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On Province and Empire in *My Ántonia* and *One of Ours:* Cather's 1922 *The Waste Land*

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Willa Cather profoundly alters her attitude towards the American experiment, World War I, and the prospect of cultural pluralism in America between her 1918 My Ántonia *and her 1922 One of Ours. In doing so, she addresses the issue of what kind of culture America should have: a monistic one such as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson advocated or a pluralistic one. In* My Ántonia*, set during the period of Great Plains settlement but extending up into World War I, she presents an intact American cultural pluralism: non-English speaking European cultures continuing their positive practices absent the monarchic repression of Central European empires. Her ethnic settlements in the Great Plains practice pluralistic democracy without intervention from centralised authority, implicitly reflecting what could happen under an emerging European anti-monarchic ethos or in an America that allowed for many ways of life. In* One of Ours*, on the other hand, she savages the jingoism that possessed America during, and after World War I: a repression that makes the war disastrous for pluralistic democracy. The dream falters. Her wartime Nebraska becomes repressive for Germans, Czechs, and other divergent peoples. It practices conformity, a new materialism, and meaningless religion. Indeed, the death of her novel's hero, Claude Wheeler, is not a sacrifice that enables democratic renewal but rather offers us a self-blinded hero who dies in glorious strife only as he sees it. He actually dies for a nation increasingly making itself unsafe for democracy in an army whose soldiers are massively disillusioned by the war. Thereafter, Cather writes little in a positive vein of Nebraska or the Great Plains and its various cultures but turns to earlier New World catalyst communities such as those of Quebec, the pueblos of the Southwest, and pioneer New Mexico.*

Keywords
Willa Cather; cultural pluralism; World War I; materialism; religion

Willa Cather engaged history and nativism in her World War I–era novels, first presenting the tragedy and triumphs of Czech people in the New World as an antidote to nativism, then rendering the pathos of Woodrow Wilson's slogan making World War I into a battle for democracy, showing it to be fought without care for democratic cultural values. This paper will first explore the historical mythoi that Cather is engaging in her World War I–period novels, then examine what *My Ántonia* has to say about America from 1914 to 1918, and, finally, what the subsequent *One of Ours* says about the same period. At the centre of both fictions is a concern for cultural pluralism for European immigrants and for the survival of European cultures pressed at home by American monism and imperial designs.

A 1999 essay by Phyllis Frus and Stanley Corkin argues that Willa Cather should be read as a *mythos* maker who mythologises Great Plains agrarianism and the Great Plains frontier:

> In such a "re-framed" discipline we envision Cather being read in a course on agrarianism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with works by Henry George, Ignatius Donnelly, Frank Norris, Sinclair Lewis, and Ellen Glasgow, or in a study of the frontier myth and its effects, which would also include dime novels, some early Western films, and works by Frederick Jackson Turner, Theodore Roosevelt, Owen Wister, Josiah Strong, and Alfred Thayer Mahan. (41)

Cather does, indeed, engage history and construct historical myth as did her literary mentors: Virgil, Dante, and Tolstoy. However, her World War I and after mythmaking most clearly engages America's need to eschew the monistic culture advocated in much World War I–period political discourse. Cather engages the myth of America's need to destroy its "hyphenated Americans" – and does so to further the dream of a pluralistic nationhood in *My Ántonia* (1918) and in *One of Ours* (1922) to show the pluralistic dream destroyed. In 1923, she also writes a polemical essay for *The Nation*, "NEBRASKA: The End of the First Cycle", where she laments the destruction of Nebraska's European-based cultures and classical knowledge.

Cather, through these two novels, enters into post–Civil War national debates as to what should be done with remnants of Europe possessed by U.S. immigrants, presenting in *My Ántonia* a powerful version of a Nebraska composed on self-regulating subcultures. In *One of Ours*, she represents how

cultural pluralism died in the repressive culture surrounding World War I (and, implicitly, in post–World War I–era materialism and jingoism).

To review the novels briefly: *My Ántonia* celebrates the power of European Czech ethnic culture on the Great Plains – its formidable courage, family-building power, and aesthetic sense. (Ántonia is based on the real-life Annie Sadilek Pavelka; all quotations and citations are from the Willa Cather Archive edition unless otherwise noted: https://cather.unl.edu/). Some of Ántonia's strength also appears in her friends, the Scandinavian hired girls. Much of the story is a recitation of the settlement in the early 1880s of Ántonia and her family in a dugout in southwestern Nebraska, her father's sense of despair and aesthetic deprivation at life in a dugout, his suicide and burial at a crossroads without benefit of clergy, and Ántonia's subsequent effort to enable her family to survive and preserve her mother's family, her family's farm, and her Czech culture despite being surrounded by a world of exploitative finance, uncaring English-speaking townspeople, male rapists and seducers, an illegitimate child, and harsh soil and weather. Finally, she achieves her own farm and family.

Ántonia's struggles to reach beyond her early tragedies to create a good life on a Nebraska farm are rendered through the eyes of Jim Burden, an orphaned child from an Eastern Seaboard Virginia family, who goes to live with his Nebraska grandparents and tells in a first-person journal his story, that of Ántonia's, and those of her acquaintances. Burden grows up at the same time as Ántonia; she as a scion of Czech culture, and he as a product of a pioneer classical education.

