FROM ROMANTIC AESTHETICISM TO AESTHETIC CHRISTIANITY: WILLA CATHER'S THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE, MY MORTAL ENEMY, AND DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP

by

JOHN GOLDEN WEATHERFORD IV

(Under the Direction of Hubert Horton McAlexander, Jr.)

ABSTRACT

The Professor's House (1925), My Mortal Enemy (1927), and Death Comes for the Archbishop (1928), three of Willa Cather's most important works, collectively comprise Cather's transition from Romantic Aestheticism to Aesthetic Christianity. Though critics have set forth many competing readings of the three works, none have considered them as a cohesive unit of Cather's output. By examining together these three disparate-seeming works, one can observe and better understand the intimate and deep, though not initially obvious, connections that unify this period of Cather's career.

INDEX WORDS: Aestheticism, Catholicism, Christianity, Death Comes for the Archbishop, My Mortal Enemy, Religion, Romanticism, The Professor's House, Willa Cather

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JOHN GOLDEN WEATHERFORD IV

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JOHN GOLDEN WEATHERFORD IV

Major Professor:	Hubert Horton McAlexander, Jr.
Committee:	Jonathan Duane Evans Hugh Ruppersberg

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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Soli Deo gloria.

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INTRODUCTION

"The DNA lottery may have left you smart /
But can you stand up to beauty, dictator of the heart?"

- U2, "Stand Up Comedy"

Most critical works that consider the entirety of an author's literary career make some sort of attempt to define a "trajectory" of what the author has produced. This idea of tracing a trajectory through an artist's works is natural enough; one can almost imagine a mathematical function in which, for a given time period, the author's personal history and contemporary current events are inputs that generate the output of a given novel, story, or poem. All that remains is to plot each point on a coordinate plane, and before long one is left with a neat, tidy graph that conveys all that one might ever need to know about an author and her or his work.

Taken to such an illogical extreme, the notion of a trajectory quickly begins to look ridiculous, as detractors of biographical criticism have well pointed out. However, simply because an idea fails to provide a grand unifying theory of all literature in no way means that it holds no value. Rather, the idea of a literary career having a trajectory--though admittedly sometimes seeming over-worn, indefensible, or just plain unhelpful--when carefully and appropriately applied, can offer a remarkably useful and insightful method of examining an author's works. A trajectory implies movement and change, but not at random. With the gift of perspective given by time, a trajectory imbues a comprehensible shape, logic, and order to the perceived chaos of the events that constitute a life and a life's work.

Many Cather critics have used such an idea, and, with a few exceptions, they sketch a surprisingly similar picture, especially in one regard: nearly all prominent Cather critics regard a trio of Cather's novels--The Professor's House (1925), My Mortal Enemy (1926), and Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927)--as collectively representing a volta in her oeuvre. Susan Rosowski provides an excellent (and more accurate than most) instance of this trend in an introduction to a book that covers Cather's complete works:

> Following A Lost Lady, Cather asked a question that had run as an undercurrent through her previous writing: what is left when the imagination fades and the world is fallen? In The Professor's House (1925), Cather told a romantic version of the fall... Then, as if preparing for the new key in which she would write, Cather, in My Mortal Enemy (1926), created characters who reject a romanticism that had deteriorated into sentimentality. (xii-xiii)

Like many others, Rosowski attempts to find a common thread, a continuity, that ties the trio together, and rightly so: the three works, written sequentially and within an astoundingly short time of each other, bear certain unmistakable continuities. Critics note that all three comprise distinct formal experiments: "Tom Outland's Story" startlingly inset into The Professor's House, not to mention the novel's contracted third act; the absolute sparseness of My Mortal Enemy; and the serene montage created by the fluid assemblage of moments in the life of Father Latour in Death Comes for the Archbishop. They also comment on Cather's fascination

with the American Southwest in The Professor's House and Death Comes for the Archbishop, the prominence of women in all three texts, and other shared themes.

However, the works differ from one another far more substantially and significantly than they resemble one another, and the differences raise issues of far more critical interest. Why, for example, does Cather interrupt her journey toward the Southwest (The Professor's House and Death Comes for the Archbishop) with a short, intense detour to New York City and the west coast (My Mortal Enemy)? Or, what is one to make of the intensely bitter tone of My Mortal Enemy, especially in contrast with the serenity of Death Comes for the Archbishop immediately following it? Critics are unified in ascribing *importance* to these three works in the overall trajectory of Cather's career; however, they disagree about what exactly these remarkable books mean in relation to one another.

Further fanning the flames of the critical debate, Cather wrestles with heavy--and therefore controversial--matters in all three books. The insistent pedal tone of death sounds throughout all three, and each work also confronts questions of meaning and purpose, too. In The Professor's House, Godfrey St. Peter looks to find new sources of meaning and structure in his life after completing his great academic work. Myra Henshawe, in My Mortal Enemy, rages against the world more and more as she finds that the romantic love upon which she grounded her life will not sustain her. Death Comes for the Archbishop, though lacking the anxiety and unease that characterizes the other two works, nonetheless concerns itself with

what it means to live a full life and, in Father Latour's quest to build his cathedral, what it means to leave one's mark upon this world once one leaves it behind.

Unsurprisingly for works that focus so intently on the ultimate questions of life--meaning, purpose, death--the three novels all pay a good deal of attention to religion, specifically Christianity. Cather, in fact, thrusts religion increasingly into the spotlight in each of the three sequential works. In The Professor's House, Christianity makes its appearance only in the book's final act, with St. Peter finding hope in "a world full of Augustas" (257) after his near-death experience, a reference to the unassuming, devout seamstress who saves his life. My Mortal Enemy engages religion more centrally. A difference of religious beliefs between Oswald Henshawe and John Driscoll leads to Myra and Oswald's elopement, and Myra attempts to find solace in Catholicism at her life's end. Needless to say, religion permeates the entirety of Death Comes for the Archbishop, informing not only its subject matter but also its very tone.

Although the three works vary greatly in terms of form, tone, and outlook, they are in fact connected by a recurring inquiry into death, purpose, the meaning of life, and into religion as the answer to those questions. Many critics have noted that the three works are stitched together by Cather's gradual turning from Aestheticism to religion as the answer to life's questions. However, these analyses prove insufficient, for they fail to define with sufficient clarity what they mean by "religion." For Cather, as for many, "religion" signifies a complex interweaving of beliefs, outlooks, doctrines, traditions, hopes, and longings. If these three

books are in fact about Cather's turning to religion, then a clearer picture of what religion meant to Cather must be reconstructed based on the evidence presented in each novel. And, it will show how Cather's evolving understanding of religion informs each work, allowing us to trace a clear and defensible, though complex, trajectory for these three compelling works.

THE PROFESSOR'S HOUSE

> The park was deserted. The arc-lights were turned off. The leafless trees stood quite motionless in the light of the clear stars. The world was sad to St. Peter as he looked about him; the lake-shore country flat and heavy, Hamilton small and tight and airless. The university, his new house, his old house, everything around him, seemed insupportable, as the boat on which he is imprisoned seems to a sea-sick man. Yes, it was possible that the little world, on its voyage among all the stars, might become like that; a boat on which one could travel no longer, from which one could no longer look up and confront those bright rings or revolution. (Cather, The Professor's House, 130-131)

Taken from near the end of the first book of The Professor's House, this passage captures the essential problem that Cather confronts in her 1925 novel: what does one do when the lights go out?

