprooted culture of peoples *without* a written history. Human history follows people until they settle, and then begins to tell their story. But until they do settle, a people have no history. This is the historical narrative that Willa Cather writes *against*.

If we concentrate on those who settle—on Alexandra and Carl-the-husband—we miss the "best we had" in history. We miss Carl-the-traveler (whose wanderings possess no textual life), we miss the passion of the lovers, we miss the source of energy and vitality than animates the pioneer and the nation itself. Much of this vitality is deadly, and the body count of Emil and Marie in *O Pioneers*! is only the beginning of the casualty list among Cather's most animated characters. Nonetheless, the deaths themselves inform the living by providing inspiration to the more lethargic. In Cather's vision, settlement is antithetical to the fundamental spirit of United States culture. According to Cather, we are travellers. At the inauguration of President Clinton in January 1993, Maya Angelou restated the theme, addressing her American audience individually: "Each of you, descendant of some passed on traveller." The inaugural poem was meant as an expression of unity, and in it Americans are united by their common homelessness. Angelou's inaugural poem stressed the idea that America has always been a place through which peoples have passed. In many ways, the untold story of America is its own confrontation with homelessness.

II

The thematic meaning of Willa Cather's pioneer novels would be no more than nationalistic polemic if it were not for the acknowledgement, usually made quite explicit, of the psychic costs incurred by migration. The peculiar strengths of the culture may come from its restless population, but so does the tremendous price it exacts for success and the penalties it assesses for failure. Among the sources of balance that form the aesthetic of *O Pioneers!* is the implication that nothing is gained without tremendous cost, nothing good emerges without a price to pay. Cather would

eventually come to see this as an American crucible, the endeavor that defines, on her terms, the American experience. The measure of Cather's crucible is taken throughout *My Antonia*, Cather's great novel of crossing.

Crossing is a fundamental American rite of passage, crossing from one place or home to another and being prepared to answer the inevitable question, Where do you come from? Passage itself, in other words, defines for Americans either psychically or actually what it means, essentially, to be an American. The success stories told in small towns across the U.S. countryside are stories of sons and daughters who have left to make their fortunes elsewhere. *My Antonia* (1918) opens twice, once in a brief Introduction, where the narrator, Jim Burden is "crossing Iowa" (1) on a train and thinking of Antonia, and again in Chapter 1, as Burden recalls his "interminable journey across the great midland plain of North America" (5). The man is always moving, in fact, from one place to another, from home to home and from region to region across America. Jim Burden is Cather's quintessential migratory American, and it isn't until his life crosses with that of Antonia and the other first generation European immigrants that he realizes the fact. Their historic, immigrant crossing is the archetype of his own restlessness.

Cather makes clear the costs incurred in the creation of a cultural mode of consciousness rooted in continual transferrals. The drama of psychic migration is communicated in unforgettable terms by the remarkable story of Peter and Pavel, two Russian immigrants to Nebraska. "Of all the strange, uprooted people among the first settlers," Jim narrates, "these two men were the strangest and the most aloof" (24). And of all the disgraced immigrants who arrive in Cather's America to begin again, these two bear the heaviest guilt. One night in Russia the two men were hired to carry a bride and groom in their sleigh, or sledge, on a wedding journey. While crossing a snowy field, their sledge is chased by hungry wolves. One by one, the sleighs behind them are overrun by starving wolf packs, and the human occupants devoured. Peter and Pavel realize that the wolves will catch them as well, and tell the bridegroom that they must lighten. They decide to save themselves by throwing the bride and groom to the wolves.

The two Russians do not thrive once they rid their sledge of the bride and groom. They are "run out of their village" and continue to run from town to town, and eventually to America, pursued by "the story of the wedding party." When Jim and Antonia hear it, the event immediately enthralls them. It is their "secret" to possess and to guard, "to give us a painful and peculiar pleasure." Jim would often put himself to sleep by imagining himself in the story: "I often found myself in a sledge drawn by three horses, dashing through a country that looked something like Nebraska and something like Virginia" (40, 41). The question is, did Jim see himself as one of the groomsmen, or was he the bride? Or, more likely given his centrality, he identified thoroughly with the situation itself, seeing his own cultural framework captured in the predicament of the moving sledge.

Peter and Pavel survive their Ukraine flight from death because they realize "they must lighten," throw their passengers off the sledge. The situation as Cather depicts it is unthinkable. To satisfy those who would accuse Pavel and Peter of cruelty, ought they have thrown themselves over? The story is an allegory of the intellectual process of migration. The ones who sit as passengers in the sledge are killed—sacrificed for the sake of continued movement. The ones who do the sacrificing, who throw away the baggage—bodies, loyalties, allegiances—are the ones who survive. This must be what attracts Jim so personally to the story when he hears it as a boy. One way to read *My*

Antonia is that it is Jim's explanation of how he became the survivor, not the sacrifice, and also of how he will not forget who and what it was he threw over.