Burden's move from his grandparents' farm to the small western Nebraska town of Black Hawk during the same period as Ántonia goes from her mother's poor farm to be a "hired girl" in town allows Cather to explore class divisions in pioneer society. Cather tells of the turmoil of maturation for both young people but especially that of Ántonia as she faces establishment male exploitation in town. Burden eventually goes away to the University of Nebraska in Lincoln where he studies the classics, especially Virgil, with a young professor who teaches him to live through Virgilian and classical eyes, though in the end he comes to be a somewhat sterile businessman caught in a bad marriage (Olson). In the last book of the novel, set in 1915, three years before the novel was published near the end of the First World War, Burden visits Ántonia's farm where she now has a good but weak husband from the old country, ten children, and a peaceful life reflecting her Bohemian heritage – Bohemian speech, ducks and geese, kolaches, a large orchard and

gardens, and Bohemian dances – a place filled with joy, reverence for life, and the people she loves.

While *My Ántonia* was published in September 1918, about two months before the war's conclusion, *One of Ours* appeared in September 1922, when the country had begun to assess the relationship between the ideals proclaimed by American leaders during the war and the war's actual outcomes. Whereas *My Ántonia* is told subjectively in Burden's journal and with his mythologising talent, *One of Ours* is told in spare prose by an omniscient narrator; much of the time that narrator is looking over the shoulder of Claude Wheeler, the novel's central character. Wheeler's history is based on the life story of G. P. Cather, Willa's cousin who was killed at Cantigny in World War I. Though the novel received the Pulitzer Prize, it was often panned by contemporary literati on the grounds that a woman could not write about war and that the language was not the rich stuff of *My Ántonia*. The language is spare precisely because the dream is done, and life is seen sparely and presumably accurately.

The plot centres on Wheeler, first in Nebraska as a student at a fundamentalist college and then as a university student, then a farmer, and finally, a soldier. During the university period, we learn of Wheeler's love – equivalent of Burden's for the Shimerdas – for an intellectually active German family, the Erlichs. He also comes to admire other characters bearing the marks of continental European cultures under assault in the chauvinism of World War I.

Claude is forced to leave the university to return to his materialistic father's farm when his father acquires a ranch in Colorado. There he begins a frigid marriage to Enid Royce, who abruptly leaves for China to be a missionary without displaying any love for her husband. To find meaning in his life, he enlists in the army. He goes on a troop ship to France, where influenza dominates, and to the war zones in the Lorraine area, where he thinks he has found a life purpose in leading men into battle. That "purpose" causes him to sacrifice his own life while inspiring his men in the fictive Boar's Head section of the Moltke trench, leaving behind a grieving mother, who is also seeking to find meaning.

Though both novels engage history and historical myth, what they seize on are not primarily the myths of agrarianism and the West suggested by Frus and Corkin (though both find a place in the novels). What they address is America's protection of democratic cultural pluralism within its borders and its battle for it overseas. Cather is saying, in the two novels, that pluralism could have been the basis of a good local and national life but that the

chauvinism and nativism of World War I and after destroyed it and pushed America towards a monolithic, xenophobic culture destructive of all folk or high culture.

The issue of what kind of culture America would have becomes part of the political discourse and appears in the work of leading writers in the period from 1880 to 1930. Prior to the 1840s and early 1850s, the United States was settled primarily by the English and Protestant Irish; some German immigrants, probably mostly Protestant, settled in states like Pennsylvania (Cohn). However, just before and after the Civil War, all of this changed. The potato famines in Ireland and political revolts and wars in Germany and Central Europe led to a marked increase in non-Protestant, non-English immigration. Among the push factors for immigration to the Plains at the time were the 1853-56 Crimean War against Russia, the 1859 Franco-Piedmont War against the Austrian Empire, the 1866 Seven Weeks' War against the same empire, and the 1870–71 Franco-Prussian War that defeated France and made a militaristic Prussia dominant in the German territories (Garver 180). Among the pull factors were the transcontinental railroads, the Homestead Act that distributed free land on the frontier, and putative political and economic opportunity. As a consequence of these perturbations in Europe and opportunities in the New World, "[b]etween 1880 and 1920, more than 20 million immigrants arrive[d]" in the United States, "[t]he majority [...] from Southern, Eastern and Central Europe" (History.com editors). Between 1900 and 1920, the nation admitted more than 14.5 million immigrants, mostly again from eastern and southern Europe, and passed a series of xenophobic immigration acts ("Mass Immigration and WWI"). Scholar Joseph G. Svoboda writes, "[b]y 1910, the number of first and second generation Czechs in Nebraska was nearly 51,000 or about ten percent of the state's population of foreign birth and foreign parentage" (153); large numbers of these people concentrated in areas to which they gave Czech place-names such as Bruno, Prague, and the Bohemian Alps.

At the same time, in American literature of the more popular sort – pulp fiction and Westerns – an aggressive nativism began to appear, one where even the simplest intellect could discern in fictions that true goodness and heroism came from white northern European heroes, especially of Eastern Seaboard white descent (Madison; B. Cohen).

The key to Cather's opposition to monistic culture is Jim Burden, especially his reading of Virgil. He is a surrogate for Cather with roots in Virginia, a childhood in western Nebraska, much preoccupied with the Greco-Roman

classics, and friendly with Annie Pavelka in ways that parallel Jim's friendship with Ántonia. As Ann Fisher-Wirth writes, "What Ántonia, as woman, represents for Willa Cather, as woman, is expressed by Jim Burden, who speaks for Willa Cather, as writer" (Fisher-Wirth). One clue to Cather's antipathy to monistic culture is contained in a passage where Jim Burden meditates on the meaning of Virgil's *Georgics*. The passage that Burden putatively quotes actually asserts that the poet will take the wreath for poetic fame away from Greece and lead a triumphal march to Italy where he will be crowned for building, in poetry, a temple to Caesar Augustus and his conquests. John Conington's notes on this passage suggest a Virgil anything but humble:

