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The American Myth in Progress: Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*

Stéphanie Durrans-Brochon

At the heart of the age-old debate that has sharply divided opponents and proponents of myth, there lies a basic confrontation between the “regressive implications” and the “seminal uses” (Rahv, 3) attributed to mythmaking. However, as underlined by Philip Rahv, myth has critics and authors agreeing on at least one point:

[. . .] the one essential function of myth stressed by all writers is that in merging past and present it releases us from the flux of temporality, arresting change in the timeless, the permanent, the ever-recurrent conceived as “sacred repetition.” Hence the mythic is the polar opposite of what we mean by the historical, which stands for process, inexorable change, incessant permutation and innovation. Myth is reassuring in its stability, whereas history is that powerhouse of change which destroys custom and tradition in producing the future [. . .]. (Rahv, 6)

While notions of fixity, conservatism and stagnation consequently appear to be intrinsically attributable to myth, the more vital function of myth as a producer of history seems to have been completely overlooked. Roland Barthes goes even further by arguing that myth actually “transforms history into nature” (215), that it “deprives its object of all history” (239) and that its very function ultimately consists in “draining away reality” (230). However persuasive these arguments might be in a European context, it seems to me that their transposition to the field of American studies makes them vulnerable to criticism. How can we indeed reconcile the first settlers' achievement in forging a new nation with their initial vision of a *terra nullus*, a land without history or mythical foundations? In such a context, traditional assumptions that history lays the basis for myth might need rethinking to the point of positing a reverse process of history-making through the elaboration of myths.

The reason why I chose to focus my attention on Willa Cather's fourth novel, *My Ántonia* (1918), lies in what I perceive as the paradigmatic value of this work with respect to the emergence of a national literature in America. In the opening pages of the story, the narrator Jim Burden recalls his first vision of the Nebraskan land in the 1880s, at a time when many people still thought of it as lying on the Frontier. The nine-year-old Jim is then confronted by the "empty darkness" (7) of a territory in which "there seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields" (7), a territory in which "there was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made" (7), a territory that reaches back into the night of times. (In this respect, it is particularly significant that Jim's first vision of Nebraska should take place at night.) The task facing Jim Burden from now on will thus consist in constructing both a personal and national identity out of this empty, virgin land.

In the field of Cather studies, scant attention had been paid to the dynamics of contextualized mythmaking until the publication of two critical landmarks in the mid 1990s: Joseph Urgo's *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* (1995) and Guy Reynolds's *Willa Cather in Context* (1996). The latter especially draws attention to Cather's formulation of a tension between myth and history in her first novel of the soil, *O Pioneers!* (1913). His belief that "Cather grafts an idealized mythic discourse onto her historical subject-matter" (Reynolds, 55) is illuminating within the limits of his analysis but it goes only part of the way towards accounting for the achievement of *My Ántonia*. There is indeed in this novel no sense of history to begin with, which leads to an altogether different sort of mythologizing process. Throughout *O Pioneers!*, we cannot help feeling Cather's difficulties in achieving a perfect conjunction of myth and reality. For instance, the imposition of the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe onto the tragic love story of Emil and Marie remains unsatisfactory because of its failure to throw light upon the construction of a specifically American identity which seemed to lie at the heart of Cather's concerns in this novel. In the same way, the unlikely conflation of two types of settlers which Reynolds identifies in Alexandra Bergson (the "canny speculator" and the "idealised pioneer farmer," Reynolds 56) seems to have been fully resolved in the delineation of Ántonia Shimerda five years later. In similar vein, Joseph Urgo's *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* opens with observations about the "dialectic between migration and settlement" which "informs New World history at every stage" (1). However, in Urgo's opinion, "the central theme, the overarching myth, the single experience that defines American culture at its core