In order to migrate successfully, something must be thrown over, the load must lighten. The Russian groomsmen's story is an emblematic narrative, a cautionary tale to all migratory citizens of the new country. Separation from absolute values, such as the chivalric code of conduct which would keep the bride in the sledge at the cost of life to all, is a violent separation. The forms of violence that Cather depicts in *My Antonia* all mark definitive crossroads in the lives of migrants. Jim Burden always knows when to lighten; he survives because he seems to know when he must move on in body and spirit in order to "get on," and not be thrown over. An attachment to home more powerful than a response to the demands of circumstance and accident, is, to Cather, a fatality.

What *My Antonia* projects, as a novel that means (by its epic presumptions) to speak an American, cultural meaning, is precisely the burden of the twenty-first century in the United States. To survive in Cather's American context is to possess the mutable skills of the traveler, and to keep a clear distinction between the ideas that fire the imagination and the physical manifestation of those concepts.

Paradoxically, then, if the wanderer is ever to settle, he must never believe that his settlement is immutable. To settle "for good" is to cultivate the conditions of failure that call for migration. Nonetheless, to migrate is to seek conditions favorable to settling down. The journey cannot end. All of Willa Cather's great settlers (Antonia Shimerda Cuzak, Alexandra Bergson, Godfrey St. Peter) carry within their minds the dream of flight or the memory of escape. Likewise, all of her great travellers (Jim Burden, Carl Linstrum, Tom Outland) harbor fantasies of settlement and permanence. These characters, paired as they are in Cather's texts, are emblems of the American crossroads.

Crossing must not be confused with assimilation, which assumes the existence of a prior, fixed culture in "the service of an ideal," which Cather found so destructive. There has never been an "America" apart from the people who arrived from somewhere else, renamed the land, fought others for its possession and definition—and who continue to arrive and to make demands. The greatest division in America is between those who came here of their own accord and those who came here as slaves; between those whose volition delivered them and those who were stolen, and then granted freedom only as an expediency. But in both cases, assimilation is not the process by which the nation is created. The crossing, the passage itself, is the moving ground on which Americans share a heritage. To neglect the fact that all Americans have a history of transferring home from actuality to memory, of shifting loyalty from one set of allegiances to another, is to misconstrue the culture itself. All Americans have, in the past if not their present and future, the legacy of having willfully forgotten some allegiance; of having betrayed what was once held sacred.

Philip Gleason cites a critical paradigm of anthropologists which holds that "the immigrant or person of immigrant derivation . . . is a prototypically American figure *not* because of any distinctiveness of cultural heritage but for exactly the opposite reason." The importance of the immigrant symbol lies in "the 'character structure' produced by the *American* experience of change, mobility, and loss of contact with the past" (169-170). Postmodern conditions, such as the perception of fracture, dislocation, and decenteredness, are certainly the product of the United States military defeat in Vietnam, as we have been told. However, these conditions might also be identified

specifically with the results of migratory experience, and thus wholly incorporated into the cultural logic of the United States. The academy itself reflects the ideas of people whose lives were shaped by migration, by their own sense of "change, mobility, and loss." No doubt the theories produced by migratory intellectuals, especially the theories attendant to postmodernism, are rooted in the need to keep on moving. Difference (and *differance*), multiplicity, fragmentation—all of these ideas flow logically and inevitably from the experience of migration and relocation.

Any migrant "calls into question settled values simply by his arrival and his presence" (Marty 395). What is called into question by habitual, cultural migration is the very notion of "settled values" as an enviable quality of mind. The migrant will certainly have his own values questioned by his host community. Because of a history of crossings, trans-Atlantic, trans-Pacific, and intercontinental, Americans cannot seriously entertain the idea of a culture that is not continually undergoing challenges to its settled values and to its essential definition. In Cather's vision, then, there is something distinctively "American" that emerges from the poetics of migration. However, it is not simply the immigrant who is given heroic status. Cather grants an apotheosis to the very idea that one must move in order to cross over into the future. In essence, this is Cather's piece of American mythology, which is now becoming quite useful to us all.

III

The millions of immigrants who have come to the United States have embodied the idea that no particular place is necessarily "home" to any human being, and that as a species, human beings are movable and take well to being transplanted. The idea of movement is the idea of America, represented by the eagle, the bird of prey that will make its home on any rock high enough to provide a clear vision. The eagle settles upon the rock only to await its next move, to locate its next victim. In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), Cather links American homelessness to the foundation of its empire. The empire of migration is an empire of transitory values, of transactions of power and focus, of the adaptation of old ideas to contemporary necessity, of shifting loyalties and cultural mergings. The novel's plot is migratory—it concerns an itinerant French Bishop, sent to the Hispanic Southwest by the French and Italian Cardinals to spread the faith of Rome among the Mexican and American people and, with luck, among the Navajo, the Acoma, and the Laguna.