In The Professor's House, we meet Godfrey Napoleon St. Peter, a history professor at a small university on the shore of Lake Michigan in the town of Hamilton. The Professor, as he is called throughout the novel, has just completed his magnum opus, a multi-volume work on the Spanish conquistadors who explored much of America. He is married to the lovely wife of his youth, Lillian, and has two grown daughters, Rosamond and Kathleen, both married. The

Professor is fifty-two, the same age as Cather when The Professor's House was published,[1] and, as the novel opens, he finds himself "alone in the dismantled house where he had lived ever since his marriage, where he had worked out his career and brought up his two daughters" (3). His histories, it turns out, have finally brought to the Professor a certain degree of financial freedom, and the house in which he stands is dismantled because his family has moved to a new house. The old one, though workable, was, at least for the women in the family, too full of inconveniences, oddities, and a certain garishness, happily left behind when wealth enabled them to do so.

The Professor, however, is not quite so eager to leave his long-time home behind. Though he, too, shares many frustrations with particular aspects of the house--steep stairs, narrow hallways, and the like--two areas of the house have an irresistible hold over him: his garden and his attic study. As we read descriptions of each area, we infer subtle details about the Professor, especially about his mind and intellect. The narrator informs us that "his walled-in garden had been the comfort of his life–and it was the one thing his neighbours held against him" (5). Significantly, the Professor "started to make [the garden] soon after the birth of his first daughter, when his wife began to be unreasonable about his spending so much time at the lake and on the tennis court" (5-6). His garden was a private retreat, walled-in, wholly *his*. It

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[1] That the Professor and Cather share the same age reinforces the notion that Cather wrote a good deal of herself into the Professor. Of course, he does not serve merely as a stand-in for her; he is a fully realized character. Nevertheless, several small details such this one, when considered together, lead one to believe that this novel was highly personal for Cather. Critic Mary Ryder argues that, "Affected by a growing sense of alienation and pessimism in the early 1920s, Willa Cather... [decided] in 1922 to join the newly established Episcopal Church of Red Cloud[, an] indication of her efforts to come to grips with the doubts, disillusionment, and general malaise which she had been experiencing. These feelings surface in The Professor's House, a novel which Cather began writing in 1923... Like her principal character, Godfrey St. Peter, Cather was soon to be 52 years old... and [the Professor's] story becomes what James Woodress calls 'a kind of spiritual autobiography' for Willa Cather" (219).

was also a French garden--France being Cather's byword for all things beautiful, refined, and orderly--kept "tidy... glistening... bright... symmetrical... clipped" (6). Finally, the garden was where St. Peter "and Tom Outland used to sit and talk half through the warm, soft nights" (7).

The attic study, the other area of the home in which the Professor preferred to dwell, was removed from the main floor of the house by a middle floor (presumably of bedrooms). It was not a study proper--he had a "show study" on the main floor (8)--but instead the sewing room of the family's part-time seamstress, Augusta. The Professor long ago infiltrated the cramped room full of cloth scraps and sewing forms and set up a small desk by the attic window. Because the attic often became drafty in the winter, he placed an ancient, leaky gas stove by his desk to keep him warm. At the novel's outset, the Professor has just made his way up to the attic, and stops to reflect on the worn heater. The semi-omniscient narration here, as it often does, shifts quickly away from the item it is initially concerning to a broader reflection, on this occasion on the Professor's character:

> He wondered now why he had never looked about for a better stove, a newer model; or why he had not at least painted this one, flaky with rust. But he had been able to get on only by neglecting negative comforts. He was by no means an ascetic. He knew that he was terribly selfish about personal pleasures, fought for them. If a thing gave him delight, he got it, if he sold his shirt for it. By doing without many so-called necessities he had managed to have his luxuries. (17)

We catch here our first direct glimpse of what the aforementioned details had been hinting about: the Professor's commitment to "delight" and "luxuries." We see more of this commitment when, a few pages later but still in the same scene, we are told that "St. Peter had managed for years to live two lives, both of them very intense" and that he "burned his candle at both ends" (19). As a teacher, he was "servant" to any student with an "eager eye," "lively curiosity," or "ardour" (19) and, up to this point in his life, his "responsiveness" to these qualities "hadn't worn out with years... any more than the magnetic currents wear out," for "it had nothing to do with Time" (19).

By now, we understand that the Professor is, through and through, an Aesthete, firmly rooted in the tradition of Walter Pater. Pater, a nineteenth-century man of letters, was among the first to advocate a new philosophy that came to be known as Aestheticism. Pater himself believed specifically in an extreme type of *carpe diem* worldview that understood life as one's chance to wring as many moments of intense, passionate experience from the woefully small number of days alloted to one. The following condensed excerpt from the initially scandalous but now celebrated conclusion to his The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry sets out the foundational principles by which Aesthetes live:

> Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from

> point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?
>
> To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life...Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing of forces on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening. With this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch, we shall hardly have time to make theories about the things we see and touch.
>
> ...we have an interval, and then our place knows us no more... our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time. Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us. Only be sure it is passion—that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness. Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for art's sake, has most; for art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake. (210-13)

Pater values supremely the intense experience; anything and everything else besides it, he argues, is only valuable insofar as it helps one obtain more--and more intense--passionate

experiences. The Professor's language mirrors almost exactly that of Pater; St. Peter seeks out the very same charged, passionate, intense experiences of which Pater speaks; he lives for beauty, intellectual stimulation, and other "personal pleasures." However, the Professor, as we find him at the novel's outset, is a man about to experience a profound change. Or, more accurately, a profound change has already overtaken him, even though he does not yet realize it; the novel's primary drama, then, consists of the Professor gradually growing more aware of this change and of his reactions to it.

As the Professor first senses that something is amiss, he tries to shake off and ignore the sensation. Foreshadowing of things to come, the Professor replies to his wife in a small marital dispute with--perhaps unknowingly--a variation on the refrain of Ecclesiastes: "'Oh, my dear, all is vanity! I don't dispute that'" (37).[2] Though he is not yet aware of it himself, the Professor is entering into something of an Ecclesiastical (in the sense of the book) period of his own life: he is soon to find that all that has given him comfort, peace, and joy to this point in his life is no longer sufficient, is meaningless, is vanity. Thus, as critics E. K. Brown and Leon Edel argue, "Not by any answers it proposes, but by the problems it elaborates, and by the atmosphere in which they are enveloped, The Professor's House is a religious novel" (246). It concerns itself with the existential, the teleological, one's understanding of one's place and purpose in life.

* * *

[2] This line, along with the fact that the Professor was a remarkably well-educated scholar of history specializing on a people who were consumed with religion (the Spanish conquistadors), makes his claims to Augusta of biblical ignorance somewhat suspect.