> The poet who has just spoken of himself as a conqueror ("victor") represents himself as returning from a campaign in Greece and bringing the muses captive from Helicon; in other words, if the old subjects of song are forestalled, he will be the first to do for Rome what Hesiod and others have done for Greece. Then he will build a votive temple by his native temple to his patron god, and celebrate before it games and shows, like Roman conquerors after their triumph. The temple is to be adorned with the sculptured history of Augustus. (Virgil *Georgics* 3 in *Opera* [1881], 1:282)

Cather, using the voice of Gaston Cleric, transforms the *Georgics* 3 passage celebrating the grand transfer of imperial conquest and culture from Greece to imperial Rome into one celebrating the transfer of the muse from Greece not to the empire and the praise of Augustus, as the Virgilian original asserts, but to Virgil's hometown, to the local Mincio's riverbanks. Considering Cather's central preoccupation, it can be surmised that she makes the passage implicitly into a praise of transferring culture from Europe to the American Plains. The transfer will go not to an empire but to a small cultural region in northern Italy near the Mincio River. Gaston contracts the area to which his reappropriated Grecian muse will speak from the entire Roman empire to Virgil's Mincio neighbourhood and eliminates Virgilian triumphalism in a deliberate reappropriation to endorse local culture-building. Here is what Burden finds in Virgil, *Georgics* 3, as he

> turned back to the beginning of the third book, [he noted the phrase] "Primus ego in patriam mecum . . . deducam Musas"; "for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my country." Cleric had explained to [Burden's group] that "patria" here meant, not a nation or even a province,

> but the little rural neighborhood on the Mincio where the poet was born. This was not a boast, but a hope, at once bold and devoutly humble, that he might bring the Muse (but lately come to Italy from her cloudy Grecian mountains), not to the capital, the *palatia Romana*, but to his own little "country"; to his father's fields, "sloping down to the river and to the old beech trees with broken tops." (Cather, *My Ántonia* III, ii)

The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition notes that Cather misquotes the Virgilian texts and often quoted from memory:

Book 3, lines 10–11, are as follows: "*Primus ego in patriam mecum, modo vita supersit, / Aonio rediens deducam vertice Musas*;" [. . .] Cather's translation is inaccurate, but her usual practice was to quote from memory without bothering to look up the passage. The sense of the translation is accurate enough. (Cather, *My Ántonia* fn. 197)

Cather's sense is not "accurate enough" as a representation of what the *Georgics* say. In my view, she deliberately changes the meaning of the passage, so that, whereas in Virgil, the muse comes into the Roman Empire to praise Augustus, her Gaston Cleric as classicist makes it come into the little area near the Mincio to soften local culture.

Gaston Cleric's Virgil is not prepared to perform the praise of Augustus' imperial triumphs; in the analogous passage in *Georgics* 3, neither local nor humble, Virgil tells us that he will find a way to ride in triumph above the rest of humankind. Then follow the lines Jim reads, here given in full from Conington's 1895 edition:

> Primus ego in patriam mecum, modo vita supersit,
> Aonio rediens deducam vertice Musas,
> Primus Idumaeas referam tibi, Mantua, palmas,
> Et viridi in campo templum de marmore ponam
> Propter aquam, tardis ingens ubi flexibus errat
> Mincius et tenera praetexit arundine ripas.
> (Virgil *Georgicon Tertius* in *Opera* [1881] 52)

The Conington translation, popular in Cather's time, reads:

> Yes, I will be the first, if but lip [*sic* life] hold out, to dislodge the Aonian

> muses from their mountain home, and carry them with me in my victorious progress into my native land. I will be the first to bring back to thee, my Mantua, the palms of Idumea, and on the broad greensward I will build a temple of marble by the water's side, where Mincius trails his great breadth along in lazy windings, and fringes his banks with soft rushes as he goes. (Virgil *Georgics* 3 in *The Works of Virgil* [1892] 79)

Cleric and Burden contract the area to which the Grecian muse will speak from all Rome to the Mincio neighbourhood. They eliminate Virgilian triumphalism. This appropriation to celebrate the local appears to be no accidental misquotation but one deliberately endorsing local agriculture- and culture-building.

The elimination of imperial triumphalism from Virgil's motive for moving the muse from Greece to Italy – or, in Jim's case, from Europe to Nebraska – is not peripheral to Cather's 1918 vision. *My Ántonia* was written mostly during 1917–18 when the United States fought absolutist monarchies ruling the heart of Europe to "make the world safe for democracy" – so the story went. The novel appeared in print on September 21, 1918, just under two months before war's end. Though Cather does not mention the war in the novel, her appropriation of Virgil without mention of Augustus fits her belief at the time that the war against tired-out monarchies was worthwhile as she notes in a 1914 letter to Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant and in a 1918 letter to Frances Smith Cather (Cather, *Complete Letters* #0285, #0440).

Only a few weeks after *My Ántonia* appeared, on the day of the war's ending, Cather wrote to her Aunt Francis, who had lost her son, G. P. Cather, to the war. Cather echoed popular Wilsonian propaganda that the war would end absolute monarchy and tyranny:

> On this first day of the great Peace, when this city [New York City] is mad with joy and all the church bells are ringing, my heart turns to you who have helped to pay the dear price for all that this world has gained. Think of it, for the first time since human society has existed on this planet, the sun rose . . . upon a world in which not one great monarchy or tyranny existed. . . . I know you will wish that G. P. had lived to see this glorious day, and to help in the reconstruction work which must follow. (Complete Letters #0440).