Archbishop Latour is asked by the Navajo chief, Manuelito, to intervene on behalf of the Navajos in Washington. "They asked nothing of the Government, he told Father Latour, but their religion, and their own land where they had lived from immemorial times. Their country, he explained, was a part of their religion; the two were inseparable" (292). But Manuelito's request is far from "nothing." The idea of the United States is at precise odds with Manuelito's request: In America, place and belief, land and religion, are not and cannot be connected by sacred links. In a culture of mobility, consecrated ties to specific parcels of land are unthinkable.

Manuelito tells the Archbishop that the Canyon de Chelly is a sacred place. "Their gods were there, just as the Padre's God was in his church" (293). According to Navajo legend, the Shiprock, just north of the canyon, "was once a ship of the air" which flew from a mysterious place of origins and brought "the parents of the Navajo race" to this

desert where the gods wanted them to settle for all time. To the Navajo, one's sacred identity is rooted to a specific place. But to the migratory man, this is an affront. If homeland is sacred, what is the migrant doing so far away from his? Archbishop Latour travels in order to bring news of his God to New Mexico, to America and beyond. The Navajo gods brought the Indian to America to stay put. To the Navajos, travel is associated with origins, it defines their relation with the past. To Latour, the sacred journey is part of the present, it is the act that defines the future. Latour travelled thousands of miles to build a Cathedral under the auspices of a religion based upon an abstraction. The Navajo cannot "go three hundred miles away and live in a strange land" and therefore must have the canyon. In these sentiments Cather expresses the merging of ideas that would lead to creation of an American empire rooted in migration.

The confrontation between whites and Indians on the American plains pitted a culture of migration and transferral (paradoxically represented by "settlers") against a culture in which places and landscapes were sacred, represented, paradoxically, by nomadic peoples. In United States culture it is not the land that is sacred; the act of moving through it, with a rifle, a bible, or a box of samples in hand, was a matter of consecrated ritual.

Jean Latour carries a sense of the real with him to the Southwest, and Cather dramatizes the way in which his vision affects the landscape in his mind as he travels from Laguna to Acoma: "In all his travels the Bishop had seen no country like this. From the flat red sea of sand rose great rock mesas, generally Gothic in outline, resembling vast cathedrals" (94). The capability of seeing "Gothic" in the American landscape indicates a transmission of meaning from Europe to the desert that will prove fatal to the indigenous inhabitants of the region as well as determinate of subsequent developments there. The narrative comments upon the European center of Latour's journey, noting that "the early missionaries might well have forgotten the poor Acomas, that tribe of ancient rock-turtles, and believed themselves in some cloister hung on a spur of the Pyrenees" (102). It is the act of intellectual transmigration that will accomplish the success of the empire, and it is the transmission itself which the text describes as miraculous.

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop* Cather locates a fundamental aspect of American ideology in the figure of a French priest travelling on a Roman mission through the Hispanic southwest territories of the United States in the middle of the American nineteenth century. In confrontation with a culture of stability, the migratory idea faces its antithesis. The one idea which cannot be tolerated in America is an uncompromising hold to a single idea, place, or totalizing faith—such as that held by the Acoma and Navajo, or what Americans commonly refer to as the "cults" of fanatics or the doctrinaire politics of either left or right ideologues. The success of Archbishop Latour lies in his migrations to and from Santa Fe, Baltimore, Rome, interacting with traders and soldiers and the church hierarchy, representing the idea of transmission. The Romanesque Cathedral is his mark of triumph not as a symbol of stability but as the symbol of transiency.

At the conclusion to his frontier thesis, Frederick Jackson Turner refers to the "restless, nervous energy" of Americans, and asserts that "the expansive character of American life" has not disappeared with the frontier territories. Regarding "the character of American life," Turner argues, "Movement has been its dominant fact" (27). The standard interpretation of this statement has been a physical one, stressing the

class and territorial mobility of the American citizen. However, mobility has also passed into the culture as an ideological "great fact" of American existence. The philosophy of pragmatism, for instance, is based upon the disbelief in absolute positions and the incredulous reaction to fixed dogma or intransigence of any kind. As movement becomes a quality of mind, all ideas and belief systems are levelled by the common experience of crossing, of having let go of some prior idea and moved on to another. Such is the single requirement for inclusion in the American system, as projected by Cather's fiction. It does not matter what you believe in so long as you recognize that all beliefs are the product of crossing from some previous idea or situation into another. America transforms anti-essentialism into an essentialist principle.

Movement, then, is fundamental in Cather's America—moving amongst potential selves, migrating into new territories, transmitting ideas across frontiers. The environment created by this culture of migration is a fatal one to anyone or to any culture incapable of transformation or spiritually opposed to crossing over. The price of admission in the American environment is to abdicate any unchangeable, principled existence that will not yield to the migratory business of the empire. Intractability is the national heresy. Americans must learn early that they "contain multitudes" or they will be, in some fashion, destroyed. The burden of the future, for American civilization, will be to live up to its own standard of inclusive mobility, and to recognize in its frontier-consciousness that there is no past to uphold, only a future to construct. In other words, we must remember that we keep our suitcases under our beds, nearly forgetting our origins in the quest to complete our journey.

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