is migration [. . .]" (5) and he consequently sees Willa Cather as a writer who "throughout her extensive body of work articulates the cultural mode of thought produced by migratory consciousness" (5). In the course of this well-informed study, Urgo brings the conclusions of social historian Walter Nugent to bear upon his own thesis, arguing that "scholars have been misled by an exclusive focus on the nation's frontier experience [. . .]. Focusing on migration rather than on the frontier would . . . place the American experience within the broader transatlantic context rather than isolate it as something unique" (Nugent, 27-29). However persuasive it may be, it seems to me that Urgo's argument fails to account for other powerful dynamics at work in Cather's fiction and I would differ from his position to argue that being anchored in a restricted space does not necessarily imply an attitude of withdrawal or pure nostalgia. On the contrary, the tension to be found between these two opposite forces of migration and rootedness is actually what energizes Cather's writing by allowing her to infuse the material she borrows with a specifically American quality. One of the poets Willa Cather most admired, Walt Whitman, once launched a vibrant appeal to American writers to throw off the shackles of tradition and to reject the influence of an imported mythology in the creative process.¹ Half a century later Willa Cather came to the realization that a true American mythology could only be born from the consciousness of the past revitalized by the American experience, a process which does enable us to focus both on the primacy of the Frontier and on transatlantic exchanges as a source of creativity.

In the chapter he devotes to the study of *My Ántonia*, Urgo analyzes Jim's perception of the unceasing motion of the land as an illustration of his migratory consciousness: "And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed, somehow, to be running" (15). While the trope of migration undoubtedly constitutes the main visual component of the scene, I would suggest that this is only a surface movement and that Willa Cather weaves more complex imaginary patterns into the fabric of this passage. When we consider the whole passage, and not only this isolated quotation, we realize that we are actually made to follow the workings of Jim's imagination through the skilful use of repetition and the reworking of Jim's first impres-

¹ In "Song of the Exposition," Whitman contemplates the elaboration of an American poetry liberated from classical mythology: "Come Muse migrate from Greece and Ionia, / Cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts, / That matter of Troy and Achilles' wrath, and Aeneas', Odysseus' wanderings, / Placard "Removed" and "To Let" on the rocks of your snowy Parnassus / Repeat at Jerusalem, place the notice high on Jaffa's gate and on Mount Moriah, / The same on the walls of your German, French and Spanish castles, and Italian collections, / For know a better, fresher, busier sphere, a wide, untried domain awaits, demands you" (ii).

sions on the next page: “[. . .] more than anything else I felt motion in the landscape; in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping . . .” (16). This second occurrence clearly highlights Jim’s search for imaginary landmarks and images that might help him take the measure of his new experience. At another level of articulation, the comparison with wild buffalo also serves as a first stage in Jim’s timid exploration of history, as if he were trying to project mythical images onto an empty land that keeps eluding him. Indeed, in *My Ántonia*, it is usually out of the depths of the earth that America’s image is gradually built up and mythicized. For instance, the rattlesnake killed by Jim in Book I suddenly appears as Jim is in the process of “examining a big hole with two entrances” (45) in the prairie-dog-town. Once more Jim subsequently proceeds to impart a historical dimension to the snake by turning it into the representative of a mythic past, “left on from buffalo and Indian times” (47). Paradoxically, the movement which best crystallizes the myth of America is not located in the migratory impulse of the characters *per se* but in a sense of place which serves as a repository for mythicized projections of the land. The description of Ántonia’s children springing up from the fruit-cellar is particularly significant of Cather’s desire to underline the energizing vitality of home and memory. Far from being construed only as a space for preservation and regression, the underground cellar is turned into a life-producing force (“a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight,” 339). Nor should we forget that one of the most memorable and unanimously acclaimed images of *My Ántonia* is nothing but a mere plough magnified by the last rays of the setting sun, thereby giving form and coherence to the endeavors of whole generations of farmers. It is also from his careful scrutiny of the land that Jim tries to reconstruct the history of Nebraska, from the Indian circle showing “like a pattern in the grass” “against the setting sun” (62) to Jim’s realization of man’s experience as a little circle in the final pages of the story. What is at stake in this closing panel is not only the migratory consciousness of a man who keeps heading forward through the fields. If migration there is, this migration actually takes him down the road of memory and back to his starting-point. The motif of the circle consequently appears as a much more potent representation of Jim’s consciousness, leading him to delve further and further into the recesses of the past on a quest for personal and national origins. The last lines of *My Ántonia* may therefore suggest Willa Cather’s desire to posit the myth of origins as a structuring principle for the American imagination and as a counterpoint to