We gain more insight into the Professor's understanding of the world in one of the novel's most famous passages when we, along with Lillian and Scott McGregor, the husband of St. Peter's daughter Rosamond, drop in to the Professor's classroom and overhear him responding to a student's question at the end of one of his classes:

> "No, Miller, I don't myself think much of science as a phase of human development. It has given us a lot of ingenious toys; they take our attention away from the real problems, of course, and since the problems are insoluble, I suppose we ought to be grateful for distraction. But the fact is, the human mind, the individual mind, has always been made more interesting by dwelling on the old riddles, even if it makes nothing of them. Science hasn't given us any new amazements, except of the superficial kind we get from witnessing dexterity and sleight-of-hand. It hasn't given us any richer pleasures, as the Renaissance did, nor any new sins--not one! Indeed, it takes our old ones away. It's the laboratory, not the Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world." (54-55)

Although this statement on the surface may seem like an innocent enough expression of "reactionary, anti-modernist" sentiment (245), it's really quite troubling. It contains certain grains of truth: the grand philosophical questions always will remain unanswered, at least on this side of the grave; moreover, a great deal of what comes from science can be seen as nothing more than ingenious toys and new distractions; and finally, much can be said in support of the argument that meditating on profound mysteries is better for an individual's

character and intellect than learning about how to work the latest gizmo. However, the Professor reveals here much more than his perspectives on science: he bares his value system. Note what the Professor emphasizes: “attention... the human mind, the individual mind... made more interesting... amazements... pleasures.” He evaluates science on the criteria of how stimulating it is to the individual intellect and how able it is to provide new and better pleasures; the Professor evaluates science in Aesthetic terms.

We begin here to see also that the Professor’s Aestheticism--and perhaps all Aestheticism--has another side to it, a troubling, selfish side. When the Professor speaks of “the real problems,” we realize that he means not hunger, sickness, or poverty, about which science has done and can do much; he speaks of intellectual problems, problems that, no matter how interesting or how enriching to the soul, are not high on one’s priority list if one is starving, gravely ill, or homeless. At its core, Aestheticism is a deeply selfish philosophy; it consists entirely of pursuing to the highest degree one’s own personal pleasure, and other people’s concerns only enter into considerations if they happen to fall within the domain of that which gives one pleasure. For the Professor, science’s contributions to combatting disease, suffering, and death mean not much because they fall outside the locus of his interests; because science and its achievements do not prove interesting or stimulating for the Professor, they don’t carry much weight for him.

The Professor continues his response, veering off on a strange tangent that seems, when considered carefully, stunningly unconnected to the student’s question:

> You'll agree there is not much thrill about a physiological sin. We were better off when even the prosaic matter of taking nourishment could have the magnificence of a sin. I don't think you help people by making their conduct of no importance--you impoverish them. As long as every man and woman who crowded into the cathedrals on Easter Sunday was a principal in a gorgeous drama with God, glittering angels on one side and the shadows of evil coming and going on the other, life was a rich thing. The king and the beggar had the same chance at miracles and great temptations and revelations. And that's what makes men happy, believing in the mystery and importance of their own little individual lives. It makes us happy to surround our creature needs and bodily instincts with as much pomp and circumstance as possible. Art and religion (they are the same thing, in the end, of course) have given man the only happiness he has ever had." (55)

We encounter the same, now-familiar language of beauty and delight: "thrill... gorgeous... glittering...life was a rich thing... happy." We also encounter a new note in the refrain, though: a more naked sense of superiority. One quickly gets the sense that the Professor views himself as somehow more advanced than the people who lived in past times: modern people, enlightened (even if also dulled at the same time) by science, chuckle as they look back on the superstitious crowds of ages past who deluded themselves into happiness with the mythical drama of the church. As the Professor continues, somewhat condescendingly, he argues that men are made happy only by "believing in the mystery and importance of their own little

individual lives." Though his statement may contain traces of a universal cynicism, of a disillusioned resignation to the ultimate meaninglessness of life, little evidence exists that the Professor is in fact a nihilist. Rather, the Professor seems blissfully unaware that he, too, is a man, is but one more little individual life, and that the only happiness *he* has ever had in his own life has come from art (i.e. beauty, delight, pleasure, etc.), a source which he himself equates with the (in his mind) hollow pleasures offered by religion. In the Professor's own mind, he is different: he is *I*, he is *me*. In what will prove a completely unexpected turn for the Professor, though, he is soon to lose his ability to be sustained by the edifices he has constructed to prop up his own sense of happiness.

After Cather has St. Peter spout off some lines in defense of her theory of the novel *demublé*, the Professor concludes his remarks:

> With the theologians came the cathedral-builders;[3] the sculptors and glass-workers and painters. They might, without sacrilege, have changed the prayer a little and said, *Thy will be done in art, as it is in heaven*. How can it be done anywhere else *as* it is in heaven? But I think the hour is up. You might tell me next week, Miller, what you think science has done for us, besides making us very comfortable." (55-56)

The Professor offers a final bit of insight into the belief system which he is about to find failing him. For him, art and religion execute similar functions: they both add "mystery and importance" to "little individual lives." Religion, the Professor seems to reason, is all well and good if you can stomach that sort of thing. For those who, like the Professor, don't put much

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[3] Though likely purely felicitous, this detail delightfully foreshadows *Death Comes for the Archbishop.*

stock in matters religious, art, in the Aesthetic sense meaning intellectual and emotional pleasure, refinement, happiness, etc., will do the job just fine. The Professor fits perfectly Cather critic Susan Rosowski's dictum that "when religion [seems] discredited by science, the romantic [turns] to art" (5). Art can be the object of one's hopes, desires, yearnings, and pleasures. It can give one's life structure. It can be the thing you look forward to at the end of the day, week, month, year, or season of life that will sustain you throughout that time. The Professor, though, is about to arrive at the troubling point where one's life extends beyond art's ability to sustain.

* * *

Days pass after the lecture, and St. Peter declines an invitation to travel to Europe with his wife, daughter, and son-in-law. All the while, the Professor becomes more and more aware that something is amiss within himself. After St. Peter announces his decision, his wife, more aware of the profound change that has taken ahold of the Professor than he, gently confronts him about it:

> "What is it, Godfrey? I can't see any change in your face, though I watch you so closely. It's in your mind, in your mood. Something has come over you. Is it merely that you know too much, I wonder? Too much to be happy? You were always the wisest person in the world. What is it, can't you tell me?"
>
> "I can't altogether tell myself, Lillian. It's not wholly a matter of the calendar. It's the feeling that I've put a great deal behind me, where I can't go back to it again–

> and I don't really wish to go back. The way would be too long and too fatiguing. Perhaps, for a home-staying man, I've lived pretty hard. I wasn't willing to slight anything–you, or my desk, or my students. And now I seem to be tremendously tired. One pays, coming or going. A man has got only just so much in him; when it's gone he slumps." (142-43)

The Professor, although acknowledging that something is amiss, assesses the problem as some sort of fatigue or exhaustion--he has consumed all the resources given him. In a sense, he is correct; while his Aestheticism may still have the power to delight--he still enjoys his garden, for example--, it seems to be losing its ability to provide meaning, "mystery and importance" in his life.

Especially telling is St. Peter's notion of "go[ing] back" to whatever it is he has lost or can no longer access. This notion connects to his later efforts to find "his mistake" in how he lived his life (284). He believes that his error has been one of execution: if he had simply played his hand more prudently, he might not have ended up in his current position. Godfrey's true error, though, is systemic. He has not simply miscalculated his data; his entire philosophical calculus is flawed. Though he may not be intellectually aware of the nature of his error, his emotions suggest it when he states that even if he could go back to the "great deal" he has put behind himself, he doesn't even wish to do so; something in his emotions tell him that such a return, even if possible, would not be fruitful.