Cather wrote several similar letters concerning the war, expressing conventional

views about democracy's stake in the war and her dislike of central European absolutism, which was rooted in the old Roman dream of an empire comprising many countries and ruled by a Caesar, kaiser, or czar. Although Cather in a 1938 letter to Ferris Greenslet indicates that she admires Buchan's version of Augustus and always indicates her love of ancient Rome at a historical distance (*Complete Letters* #1422; Buchan), she did not admire Kaiser Wilhelm, who claimed Caesar's title (*Complete Letters* #1845). Cleric's explanation of Virgil's transfer of the muse from Greece to the Mincio area without mentioning that it comes to praise Augustus and the Roman *imperium* reflects, more than Virgil's Augustan hope, Cather's own agenda for American culture's possible continuation of European-based cultures in the popular realm and its study of the classical cultures that had been central for the elites in American education from the beginning.

Though Cather had finished *My Ántonia* by the time of G. P. Cather's death at Cantigny on May 28, 1918, she still wrote and submitted its introduction in her own authorial voice, a piece that preceded Jim's "manuscript". Proofreading, she could have made changes. But no evidence suggests she made any changes because of G. P.'s death; Cather submitted the introduction that prefaced Jim Burden's journal on June 20, 1918, and corrected proofs in July (*Complete Letters* #0420). Indeed, G. P.'s death seems to have given her the temporary feeling that the sacrifice would produce good, as she indicates in a deeply felt letter to Frances Smith Cather (*Complete Letters* #0419). She then believed the battles of Britain, France, and the United States against absolutist European empires protected democracy and valuable oppressed Central European cultures; for example, she writes to Elsie on Armistice Day: "This is the great Peace Day. . . sad that the Kaiser should put all the kings out of business". Cather says that she "wanted a few harmless ones left" (*Complete Letters* #1845, #2079).

However, at the time Cather wrote, anachronistically, what constituted valuable American cultures was not settled. Two popular understandings of what an American democratic cultural system might be competed, and Cather supported the "Mincio" not the "imperial" one. The "imperial" version, articulated by Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, favoured U.S. and Triple Entente universal domination and asserted that true "Americans" should not identify with traditional European cultures. "Hyphenated Americans," persons speaking non-English languages and maintaining old country traditions, should conform (*New York Times*, 13 Oct. 1915; Vought). Although applied primarily to German-Americans, this ideology also suppressed other identifiably European cultural enclaves – Bohemians, Swedes, Norwegians,

and Irish (Luebke *passim*; for Swedes, Folsom; cf. Cather and Bohlke, "1921: Hastings and Omaha"). Homogenisation continued into the war for young men from all ethnicities, and, in *One of Ours*, Cather portrays many ethnicities serving as interchangeable war machine parts. France's rows of white crosses give no sense of the local cultural group to which the dead belong (V, x).

Alternatives to Roosevelt's and Wilson's versions of democracy were pushed by Horace Kallen in his 1915 article "Democracy versus the Melting Pot", proposing an America heterogeneity without forced assimilation, enclaves having separate patterns of culture and mutual cultural respect (Ratner; Downey). Kallen's 1915 argument, treating coercive assimilation as contradicting democratic America, resembles Cather's implicit 1918 one in *My Ántonia*. And Kallen's cultural pluralism predictably inspired the repressive Councils of Defense, organised by Woodrow Wilson to "safeguard democracy".

The typical Nebraska Council of Defense in Saunders County took to itself a mandate that would have destroyed Ántonia's style of living and eroded democratic governance itself. The Saunders County Council of Defense, according to the county's World War I "Honor Roll", identified pattern "actions against the government":

> [D]isloyal remarks regarding the objects, motives, and purposes for which the nation had felt called upon to declare war. . . . [D]isloyal acts . . . depriv[ing] the military forces of the nation and its foreign allies of breadstuffs and other food necessary. . . [F]ailures to subscribe or contribute to the various war activities . . . [V]iolation of foreign language laws passed by the legislature. . . . [P]ro-German sentiment and sympathy manifested in private utterances and public display. . . . [O]bstructing the enlistment or draft of persons . . . . ("Saunders County"; cf. Edler)

Though the Honor Roll's statements are confusing and single out only German culture, its broader intent is clear: the totalising of American culture under one language and set of cultural practices. Councils of Defense were about this as were local government actions such as Iowa's Babel proclamation, all promoting Wilsonian-Rooseveltian "democracy". Iowa's Babel Proclamation forbade the public use of non-English languages, implicating not only German-speaking people but Iowa's Scandinavian and Slavic language speakers (Frese). Cather resisted such standardisation, and her own essay about the war effort in Nebraska concerns how much separate ethnic communities assist in the war effort without disloyalty or obstruction (Cather, "Roll Call").

During World War I, the cherishing of American Czech, or "Bohemian", culture could mean respect for the right of Czechs to democratic self-rule abroad *or* for Czech self-rule in America. Cather writes of a Prague in Nebraska and in Bohemia, of superior Czech immigrants emerging from the Czech revolt of 1848, of the Czech culture in Wilber, Nebraska: its language, food, and Czech-language theatre (Cather, "NEBRASKA"). By 1916, the Czechoslovak National Council, active in the United States, France, and Russia, sought Czech independence, and although Cather did not editorialise in favour of Czech freedom, she did see American and Central European Czechs as related. Early in the independence of Czechoslovakia, she wrote to Olga Folda, a young Nebraskan seeking to visit the old country, "If you have a desire to write about Nebraska Bohemians, it seems to me that you are following an ideally perfect program", one in which you "understand the West better by knowing the old country, and . . . see the old country more clearly by the light of the West" (*Complete Letters* #2806). In the 1920s, she corresponded with Tomáš Masaryk, president of Czechoslovakia, stressing her gratitude that, through *My Ántonia*, she had served the Czechs of his country by respecting those of hers (Jewell and Stout 365).