the more centripetal doctrine of Manifest Destiny. These two opposite forces eventually stand out as constitutive of a powerful dynamics of contradiction underlying the American psyche, a dynamics Willa Cather best epitomizes through the conflictual relationships between Jim Burden (the legal counsel for a Western railway) and Antonia Shimerda (the very embodiment of the country, as suggested in the introduction to the main narrative). As a result of this permanent confrontation of forces, Cather's version of the myth of origins appears to be revitalized through the injection of American particulars which stand in striking contrast with the dead metaphors of European myths. As underlined by Roland Barthes, the best protection against myth is to produce an artificial myth which will, in its turn, become a true mythology (222). This is precisely what Jim Burden sets out to do through a complex process of appropriation, deconstruction and reconstruction of Old World material. In the face of this empty land which has so far been secluded from the mighty course of history, mythmaking initially appears as a daunting challenge. "However far back we go, mythology can only have historical foundations, because myth is the way history chooses to express itself: it could not arise out of the 'nature of things'" (194), asserts Roland Barthes. In a way, the feeling of dissatisfaction expressed by a number of critics about Alexandra Bergson's love relationship with the Genius of the Divide in *O Pioneers!* may actually stem from Willa Cather's failure to give this fantasy a truly historical or cultural basis. Inversely, I would suggest that the power of *My Antonia* comes from Cather's success in combining scattered fragments of America's history with revisited European myths to create a complex construction of America's foundational myths.

Certain episodes of American history are thus mythicized by Jim Burden as he tries to come to terms with the land of Nebraska. The tension between myth and history is particularly striking in the two "legends," as they are called, which form a sort of imaginary frame for Jim's childhood experiences in Nebraska: the sunflower legend (which is narrated on the occasion of Jim's first long ride across the country on his pony) and the story of Coronado's quest for the Seven Golden Cities of Quivera (which is narrated just before the Wick Cutter episode and Jim's hasty departure for university life in Lincoln). Both stories clearly have a strong etiological function in the true spirit of myths, the first one using the Mormon Trail episode to account for the presence of sunflowers in Nebraska while the veracity of the second one is supposedly attested by a farmer's discovery of a Spanish artifact in his field. Their actual historical basis is, however, open to doubt, as underlined by Jim through his reference to the dissenting opinions of botanists and aca-

demics. As a result of their position as frame narratives, they also appear as only the latest stage in a long process of mythmaking, like radiating from a core of ambivalent experiences not only in Jim's personal history but also in all American pioneers' history. Both stories serve indeed to emphasize the intrinsic tension between, on the one hand, the necessity of migration and the urge to conquer new lands, and on the other hand, the desire to settle once and for all either in a newly-conquered territory or in one's native country.

These fragments of American history are however few and far between, and pride of place is consequently given to a number of mythical projections imported from Europe. In her representation of the Nebraskan landscape and of Jim's adventures, Willa Cather borrows heavily from Biblical iconography, even though these overtones generally remain unobtrusive, working suggestively through a series of impressions rather than imposing themselves onto the meaning of the story as they usually do in *O Pioneers!* The passage relating Jim's and Antonia's first acquaintance with Nebraska is actually imbued with a strong sense of the sacred which runs counter to Jim's initial description of Nebraska as a God-forsaken place:² "The whole prairie was like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed. [. . .] it was a sudden transfiguration, a lifting-up of day" (40). A vision of America as akin to the Promised land of the Hebrews gradually takes shape, to be reinforced by the later description of a Virgin-like Antonia riding on her pony with a Joseph-like Jim walking by her side (47-48). Interestingly enough, the Burning Bush motif is taken up as Book II draws to a close through the description of the prairie:

The curly grass about us was on fire now. The bark of the oaks turned red as copper. There was a shimmer of gold on the brown river. Out in the stream the sandbars glittered like glass, and the light trembled in the willow thickets as if little flames were leaping among them. The breeze sank to stillness. In the ravine a ringdove mourned plaintively, and somewhere off in the bushes an owl hooted. The girls sat listless, leaning against each other. The long fingers of the sun touched their foreheads. (244)

Once more, framing devices are used to draw our attention to a complex pattern of echoes and symbolic correspondences in Jim's initiation. What was originally no more than a comparison borrowed from a foreign mytho-

² Jim's refusal to say his prayers on his first night in Nebraska (8) suggests an impression of being not only "outside man's jurisdiction" (7) but also in a territory situated beyond God's authority.