* * *

Lillian and the Marselluses leave for France, and the Professor is left alone for the summer. He moves his clothes and bed back to the old house, where he tends his garden and sets about the task of editing and annotating Tom Outland's diary for publication (150). Outland, upon first arriving in Hamilton, immediately sought out the Professor at this home upon the recommendation of his priest and friend, Father Duchene, who spoke highly of St. Peter's knowledge of his native Southwest America. From Outland and St. Peter's unusual first meeting sprang a long and intimate relationship. The Professor helped Outland gain admittance to the university, where his astounding brilliance quickly showed itself. Outland and the Professor became fast friends, and Outland eventually became engaged to the Professor's daughter, Rosamond. Outland died, however, in World War I, before they were married.

Outland and the Professor also shared a connection with the American Southwest--it was the backdrop for the Professor's histories and the place where Tom lived out his youth. Before Tom's death, the two traveled there together, and the diary the Professor edits recounts the tale of a very peculiar summer Tom spent finding and exploring a previously undiscovered Indian civilization tucked into the high cliffs of a remote mesa. The novel shifts into its second book for the telling of the tale in Tom's voice as the Professor recollects the night Tom first related the story to him as they sat in the garden at the Professor's old house.

Much has been said and written about Cather's unorthodox decision to interrupt the flow of the narrative of St. Peter with this tale. Its main function as far as we are concerned,

however, is to act as a point of reflection, contemplation, and comparison for St. Peter's life and the changes taking place in it.[4] Tom tells of his friendship with Roddy Blake, his discovery (with Blake) of the uninhabited Cliff City, and his disillusionment in Washington, D. C. while fighting for government money and attention for the excavations at the mesa. When Tom returns, defeated, from D.C., he finds that Blake sold off native treasures while Tom was away. The two have a falling out; Tom, feeling betrayed by Blake, angrily demands that he leave the mesa at once, and Blake complies. Tom soon feels regret over his harsh treatment of Blake and leaves the mesa to look for him in town. He learns that Blake had already departed, and Father Duchene convinces him that it is of no use to actively pursue Blake. Late that afternoon, Tom heads back up to the mesa. The evening is startlingly beautiful; Tom, narrating the tale, explains why the memory of the night is still so vivid:

> I remember these things, because, in a sense, that was the first night I was ever really on the mesa at all–the first night that all of me was there. This was the first time I ever saw it as a whole. It all came together in my understanding, as a series of experiments do when you begin to see where they are leading. Something had happened in me that made it possible for me to co-ordinate and simplify, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. It was possession. (226)

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[4] "Tom Outland's Story" is not merely an extended literary device through which we gain greater understanding of the Professor; it stands quite well on its own as a rich, engaging narrative. However, we must pass over much of interest in it (and in the rest of the novel, for that matter) for the sake of maintaining focus on our exploration of the changes taking place within the Professor. It is a case of using excision for (hopefully) splendid effects, a strategy that Cather herself would likely approve of.

Tom clearly has the same capacity for experiencing beauty as does the Professor; however, his understanding of the role beauty can play in one's life differs from that of the Professor in subtle but significant ways. Though the word "possession" might lead one to believe that Tom's aesthetic appreciation contains the same selfishness as does the Professor's, Tom, as he continues, shows us that this clearly is not the case:

> The excitement of my first discovery [in the laboratory] was a very pale feeling compared to this one. For me the mesa was no longer an adventure, but a religious emotion. I had read of filial piety in the Latin poets, and I knew that was what I felt for this place. It had formerly been mixed up with other motives; but now that they were gone, I had my happiness unalloyed. (226-27)

Unlike the Professor, Tom understands that beauty is about more than just the pleasure he receives from it; he feels "a religious emotion" in response to the beauty of the mesa. He goes on to speak of a "filial piety" for his secret world, implying a sense of obligation and of duty to the mesa in response to the beauty it shows him. In this sense, Tom's understanding of beauty, his sense of aesthetic pleasure, is the exact opposite of the Professor's. Beauty calls to him, and he dutifully--and happily--submits to its source. Tom, although he may not articulate it as such, senses that art and religion are most decidedly not the same thing, in the end or in the beginning. They are intensely interwoven but separate phenomenon, beauty being the means by which one arrives at the end of proper religious devotion. Tom is happy when "other

motives," which one can only assume have to do with personal pride and desire, are no longer mixed in with his outwardly-focused, selfless release and submission to the mesa.

When held in juxtaposition with Tom, the Professor seems to have become a classic case of what C. S. Lewis calls the "fatal tendency in all human activities for the means to encroach upon the very ends which they were intended to serve" (Lewis 162). As Lewis goes on to observe, " money comes to hinder the exchange of commodities, and rules of art to hamper genius, and examinations to prevent young men from becoming learned" (162). Nowhere do we see the Professor break the lamentable trend Lewis describes; his thoughts and desires are consistently shown to be focused inward on himself and his personal pleasure, not outward to others in grateful response for what they have given him. Sadly, as we move into the novel's third book, this pattern grows only more pronounced.

* * *

At the outset of the novel's third (and, by far, shortest) book, the date is August 1st, and the Professor "had pleasantly trifled away nearly two months at a task [editing Outland's diary] which should have taken little more than a week" (238-39). "But," the narrator tells us, "he had been doing a good deal besides--something he had never before been able to do...He was cultivating a novel mental dissipation" (239). Before this summer, the Professor had always been in one of two states: actively engaged, either with pleasure or work (which one suspects was, for him, itself a form of pleasure), or sleeping; now, though, he is able to "lie on his sand-spit by the lake for hours and watch the seven motionless pines drink up the

sun" (239). Along with this mental dissipation, another profound change has overcome Godrfrey St. Peter: he has reverted to his childhood self:

> The Kansas boy who had come back to St. Peter this summer was not a scholar. He was a primitive. He was only interested in earth and woods and water... He was not nearly so cultivated as Tom's old cliff-dwellers must have been–and yet he was terribly wise. He seemed to be at the root of the matter; Desire under all desires, Truth under all truths. He seemed to know, among other things, that he was solitary and must always be so; he had never married, never been a father. He was earth, and would return to earth. When white clouds blew over the lake like bellying sails, when the seven pine-trees turned red in the declining sun, he felt satisfaction and said to himself merely: "That is right."... When the maple-leaves along the street began to turn yellow and waxy, and were soft to the touch,–like the skin on old faces,–he said: "That is true; it is time." All these recognitions gave him a kind of sad pleasure. (241)

Although the connection is never explicitly made, we understand that the Professor's transformation into this boy-primitive is the culmination of the changes we observed taking place in the first book. It seems on first blush to have little to do with the failure of the Professor's Aestheticism, and indeed, it may even appear to be a resurgence or a consummation of it. After all, is not this primitive "wise," and does he not feel pleasure and satisfaction, even if tainted by sadness, at the sight of nature's beauty? Perhaps. But this new personality can be better understood as St. Peter's complete abandonment to the philosophy he

now knows has failed him but to which he sees no alternative. Sadly, he is correct in his knowledge that he is, was, and "must always be" solitary: his focused pursuit of personal pleasure prevented him from entering truly into marriage, fatherhood or any other human relationship. He has become aware of his insurmountable loneliness, and, in response, something within him has convinced him that he is soon to die. Therefore, he sees no point in fighting for anything that seems any trouble at all and has resigned himself in floating through the remainder of his life filled with a sense of "sad pleasure" at things which once delighted him so but now seem but a part of the world going dark around him.