My Ántonia engages World War I concerns in subtle ways. Though most of *My Ántonia* is set in an 1880s–90s distant from the struggle, the last section, "Cuzak's Boys", occurs, fictively, twenty years later, in 1915, during the European phase of the war and at just three years before its World War I period publication in 1918. The whole speaks to 1914–18 issues, picturing the peoples of pre–World War I northern, western, and central Europe, immigrants to Nebraska, living harmoniously while practicing their traditions. Cather's respect for Ántonia's sense of responsibility in the form of her preservation of her family culture and her family's farm gives implicit power to the idea that European Czechs deserve the "self-determination" contemplated in Triple Entente messaging ("self-determination" included some German populations in Czechoslovakia as well [Vink]). Ántonia and her husband organise their lives to foster self-sufficiency and the autonomous family unit.

Answering, at a personal level, the militarism of Europe and World War I's hope for a "war to end all wars", Ántonia speaks, in the book's last section, of peaceful ways: "'I'm afraid to look at a gun now. . . . Ever since I've had children, I don't like to kill anything. It makes me kind of faint to wring an old goose's neck. Ain't that strange, Jim?'" (V, i). Ántonia ends with an ethic of nonviolent reverence for all life and a care for her Czech family not disconsonant with peace-seeking. Though Cather herself was no pacifist

and did not respect all cultures, especially Plains Indigenous and African American ones (Gorman), she did resist efforts to erase hyphenated Americans of European descent because she respected pluralism, decentralisation, and peace.

The World War I root of *My Ántonia* most obviously appears in Cather's treatment of Otto Fuchs, the Burdens' hired man. Otto comes from Austrian Germanic stock, but the only sign of his European background is the scar that he carries across his face, perhaps from some Austrian sword fighting designed to demonstrate manhood. Unlike Ántonia, Otto has few roots in Europe and acts the fully assimilated cowboy-desperado: twirled moustache, sombrero, and boots. He seems to drift around the West using jack-of-all-trades skills, including building Mr. Shimerda's coffin when that is necessary (I, xv). Though he emerges from Austrian Germanic society, he has lost – or foresworn – Germanic culture in favour of a western persona. However, even he recognises, to Jim Burden's grandmother, that Mr. Shimerda, coming from Bohemia, would not trust the recommendation of an Austrian to protect his family from Krajiek's cheating:

> "Yes'm," said Otto; "and he's [Krajiek's] sold 'em his oxen and his two bony old horses for the price of good work-teams. I'd have interfered about the horses – the old man can understand some German – if I'd 'a' thought it would do any good. But Bohemians has a natural distrust of Austrians." Grandmother looked interested. "Now, why is that, Otto?" Fuchs wrinkled his brow and nose. "Well, ma'm, it's politics. It would take me a long while to explain." (I, iii; cf. G. Cohen)

What *My Ántonia* presents, in short, is a vision of classical studies moved to America to guide the region's elites and European cultural practices as norms for ordinary immigrant citizens, all without the nationalistic warring of European nations. Ántonia's America needs no Caesar because its local communities take care of themselves.

Most of this is gone by *One of Ours* in 1922, presenting a fictional life and World War I death like that of G. P. Cather. Cather famously says in her preface to *Not Under Forty* (1936), "[t]he world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts" (v). Literary historians often refer this statement to literary changes that came with James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and other early modernists of the 1920s, but some readers refer it to larger cultural changes occasioned by the war and after (Stout). The latter

group's analyses appear more likely. They explain the differences between the America of *My Ántonia* and *One of Ours* four years later. In 1922, Cather, doing an about-face from *My Ántonia* and her letters during the war, renders the malaise that began in Nebraska and the nation during the war and continued through the twenties. *One of Ours*, far from being a celebration of state and nation, is in the mode of Cather's 1923 essay "NEBRASKA: The End of the First Cycle", in criticising the state as too materialistic, too prosperous, and too committed to a vulgar version of popular culture: machines, mass production, and automobiles. The state rendered in the novel is also too repressive of, and indifferent to, the preservation of European-based enclaves, its people now largely rendered incapable of creating for themselves. As she says in her 1923 essay, her next-generation Nebraskans, no longer in love with the ancients, seek in the University of Nebraska a trade school, Jim Burden's world of Virgilian Mincio-muse having fled.

> The classics, the humanities, are having their dark hour. . . . Studies that develop taste and enrich personality are not encouraged. . . . One may venture to hope that the children, or the grandchildren, of a generation that goes to a university to select only the most utilitarian subjects in the course of study – among them, salesmanship and dressmaking – will revolt against all the heaped-up machine-made materialism about them. (237–38)

Looking at the lost world of classical learning and hard work sacrificed on the altars of machinery and materialism, she could still, in her essay, identify a certain vision flourishing in World War I: "The wave of generous idealism, of noble seriousness, which swept over the State of Nebraska in 1917 and 1918, demonstrated how fluid and flexible is any living, growing, expanding society" (Cather, "NEBRASKA" 238). In her fiction, however, "noble seriousness" ends with Ántonia's family. Precious few characters from *One of Ours* protect their traditions, and no character acts in Virgilian georgic or epic terms to build up the region. The classics are gone. Claude Wheeler's troopship, *Anchises*, is no hero protecting household gods, no father carried on the next generation's back away from old burning cities but an artifact transporting troops to a burning Europe. *One of Ours* brings no muse into Nebraska. Claude's study of the classics never makes them a measuring rod; the only ancient mythic measuring stick proposed is that of the Semele envisaged by Claude's friend, Gerhardt, who suggests that, out of the war, an unforeseen Semele-child may be born that will kill the culture that is – a statement not necessarily