logical system has now become an organic part of the American experience. As a result, the encounter with the Holy Ghost typically serves as a prelude to a totally different kind of revelation than the one we would traditionally expect. Through an actual literary trans-figuration of conventional images, Willa Cather turns the apparition of a mere plough into a vision of the sublime that plunges its roots deep in the American pioneering experience of the Frontier. She thus endows this apparently insignificant object with a mythic potential which no one would ever have suspected of being there. This Americanization process is equally striking in the account of Jim's fight against the rattlesnake. In typically mythic vein, the whole episode abounds in echoes from popular stories like St George and the dragon or Perseus and Medusa. The validity of these mythic correlates is however undermined by the narrative voice as the adult Jim acknowledges that "[. . .] in reality it was a mock adventure; the game was fixed for me by chance, as it probably was for many a dragon-slayer" (49-50). And yet for all that, the rejection of mythological precedents should not lead us to lose sight of the new meaning given by Willa Cather to this ancestral fight. Once more indeed, she re-injects history into myth by foregrounding Jim's use of a spade as a weapon. The whole scene consequently turns into an allegory of man's fight against the wilderness and of the conquest of civilization on the Frontier.

The construction of a specifically national myth therefore arises out of the interplay between the romantic, mythopoeic voice of the child and the more realist voice of the adult narrator who takes European myths to pieces. The same dialogic tension is at work in the representation of Dumas' play *Camille* in Book III. While we see the play as a brilliantly moving representation of tragic love through the eyes of Jim as a young man, the voice of the adult narrator offers an ironic counterpoint with reminders of the heavy performance of the aging actress who played the part of Marguerite Gautier. A tentative rehabilitation of the myth briefly emerges at the end of the chapter when Jim asserts the ultimate power of the play to immobilize time: "The idea is one that no circumstances can frustrate. Wherever and whenever that piece is put on, it is April" (278). However, the mythology of love that the play so remarkably captures is only fully reconstructed in the closing panel of the story when Jim finds himself face to face with his own Marguerite Gautier in the form of an older, battered, toothless but still energetic Antonia. His new vision of Antonia actually represents a perfect synthesis of the various palimpsestual myths to be found in the whole story. Mythical projections of the Virgin Mary, of the Earth Goddess Demeter and of the idealized pioneer woman all fuse together in a mythic sublimation of Antonia as

the mother of future generations of Americans, "a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races" (353).³ In typically American vein, the ideal of the city upon a hill gives way to the myth of the woman "up there on the hill" (330). Like all myths, *Ántonia* herself remains essentially elusive, resisting any fixed interpretations or attempts to appropriate her, as suggested by the title given by Jim to his memoirs. Ultimately, the image of *Ántonia* does not belong to Jim anymore than it belongs to Mr Shimerda or to the Widow Steavens (two characters who also refer to her as "my *Ántonia*," 27, 313). By the end of the novel, she has acquired all her strength from her association with the power of myth and universal truth: "She lent herself to immortal human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true" (353). Willa Cather thus turns from a mythographer into a fully-fledged mythmaker. She eventually creates her own "meta-myth," to use the term coined by William Righter, that is "the myth which feeds off its components [and] attains some special sense of its own power" (Righter, 113). So doing, she uses myth in both a regressive and seminal way. By infusing European myths with essentially American qualities, she manages to create something new and inspiring out of age-old images that have sometimes become slightly stale, overused or even meaningless. Despite her profoundly mythical dimension, *Ántonia* never loses her essentially referential value, a correlate to this sense of place which constitutes a central feature of the American mythological scene.

As the American critic Richard Slotkin points out, "myth is the language in which a society remembers its history" (655). In *My Ántonia*, Willa Cather's mythopoeic imagination certainly went a long way towards concentrating the American historical consciousness around a series of enduring images that provide stability in a world of incessant flux and migration. With the passing of time, and judging from its long-lasting appeal for a wide American readership, it seems that *My Ántonia* certainly takes pride of place in the elaboration of a New World mythology and the emergence of a truly national literature.

³ This metaphorical network runs through the whole narrative, from *Ántonia*'s physical appearance (her hair is equated with grass when she provides shelter for an insect in it, 40, she is compared with a tree with "her neck [coming] up strongly out of her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out of the turf," 122, etc.) to her sublimation as a Goddess of Nature and fertility in the last pages.

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