As he progresses (or perhaps regresses) further and further into his terminal Aestheticism, the Professor begins "falling out of all domestic and social relations, out of his place in the human family, indeed" (250). As the summer closes and fall classes resume, he receives the news that Lillian and the Marselluses will be returning from France shortly. Greatly distressed by this news, the Professor returns to the old house and climbs up to his attic study. He feels as though he cannot possibly bear having to live with anyone other than himself, and least of all with Lillian. Pondering these matters, St. Peter "didn't leave his study. He sat at his desk with bent head, reviewing his life, trying to see where he had made his mistake, to account for the fact that he now wanted to run away from everything he had intensely cared for." (251) Of course, though the Professor may have "intensely cared for" Lillian and the rest of his family, he now senses, even if does not consciously realize, that he was never in relationship with them. He has become a man utterly disconnected and empty. He

knows he has gone astray, but in spite of his best efforts, he cannot determine where or how he erred. However, inability to determine his mistake should come as no surprise: he is using broken reasoning; just as his Aestheticism prevented him from seeing value in science, so it prevents him from understanding that Aestheticism as a value system--and not any attempt of his to carry out its principles--has failed him. If the Professor is ever to understand where he went wrong, then, he must submit to and receive wisdom from without--the very thing his inward-facing Aestheticism has so consistently impeded.

* * *

The Professor's revelation comes through the medium of his near-asphyxiation. The Professor falls asleep on the couch in his study with the leaky gas stove on, and, though aware that the stove leaks, he neglects to open a window before he dozes off. He awakes briefly, in a stupor, and debates whether he ought to try to save himself or if it would be better just to fall back asleep and die. Though he doesn't remember anything after considering that question, he then makes a lunge for the door, and Augusta, who has just walked in the house, hears the thud of someone falling on an upper floor of the house. She rushes upstairs, opens windows to let in pure air, and pulls him out of the study to safety. When the Professor regains full consciousness, a doctor has already come and gone to make sure he is out of danger. The Professor then requests of his seamstress-savior, "'I'd be greatly obliged if you would stay the night with me, Augusta. It would be a comfort. I seem to feel rather lonely--for the first time in months'" (255). Already the Professor has changed: he desires human company, relationship.

Significantly, he does not want Augusta to stay for any reason other than her presence. His desires are beginning to turn outward.

As the Professor rests on the sofa upon which he almost met his end, he considers his relationship with Augusta:

> Augusta, he reflected, had always been a corrective, a remedial influence. When she sewed for them, she breakfasted at the house–that was part of the arrangement. She came early, often directly from church, and had her breakfast with the Professor, before the rest of the family were up. Very often she gave him some wise observation or discreet comment to begin the day with. She wasn't at all afraid to say things that were heavily, drearily true, and though he used to wince under them, he hurried off with the feeling that they were good for him, that he didn't have to hear such sayings half often enough. Augusta was like the taste of bitter herbs; she was the bloomless side of life that he had always run away from,--yet when he had to face it, he found that it wasn't altogether repugnant...
>
> It occurred to St. Peter, as he lay warm and relaxed but undesirous of sleep, that he would rather have Augusta with him just now than anyone he could think of. Seasoned and sound and on the solid earth she surely was, and, for all her matter-of-factness and hard-handedness, kind and loyal. He even felt a sense of obligation toward her, instinctive, escaping definition, but real. And when you admitted that a thing was real, that was enough--now. (255-57)

The Professor's reflections show a growing awareness that life isn't merely for the pursuit of beauty and pleasure; he even feels for Augusta "a sense of obligation," similar to that which Tom felt for the mesa. However, he accepts this new development begrudgingly, reluctantly. He does speak kindly of Augusta, calling her "kind and loyal", even "wise;" however, these few positive words are encompassed by a cloud of resistant language: she is "a corrective, a remedial influence," she speaks of "things that were heavily, drearily true" that made him "wince," he feels that she was "good for him" (beneficial but not enjoyable), she is like "bitter herbs," she's "bloomless," and--what high praise!--not "altogether repugnant."

This reluctance is understandable, for at this point, the Professor feels that he must completely abandon life the way it was before. He must choose between his old way of life or Augusta's, a choice between two discrete options with no middle ground between them. In a sense, of course, he is correct, for his life will no longer be solely about himself and his pursuit and enjoyment of beauty. His newly-felt "sense of obligation" toward Augusta, though not fully understood and though sitting uneasily with him, especially when he feels no such obligation for his wife or daughters, is the most real thing the Professor knows in his life at the moment. Though his lack of true relationship with his family concerns him, he nevertheless takes comfort in the fact that "There was still Augusta, however; a world full of Augustas, with whom one was outward bound" (257).

* * *

Just before the book draws to a close, the Professor again attempts to figure out the nature of his mistake, this time in light of his near death:

> Perhaps the mistake was merely in an attitude of the mind. He had never learned to live without delight. And he would have to learn to, just as, in a Prohibition country, he supposed he would have to learn to live without sherry. Theoretically he knew that life is possible, may even be pleasant, without joy, without passionate griefs. But it had never occurred to him that he might have to live like that. (257)

The Professor ponders the idea that his error was an incorrect "attitude of the mind," or belief, and he considers that his false belief was trying to live with "delight," "joy," and "passionate griefs." Of course, like any man who has died from a certain cause, St. Peter feels that he must remove completely from his life his Aesthetic pursuits. However, St. Peter's perceived dichotomy--delight and joy leading to death on the one side and a solemn seriousness and life on the other, is a false one; though he must no longer live *for* personal pleasure, no dictum exists preventing its presence in his life.

The solution for an obese man who has nearly died of a heart attack is not to stop eating altogether; it is to learn how to eat properly--he may, and in fact should, still enjoy his food--and to exercise, itself a potential source of new joy. Similarly, St. Peter will not be required to go without enjoying beauty; he must simply learn to enjoy it in its proper place and for its proper purpose, and he also must learn to enjoy "obligations" to other people.

Of course, the novel ends before the Professor has these realizations, if, in fact, he ever does. Perhaps Cather, at the time of writing the novel, was herself no further along in her search for answers to these problems than St. Peter. The Professor's House does not set out a program for living life properly. Instead, it is about realizing that the life lived inwardly, in pursuit of satisfying oneself and one's own desires, will not suffice, and, as it closes, about the strength to press on when one's value system has let oneself down:

> [St. Peter's] temporary release from consciousness seemed to have been beneficial. He had let something go–and it was gone: something very precious, that he could not consciously have relinquished, probably...At least, he felt the ground under his feet. He thought he knew where he was, and that he could face with fortitude the *Berengaria* [the ship on which Lillian and the Marselluses are returning from France] and the future. (258)

The Professor has indeed lost something precious; his pursuit of beauty in his life up until had indeed been his sole source of joy, but only as the bottle is for the alcoholic; though he may miss it dearly, even fiercely at times, he has reached a certainty that it can no longer sustain him. Though he does not yet know what exactly to make of his feeling of "obligation" toward Augusta, he knows that it is enough for now, and that, perhaps, from it he will learn what it is that will be enough for him as he lives out the rest of his days.