hopeful but perhaps foreshadowing Cather's later sentiment about the world's breaking (V, xiii). Gerhardt knows that the war will not "make the world safe for democracy", as the official rhetoric justifying the fighting asserted; he also knows that the world's elite cultural productions and producers mean nothing when confronting war (V, xiii). His reference to Semele's death refers to the time when she, tricked, asks Jupiter to manifest himself in full godlike form to make love to her. His act consumes her, leading to the birth of Bacchus from the ashes. Gerhardt surmises that the meaningless war may result in an unforeseen Bacchic rebirth. Semele's death by Jupiter's radiance and Bacchus's birth from his mother's death were sometimes interpreted by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century mythographers to suggest the birth of grapes and wine from the earth or of libido from wine. But eighteenth-century painting also made it an analogue to the new age emerging after the Incarnation, and Moreau makes it the triumph of Christian spirituality over paganism (Mostue; Panofsky; Duryea 235; Krell). The Semele reference says what Gerhardt also says directly: the war will not create any worldwide democratic stable state but may produce a new spirituality.

Gerhardt believes the war is not fought for democracy, and Cather presents it so – not as sustaining a cultural democracy where the "Italic" gods as well as those that come from Greece are respected. Democratic pluralism is as much under attack in the novel as it was from Nebraska Councils of Defense. Whereas the Shimerda family and others in *My Ántonia* who identify with old world ways receive respect from Jim Burden and the city of Black Hawk's leaders, in *One of Ours* the primary characters carrying a European cultural identity – German, Swedish, or Bohemian – receive little community respect or attention for their unique styles of life, save for Enid's will to prohibit Bohemian beer drinking and a general will to suppress Germanic culture. The impoverished German Erlich family violates all contemporary clichés about wartime German-Americans. They are not committed to "Hunnish" values but to those of the 1806 Francophile Napoleonic Confederation of the Rhine; witness the portrait of Napoleon and their remembrance of an ancestor who was a Napoleonic officer. They love music and opera and have a wonderful capacity for German hospitality, good food, and friendly intellectual discussion. Other German families, the Yoeders and Oberlies, are more sympathetic towards the old country, more uncertain that the war against the kaiser is just but receive undemocratic punishment from the law for exercising legitimate free speech rights (III, ix). "Mrs. Voigt, the German woman", a harmless restauranteur, receives spying accusations, boycotts, and tarring threats (III, x). The German

language is suppressed. The European-based lifestyles celebrated in *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!* receives only marginalisation in *One of Ours*. Democracy gets as savage a response from the novel's Nebraskans as it, historically, endured from the state's Councils of Defense.

Through Claude, in *One of Ours*, Cather expresses her contempt for the standardisation, solipsism, and selfishness that go with Nebraska's disintegrating of cultural and neighbourhood ties.

> Claude felt sure that when he was a little boy and all the neighbours were poor, they and their houses and farms had more individuality. The farmers took time then to plant fine cottonwood groves on their places, and to set osage orange hedges along the borders of their fields. Now these trees were all being cut down and grubbed up. Just why, nobody knew; they impoverished the land . . . they made the snow drift . . . nobody had them any more. With prosperity came a kind of callousness; everybody wanted to destroy the old things they used to take pride in. The orchards, which had been nursed and tended so carefully twenty years ago, were now left to die of neglect. It was less trouble to run into town in an automobile and buy fruit than it was to raise it. (I, xviii)

The novel presents World War I rural Nebraskans as changed: litigious, either stingy or extravagant. This "I'm all right, Jack" ethic leads several of the novel's major characters, especially Claude and Gladys, into a carceral isolation; Gladys notes the sense of imprisonment (II, vi), and Claude sees prisoners about him in the open landscape, including his brother Bayliss and Mrs. Royce (III, ii). He himself senses captivity within the walls of an unloving family (save for Mrs. Wheeler) that presumes to set directions for him, an unloving wife who determines *her* directions without him, a community culture that, save for some Germans and the Czech Havel, isolates, and a farm life from which he isolates himself (II, ii): his heart a "lump of ice" (III, v); his life but "dreary, weary, ever-repeated actions" (III, v). On the way to France, Claude sees his Nebraska life as that of a tortured prisoner, "like those Chinese criminals who are planted upright in the earth, with only their heads left out for birds to peck at and insects to sting" (IV, iii). Only occasionally do flashes of hope appear as when he feels there must be "something splendid about life" (I, xviii), a feeling that comes more regularly as he approaches the war (cf. IV, iii; V, xiv).

Shortly after *One of Ours* appeared, leading male literati of the time

mentioned earlier, including H. L. Mencken, Ernest Hemingway, and Sinclair Lewis, attacked Cather for knowing nothing of war – taking her details from movies or other novels (O'Brien 114). The recovery of the G. P. Cather letters on which Cather based her war narration has reduced that clamour; although she made mistakes, her research with soldiers and on the battlefields and near-front areas was thorough – not inferior to that of Crane and Tolstoy on wars they rehearsed but did not experience. In any case, parts IV and V of *One of Ours* are concerned less by the technicalities of war than by Claude's search for the meaning of his pain – not the collective defence of democracy, but his subjective truth.

Claude knows that chauvinism on the home front has undone whatever cultural democracy America had; the war is not fought for the causes identified by Washington, D.C., and Woodrow Wilson. The search for significance is Claude's and is within. Objectively, there is no war "cause" and little justice: an indiscriminate plague rages on the *Anchises*; widows and children starve; near entire battalions of British schoolboys are slaughtered; Mademoiselle Olive, for all her Red Cross French graciousness, is worn out, and the graves near her place mark the German and French dead with meaningless symmetry. The deaths are grotesque: "His congested eyeballs were rolled back in his head and only the yellowish whites were visible", and "His mouth was open and his tongue hung out at one side" (IV, vi).