MY MORTAL ENEMY

We now arrive at My Mortal Enemy (1925) on the arc of Cather's trajectory. Readers and critics familiar with Cather's other work--especially those reading chronologically and just having finished The Professor's House--often become disconcerted when approaching My Mortal Enemy. Gone are many of the familiar rhythms and tones one has grown accustomed to hearing, and one isn't quite sure what to make of this jarringly unique work. Critic Charles Johanningsmeier offers a succinct, accurate picture of many people's reactions to the work, observing that "for many years, scholars have regarded My Mortal Enemy as somewhat of an enigma" (Johanningsmeier 237). Johanningsmeier enumerates several sources of critical puzzlement over the work: first, although Cather has employed first-person narration in her work before, My Mortal Enemy marks the first time Cather speaks through a female narrator. Secondly, My Mortal Enemy is by far Cather's shortest novel, so short that some critics even question if it can rightly be called a novel. Thirdly, and most significantly, My Mortal Enemy takes up a tone, setting, and subject matter dramatically unlike either its immediate predecessor, The Professor's House (1925), or its immediate successor, Death Comes for the Archbishop (1927) (Johanningsmeier 237-239).

As might be expected with such an anomalous text, My Mortal Enemy has led critics to generate quite a broad spectrum of readings. Some choose to focus on one particular aspect of

the text, such as religion or money, and then, attempting to support their theses, bend certain quotes from the novel out of shape and completely ignore many relevant others. Other critics seem to take the strangeness of the work as an invitation to create their own (to speak charitably) unique analyses of the text: the work has been interpreted as everything from a feminist manifesto (Fisher-Wirth) to a celebration of Celtic culture (Miller) to a retelling of Dante's Divine Comedy (Murphy, "Cather's New World Divine Comedy").

Each of these interpretations has its place and its insights; however, My Mortal Enemy, when properly understood in the context of the larger issues Cather wrestles with in the three novels we are examining, is not nearly so perplexing as it might seem. In fact, it continues to explore the same core issue as The Professor's House, albeit from a slightly different angle and in a much harsher light: is there anything upon which one can set one's life that will not eventually fail?

We explore this question in My Mortal Enemy through Myra Henshawe, who dominates the book perhaps more than any of Cather's other main characters. Cather, through the narrator Nellie Birdseye, immediately establishes Myra's centrality on the first page of the novel. Myra Henshawe is the first thing mentioned in Nellie's narrative, and "she [Myra] and her runaway marriage were the theme of the most interesting, indeed the only interesting, stories that were told" in Nellie's family (3). Nellie goes on to tell that "my mother and aunts still heard from Myra Driscoll, as they called her" (3); note that though she has been married many years, she is still referred to by her maiden name. Nellie then recounts that Myra was the

"brilliant and attractive figure among the friends of their girlhood, and her life had been as exciting and varied as ours was monotonous" (Cather 3). Myra's dominance and centrality is even further underscored in that her husband remains unnamed for several more pages of the text.

Critics agree that Myra is the forceful center of the book; they frequently call into question, however, her fitness to serve in such a role. Her personality, while unquestionably strong, lacks charisma; Myra is an overwhelmingly unsympathetic character. She holds her head up haughtily (Cather 5); she makes people feel "hopelessly clumsy and stupid" (Cather 5); and she is full of "insane ambition" (Cather 34). While Nellie asserts that she had "a beautiful voice, bright and gay and carelessly kind" (Cather 5), Cather does not convey to the reader a sense of Myra's beauty and warmth.[5] If Myra ever was as charming as characters in the novel report, the period in which she was has long since passed. Not even her relationship with Oswald--which we are told repeatedly was a love of the highest caliber--redeems her, for it is shown in the book as at best deeply problematic and at worst completely void of any emotion whatsoever.

To gain any understanding of why Myra--or even her relationship with Oswald--were so compelling to the book's characters, we must consider the context and time period in which their relationship took place. The world in which Myra and Oswald's relationship began was

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[5] Though some critics considers Myra's lack of palpable warmth a technical failing on Cather's part, such a claim seems to me utterly unsupportable. Though she may fail in other areas of her writing, Cather never lacked the ability to characterize. One need only consider Marian Forrester in A Lost Lady to see Cather present ever-so-charmingly an equally-flawed female protagonist. Therefore, we must conclude that Myra's apparent repugnance is a concious decision made by Cather.

governed, as the worlds of all young lovers seem to be, by the rules set out by the previous generation, the generation of Myra's great-uncle, John Driscoll. His generation valued supremely material and spiritual safety. They believed that "'It's better to be a stray dog in this world than a man without money'" and that "'a poor man stinks, and God hates him'" (13). They even, in the eyes of future generations, bought eternal self-protection in the form of charitable contributions to the church to provide for lavish funerary service, thereby ensuring "[an escape from] the end of all flesh" (16).

It is not a far stretch to imagine that this high valuation of safety in Myra's uncle's generation came from its scarcity in their youth; John Driscoll, after all, implies that he has experienced first-hand the horror of poverty (13). He labored hard so that future generations, including Myra, would have everything in the material world they could possibly want--provided that it entailed no risk. Supported by seemingly invincible material security, Myra's early life is a symbol of everything the previous generation had labored for. However, in the cyclical, reactionary swing of the generational pendulum, Myra does not find the safety and security her uncle so prizes to be a blessing; for her it is a curse and a prison. When she elopes with Oswald,[6] she alters her identity and catches the attention of her peers, who share the same feelings of oppressed confinement as she does. Material security, for Myra and her brood,

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[6] One curious question that has attracted much speculation is why, exactly, John Driscoll threatened to cut Myra off. The difference in religion between John Driscoll and Henshawe doesn't seem sufficient explanation for Driscoll's antipathy toward Henshawe. However, the reason *why* Driscoll cut Myra off is not nearly as significant as the fact that he *did* present her with the choice of the sound, rational decision of keeping the money or the passionate, Romantic decision of pursuing love at all costs.

holds no charm; it may provide protection and stability, but it also, in their eyes, forbids excitement, adventure, all that makes life worth living.

No longer does Myra embody the pinnacle of the previous generation's achievement; she now represents the highest hopes and dreams of her own generation. She has become the Romantic hero, pursuing love, passion, and emotional excitement above all else. Everyone around her wishes to see whether such a feat can be successfully carried out, curious if they, too, can find adventure, purpose, and meaning in the thing they all call "love." Myra's flight from convention into the proving grounds of the outside, unmoderated world thus became a sort of pilot program for the sufficiency of Romantic love.

* * *

When we encounter Myra at the novel's outset, the experiment of her marriage has been under way for quite a while, and things look much less promising than they did initially. Though hopes remain high, all is far from well. Everyone still speaks reverently of Myra's and Oswald's romance, but Nellie's first meeting with Myra uncomfortably reveals her to be something other than simply charming and compelling; she can be cruel, too--Nellie "was never sure whether she was making fun of me or the thing we were talking about" and was "very ill at ease" while in the room alone with Myra (6).

Still, when Nellie first sees Myra and Oswald in a room together, the couple, at least at first glance, seems to live up to their grand billing:

> He came into the room without taking off his overcoat and went directly up to his wife, who rose and kissed him. Again I was some time in catching up the the situation; I wondered for a moment whether they might have come down from Chicago on different trains; for she was clearly glad to see him--glad not merely that he was safe and had got round on time, but because his presence gave her lively personal pleasure. I was not accustomed to that kind of feeling in people long married. (7)

Taken in the light of the entire work, something does not sit quite right with this scene. Myra's affection for Oswald here, though presented genuinely, seems at odds with the rapidly growing content she develops and displays toward him throughout the rest of the novel. This scene offers the only time in the entire work that we view what can be described as honest, open affection between the two. Mistrustful of this moment as we may be, we are nowhere else led to doubt Nellie as a narrator, so we must view this scene as a single bright flicker of a once great flame that we are never to see flare up again.

The narrative then pauses for a moment as Nellie recounts the details of Myra and Oswald's courtship. Nellie also recalls her reactions to hearing the tale as a young girl, remembering the question she would sometimes pose to her Aunt:

> "But they've been happy, anyhow?" I sometimes asked her.
>
> "Happy? Oh yes! As happy as most people."
>
> That answer was disheartening; the very point of their story was that they should be much happier than other people. (14)

Nellie names what everyone else feels: the experiment, since it is not going fantastically well, is going horribly wrong. Anything less than pure, unbridled, ecstatic passion--even a predominance of happiness--constitutes a disappointing outcome. In choosing to order her life around her (initially) thrillingly illicit relationship with Oswald, Myra, like the Professor, decided to order her life around the pursuit of her own personal pleasure, the only difference being the source of that pleasure: as his intellectual pursuits were for the Professor, so was her marriage to Oswald for Myra.

Unfortunately for Myra, though, she possesses none of the general amiability or blissful cluelessness that allowed the Professor to proceed happily on through life for so long; when Nellie and her Aunt Lydia visit the Henshawes in New York City over the Christmas holiday, the signs of strain in the marriage are becoming progressively more visible. Myra sharply hushes Oswald when he inquires as to the details of how she is spurring along the relationship between Ewan Gray and Esther Sinclair, declaring that she "[hates] old women who egg on courtships'" (25). Later, when the Henshawes, Nellie, and Aunt Lydia head out for an evening stroll, Myra pulls Nellie aside:

> As we walked home she slipped her arm through mine, and we fell a little behind the other two. "See the moon coming out, Nellie--behind the tower. It wakens the guilt in me. No playing with love; and I'd sworn a great oath never to meddle again. You send a handsome fellow like Ewan Gray to a fine girl like Esther, and it's Christmas eve, and they rise above us and the white world around us, and there isn't anybody, not a tramp

> on the park benches, that wouldn't wish them well--and very likely hell will come of it!" (26)

Her overwhelmingly cynical comments on young love leave one with little doubt about how Myra truly feels about how successful her dare against fate has been to this point. She apparently sees young, romantic love as nothing more than physical attraction, good timing, and great lighting. Although these sentiments are not terribly original, they are here quite horrifying, for the person expressing them irrevocably defined her (and her husband's) entire life with a decision based on the contrary idea that romantic love (and Romantic emotions in general) can be sufficiently strong to carry one through life's many tribulations.

As Nellie spends more time with Myra in New York, she sees how thoroughly Myra has come to disbelieve in the power of love not only in her increasingly open conflicts with Oswald but also in her developing tendencies to seek comfort and meaning in wealth and social relations. Nellie observes that Myra's friends "were of two kinds: artistic people--actors, musicians, literary men--with whom she was always at her best because she admired them; and another group whom she called her 'moneyed' friends (she seemed to like the word), and these she cultivated, she told me, on Oswald's account" (32). Nellie finds Myra's passionate friendships with the cultural elite charming and sophisticated, but the fact that Myra is "at her best" ought to be more troubling to Nellie; Myra ought to be at her best around Oswald. Also, although Myra claims to pursue relationships with her "moneyed" friends "on Oswald's account," we see Myra, not Oswald, complain time and again about the hardships of not

having any money. Assessing what we see of Myra during Nellie and Aunt Lydia's visit to New York as a whole, we might well conclude that Myra has already given up on romantic love and is scrambling desperately for money or prestige with which to fill the void that her marriage to Oswald was supposed to satisfy.

* * *

When Nellie encounters the Henshawes on the west coast in the novel's second section, she finds the Henshawes and their marriage in a shambles. They are without money, forced to live in a noisy, poorly-run hotel. Myra is bed-ridden, and Oswald has been reduced to a nurse-maid for her when he is not working his stifling, low-paying job. Myra no longer even longs for a restored relationship with Oswald, and no one in the rough city is cultured enough to be of interest to her. In a turn that would be ironic if it were not so predictable, Myra now desires most that which she so readily forsook in her youth: "'Money is a protection, a cloak; it can buy one quiet, and some sort of dignity,'" she tells Nellie from the confines of her bed (57). Then, a short while later, as if to settle for Nellie any doubt about her feelings for Oswald, romantic love, prestige, and money, Myra conducts the following exchange with Oswald about their marriage in front of Nellie:

> "It's been the ruin of us both. We've destroyed each other. I should have stayed with my uncle. It was money I needed. We've thrown our lives away."
>
> "Come, Myra, don't talk so before Nellie. You don't mean it. Remember the long time we were happy. That was reality, just as much as this."

> "We were never really happy. I am a greedy, selfish, worldly woman; I wanted success and a place in the world. Now I'm old and ill and a fright, but among my own kind I'd still have my circle; I'd have courtesy from people of gentle manners, and not have my brains beaten out by hoodlums." (62-3)

Myra finally and unquestionably has lost her dare against fate: her marriage to Oswald–what was to be her greatest, most defining success–has not only failed but has become her greatest source of misery. Myra has, naturally, become most bitter toward that which has been, in her eyes, the cause of her greatest, most consistent failure to achieve Romantic happiness: Oswald. In a sort of reverse Stockholm syndrome, Myra has mentally transformed the one who was originally to be her liberator from the oppression of her father's safety into her "'mortal enemy'" (78). At the novel's end, he has become the source of all her problems, responsible not only for his own failure to fulfill her Romantic desires romantically but also for her want of money and status, and even the noisy neighbors(75). Oswald undoubtedly still respects and cares for Myra, but as "'the mother of the girl he fell in love with'" (84). He no longer can offer her the adventure, the excitement, or any of the other types of brilliant, passionate fulfillment he once might have been able to give her in their younger, happier (but even then not happy enough!) days. Myra begrudgingly, unappreciatively acknowledges and accepts the care Oswald does give her, but care is not what she seeks. She seeks passion and bright-burning delight, and she despises Oswald for his failure to provide them or, at the very least, the comforting salves of money and privacy.

* * *

Myra's final gambit for Romantic satisfaction takes the form of religion. At the novel's conclusion, she develops what she thinks of as a religious rebirth and a return to the Catholic faith of her childhood. However, as Cather Critic Hermione Lee points out,

> ...the religious feeling of My Mortal Enemy is disconcerting. For all her speeches about absolution and renunciation, Myra goes on clutching and wanting till the last. There is something extravagant and manipulative in her last-minute Catholicism, as in all her gestures. It is another scene in her "dramatics." She is as histrionic over her "holy rites"--hoarding the secret money for Modjeska's masses, or staging her death, ebony crucifix in hand, overlooking the sea--as she once was over her jewels and matchmaking...Myra's Catholicism is like her old great-uncle's: her death is as scenic as his funeral was. And since her memories of him are all of an indomitable ruthlessness, her reversion to his religion recalls all these qualities...The troll-like power of old beliefs emerges, distorted, in spoilt, civilized Myra, as superstition and vindictiveness. Her religion may be her only comfort against dying, but she also uses it as a means of revenge. The iller and more religious she gets, the more she turns it against the object of her old "idolatries." (221-22)

St. Peter desired beauty and sought it out for his own personal enjoyment instead of viewing it as a gift freely given to which the appropriate response is humble enjoyment and an "obligation" to the source of the beauty. Fortunately for him, St. Peter realizes his error long before his final days. Though we are left unsure of how he responds to the revelation given him and though St. Peter seems to embrace the changes required of him more as a necessity

than as a blessing, hope remains for him. By contrast, Cather allows for no such hope with Myra; her death on the cliff by the sea, though ostensibly a religious one, is not a good death. As Lee so deftly argues, Myra's religion brings her no true peace, just another means through which to try to gain control, not only over people but even over God. She dies defiantly, clinging to her own will and her power to choose the means by which she would die.