We see "details like the constantly reappearing hand sticking out of the trench, the corpses buzzing with flies that invade the mouths and ears of living soldiers, the gas from out decaying bodies bubbling through the muddy swimming hole when Claude dislodges the helmet at the bottom", and "the shooting by the German sniper of a little girl peacefully eating chocolate given her by Sergeant Hicks" who "throws up her hands, runs a few steps, and falls, 'blood and brains oozing out in her yellow hair'". We get to know "the psychopath Phillips, the terrified little Belgian girl, the consumptive mother nursing her bloodless baby, and the old priest's niece who shoots herself through the temples, because of her love for a Bavarian officer" (Murphy 160). We also get to know that at the end "honours bump down upon the wrong heads in the army, and palms and crosses" (V, xix). No general cultural meaning exists. One can hardly discern which side the victims come from. A German baby nurses in a starving French family (V, viii). When Claude and his comrade kill their first German, the man speaks English with a Chicago accent; Willy Katz, an Austrian-American man from a packinghouse in Omaha, helps Claude kill the hiding German with Chicago-accented English (V, viii).

What one *sees* in Claude's subjective search is central – whether one sees him as normative or Quixotic/delusional (III, x). How one sees him depends on one's understanding of the book's two epigraphs, that from Richard Wagner that Cather first considered and the one that she actually used from Vachel Lindsay's "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan". Shortly after Cather published *One of Ours*, she wrote (November 17, 1922) to poet Orrick Johns:

> You are the first sleuth who has dug the Parsifal theme out of Claude Wheeler. . . . [A]ll through the first part of the book, I kept promising myself that I would put "The Blameless Fool, by Pity Enlightened" on the title page, where I eventually put a line from Vachel Lindsay. Now, either you or I did pretty well, when the theme got through to you out of absolute and consistent reticence. (*Complete Letters* #0644)

Wagner's Parsifal, unlike T. S. Eliot's 1922 *The Waste Land* Parsifal, who is a fertility figure, appears to model Cather's blameless, enlightened fool in the first part of the book; Wagner's phrase, "durch Mitleid wissend,/der reine Tor", comes from his appropriation of the Buddha story for his Parsifal and, though Cather may not have seen the Buddha in Wagner's character, she made Claude a seeker (cf. Dehnert). Wagner's Parsifal is a fool without etiquette, unkind to women, ignorant of knighthood, of good and evil, of suffering, even his own name. Claude seems similar. Though his is not Parsifal's fully protected Buddha-like youth, early on he resembles Parsifal to the degree the conventions of novelistic realism will permit: he is socially awkward; without insight into women, especially Enid; he knows nothing of the military before he joins; and appears confused in ethical perspective while in Nebraska and well into France. He has no sense of identity until he sails for France. Early on, he is a "Blameless Fool". The perplexity arises when one applies the second half of the phrase: "by Pity Enlightened". He only late in the war feels empathy (Rosowski 106–8); he is never said to be enlightened. Of course, Parsifal provides no easy movement towards the light, imperceptibly growing in compassion as first he feels pity for the swan he killed, later for his mother and Kundry, and, finally for Amfortas experiencing the wound given him by Kundry and Klingsor. After a youth of alienation from his father, commercial farming, the commercialisation and mechanisation of Nebraska rural culture, and a rigid religious college, Claude first feels Parsifal-style empathy when the raw soldiers transported on the *Anchises* suffer influenza and he cares for them, especially the dying German-American Tannhauser: "He was sorry about Tannhauser . .

. but was not sorry for himself" (IV, viii). Claude begins to feel free, expansive: "Three years ago he used to sit moping by the windmill because he didn't see how a Nebraska farmer boy had any 'call', or, indeed, any way to throw himself into the struggle in France" (IV, viii). He envies Seeger and those "who had a right to fight for a civilization they knew". Then he begins to have a "feeling of purpose, of fateful purpose, . . . strong in his breast" (IV, viii). Parsifal's growth in resisting sexual temptation, in sophisticated innocence, comes in the presence of real temptation, but Claude is never tempted by Enid, his frigid and puritanical would-be Christian wife, or anyone else. Overseas, he remains chaste, finds refuge in remembering the sexual placidity of rural Nebraska while Victor describes to him Maisie's wild London ways. He seems not to be enticed by the pairing off of American soldiers and French women around the French words *manger*, *aimer*, *payer* – eat, love, pay; though the soldiers say that they will return after the war and marry the girls, Claude seems not to understand that the concomitance of the three words in wartime coupling may imply something other than marriage. The same landscape that provides him with his first inklings of casual wartime sex (V, xvii; V, iv) also permits him to see the agape-love of the French woman for the American amputee sitting in the portal of the St. Ouen in Rouen, beneath the statue-bishop's blessing (V, ii–iii). For Claude, rural France layers experiences of quiet "civilian" growth with unspeakable trench warfare, innocence with savagery. In the "civilian" scenes, Gerhardt provides Claude with an intellectual interlocuter who makes learning meaningfully interpretative of experience as it had not been in Claude's Nebraska religious college (but as Jim Burden's had been at the University of Nebraska).

Part of Claude's growth towards empathy comes from the French Jouberts who sacrifice everything in losing two children to the war and now live mindfully absorbed in the moment's beauty and the pride of doing things right. They teach Claude to see the world's goodness in transformed perception: "[T]he fields and woods . . . laced over with this hazy enchantment . . . the purple evening, the smell of wood-smoke from the chimneys . . . like a narcotic". Tears "come to his eyes" as he believes life "had after all turned out well . . . and everything had a noble significance" (V, xiii).

In Cather's appropriation of Wagner, Claude's lightness-of-heart is not Buddha enlightenment moving beyond egotism towards mindfulness and detachment nor that of a Parsifal saving Amfortas. For Claude, enlightenment means transfigured ordinary perception as wartime French life takes on extraordinary colour and "noble significance" (V, xiii), creating a seemingly

authentic identity. The wasteland is no longer within but in the "dull stretch of grey and green": "No Man's Land", the "dead, nerveless countryside, sunk in quiet and dejection" (V, viii). An illusion of escaping into heroic life from the prison of Nebraska bursts forth. Claude's final growth, in pity and illumination, takes place when an American trench, located in an advanced American position called the Boar's Head, explodes with German ammo and the Germans advance towards Claude's American unit. Claude at first fears for his troops.

> [T]hey [his men] would break. He ran along the trench, pointing over the sand bags and shouting, "It's up to you, it's up to you!". . . He sprang to the fire-step and then out on the parapet. Something instantaneous happened; he had his men in hand. [Claude leads his troops so that the German lines falter and his troops "become like rock"] . . . Their eyes never left him. With these men he could do anything. He had learned the mastery of men. (V, xviii)

Claude's springing onto the parapet seems an existential leap into purpose; yet, at the very moment of his subjectively felt mastery and illumination, he receives a deathly shoulder wound: "[H]e felt no weakness", only one thing, "that he commanded wonderful men . . . mortal" but "unconquerable" (X, viii). We know that they are not unconquerable. David Gerhardt's Missouri reinforcements come after Claude dies; a companion thanks God that he has not known of Gerhardt's death. Claude's prayers that Gerhardt survive and he die go unanswered as each endures a meaningless death (V, xiii).

Cather substituted the epigraph from "Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan" for that from *Parsifal.* Though Claude is Parsifal-like early in the plot, he never catches anything like Parsifal's magic spear, never heals the broken land, or restores any of Amfortas's counterparts. Though he temporarily unites his soldiers as Parsifal does the Grail brotherhood, he dies without knowing battle success. No *Parsifal*-like restoration of the Grail brotherhood occurs; we are treated instead to the war-related suicides rehearsed by Claude's mother (V, xix). Many men who went to the front came back conquered in spirit. In short, Cather did not use the Parsifal epigraph because Vachel Lindsay's "Bryan" fit better (cf. Cather, "Personal Side"). Lindsay's "Bryan" is Quixotic greatness, but greatness failed, not a healing culture hero.

What the pummelling critics of *One of Ours* did not observe is that Cather consistently creates a difference between war's objective events and Claude's

understanding. The anti-democratic behaviour of Americans at home does not cause Claude to doubt that he fights for civilisation; the "uncivilised" character of trench warfare does not stain his sense of a struggle for the truly good; and the beauty he perceives in rural France is no more the whole story than the wilderness he sees in the Nebraska whose wine-red grasses Cather had described in almost Homeric terms in *My Ántonia*. Claude "makes the meaning" that is his unshared enlightenment: in an important 1922 letter to Elizabeth Moorhead Vermorcken, Cather denied that Claude is "a sentimental glorification of War, when he's so clearly a farmer boy, neither very old nor very wise" – only "one boy" (*Complete Letters* #0620). The celebration of cultural democracy and peaceful living that inhabits *My Ántonia* ends in *One of Ours*; the country that fought the great war "for democracy" has become a place of suicide for its returned soldiers – of materialism, meaningless learning, spiritual death, and sexual aridity. The 1922 novel tells us in living colour what the 1923 "NEBRASKA" tells us about the state's (and possibly the nation's) culture: dysfunctional, meaningless save for subjective leaps, and differing from Eliot's *The Waste Land* primarily in having no "What the Thunder Said" promise. Not surprisingly, in *The Professor's House* (1925), Cather presents only a hope-filled past that is destroyed – Tom Outland's past Hopi-like peaceful civilisation. The present is bleak. For Cather, no more social consensus around immigrant communities, no more living by ancient myths, no more small farms and villages as fundamentally sound social units, no more binding to one another in tragedy, and no more frontier Christianity making life bearable. Now materialism, solipsism, the machine, and racing around. It is not surprising that Cather thereafter mainly writes of efforts to create a civilisation in places other than Nebraska, and in earlier times – the nineteenth-century American Southwest of the Santa Fe area, seventeenth-century Quebec, the vestiges of ancient Anasazi civilisation. She also writes of the endless incivility of 1856 slave Virginia. In *One of Ours*, Mrs. Wheeler gives herself the consolation of believing that her Claude, who did not ever wish to be deluded, died without knowing of the suicides and postwar disillusionment, but she also carries beyond his death an illusion: that, in being spared disillusion, "God had saved him from some horrible suffering, some horrible end" (V, xix).

As Cather's letters and her portrait of Bayliss as pacifist make clear (cf. *Complete Letters* #0620), she was no pacifist. Yet, in war in *One of Ours*, in contrast to Ántonia's life, Cather finds only propaganda meanings and Claude's illusion of accomplishment. The novel's actual narrative of Claude's death contains no suggestion of divine intervention and none of Ántonia's

meaningful suffering for a way of life. He dies Quixotic. The waste land sense that appeared in much modernist writing in the 1920s also dominates Cather's work, but for her the issues are not sexual as with Eliot, or national as with Joyce, or democratic-liberal as with the Fascist-tending Pound. They reside in the destruction of small group culture by jingoism, mechanisation, centralisation, and standardisation. Anomie remains (Durkheim; Van Den Berg; Trout).

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