To the most Romantic sensibility, such a death is majestic, achingly beautiful, and powerful, but there is no joy, no sense of true peace in Myra's death, or, for that matter, anywhere in My Mortal Enemy. Instead, her death is the bitterest moment yet in a "terse and bitter little book" (Murphy and Skaggs, 10). What then are we to make of Myra's death and of this book? We gain a clue in the one aspect of religion that Myra seems to correctly understand: that "'in religion seeking is finding'" (77). Nellie describes in detail her interpretation of Myra's utterance: "She accented the word 'seeking' very strongly, very deeply. She seemed to say that in other searchings it might be the object of the quest that brought satisfaction, or it might be something incidental that one got on the way; but in religion, desire was fulfillment, it was the seeking itself that rewarded" (77). Myra is on the right track, yet she has only put together half of the puzzle. C. S. Lewis, in Surprised by Joy, an autobiography of his early life, explains the other half by giving his definition of the word "Joy":

> ... it is that of an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy, which is here a technical term and must be sharply

> distinguished both from Happiness and from Pleasure. Joy (in my sense) has indeed one characteristic, and one only, in common with them; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. Apart from that, and considered only in its quality, it might almost equally well be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief. But then it is a kind we want. I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world. But then Joy is never in our power and pleasure often is. (17-18)

Lewis's last sentence holds the key to understanding both Myra's and St. Peter's failures: they both sought to command Joy. Joy, the "unsatisfied desire which is in itself more desirable than any other satisfaction," by very definition ceases to be when one attempts to grasp it, for in grasping for it, one attempts to control it and to possess it--and if one can possess it, it is no longer a desire unsatisfied. Joy's essential quality is its unattainability, for desire exists only so long as that which is desired is out of reach. Joy, then, must be awaited with open hands rather than grasped for with strained digits; it is to be awaited and received rather than pursued. If one is to experience Joy, one must seek to give up control, power, pursuit, and agency. Myra perhaps, as Nellie suggests, "ought to be allowed to meet the inevitable end in the way she chose," but in choosing and controlling her manner of death, she denies the one truth she should have gleaned from religion (80). Perhaps this accounts for the novel's overwhelmingly bitter tone: though Myra received the Sacrament before her death, she rejects any final freedom her religion could offer her with her insistence that she control it for her purposes

instead of humbly submitting herself to it and trusting that it would bring to her that which she sought.

* * *

In The Professor's House, Cather rejects Aestheticism as a viable philosophy upon which to base one's life. By the end of My Mortal Enemy, Cather rejects another philosophy, Romanticism, and the Romantic ideal of love, in particular. More significantly, though, she again fails to define positively any workable alternative. Though she hinted toward an austere Catholicism at the end of The Professor's House with "a world full of Augustas" and obligations to them, she offers no vision of what such a life would look like. Moreover, would one, as the Professor imagined, have to relinquish all earthly pleasures to walk that path? Even though Cather may no longer see Aestheticism as a viable center for a worldview, one can't imagine her abandoning delight in beauty entirely. Cather leaves us in a similarly uncomfortable position with the coda to My Mortal Enemy: Myra and Oswald are dead, we hear no more from Parthia, and Nellie finds herself continually haunted by Myra's tragic exclamation:

> Sometimes, when I have watched the bright beginning of a love story, when I have seen a common feeling exalted into beauty by imagination, generosity, and the flaming courage of youth, I have heard again that strange complaint breathed by a dying

> woman into the stillness of night, like a confession of the soul: "Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy [7]!" (85)

In addition to unmoderated Aestheticism, Cather now has also rejected Romanticism and romantic love as pursuits and philosophies around which to base one's life, but, she leaves us to wonder, what is left that could take their place?

[7] Barring the discovery of a revealing new answer from Cather herself, critics will never reach a consensus as to the identity of the titular mortal enemy. The obvious candidate is, of course, Oswald, and he undoubtedly supplies one layer of meaning. More interesting is the possibility that Myra is her own mortal enemy--that she realizes that, no matter what she does now, she will leave this life alone, much as the Professor felt. Myra being her own mortal enemy also falls in line with Cather's condemnation of Aestheticism and Romanticism as essentially selfish philosophies.

DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP

The answer Cather proposes to the questions left unanswered at the ends of The Professor's House and My Mortal Enemy, given in Death Comes for the Archbishop, is what I term Aesthetic Christianity. Some prominent critics have scoffed or chuckled at Cather's Christianity and at critics who read her work in that light. The most famous of the scoffers is Harold Bloom, who writes:

> Those sacrifices of possibility upon the altar of form were the ritual acts of Cather's quite Paterian religion of art, too easily misread as a growing religiosity by many critics commenting upon Death Comes for the Archbishop. Herself a belated Aesthete, Cather emulated a familiar pattern of being attracted by the aura and not the substance of Roman Catholicism. New Mexico, and not Rome, is her place of the spirit, a spirit of the archaic and not of the supernatural. (2)

Bloom, if one can look past his haughtiness, does raise the valid criticisms that there is something not quite ordinary about the way in with Cather engages with Christianity and that a Paterian Aestheticism has much to do with the discrepancy.[8] Yet, his critique is not entirely sound. Cather's Christianity, though not strictly traditional, is actually quite orthodox; though Cather may not herself share in the traditional styles and manners of devotion as exhibited by

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[8] As previously noted, Cather became a member of the Episcopal Church in 1922. The Episcopal Church shares many traditions and practices with the Catholic Church; their main point of departure is not recognizing the divine authority of the Papacy. So, while Cather is an Episcopal, and though she writes of Catholicism in the works we are considering, we'll use the blanket term "Christianity" for the sake of convenience if not of accuracy.

Fathers Latour and Vaillant in the novel, her Aesthetic Christianity has far more in common with mainstream Christianity than with unalloyed Aestheticism. For proof, we need look no further than Pater himself, here commenting upon the proper place of philosophies (including various religions) within Aestheticism:

> What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own. Philosophical theories or ideas, as points of view, instruments of criticism, may help us to gather up what might otherwise pass unregarded by us. "Philosophy is the microscope of thought." The theory or idea or system which requires of us the sacrifice of any part of this experience, in consideration of some interest into which we cannot enter, or some abstract theory we have not identified with ourselves, or what is only conventional, has no real claim upon us. (211-212)

In The Professor's House and My Mortal Enemy, Cather has just thoroughly and completely rejected such a worldview. Both the Professor's pursuit of beauty and intellectual stimulation and Myra's attempt to find satisfaction in Romantic love would be worthwhile pursuits by Pater's reckoning; they both seek only that which offers fulfillment of one's own desires. As Cather wrestled with the question, "What orders, structures, and gives value to life?" in the two works antecedent to Death Comes for the Archbishop, she definitively concludes that any such philosophy that is solely based on sating one's personal desires will ultimately fail.

Yet, Cather never ceases completely to be an Aesthete; beauty and strong emotional experiences simply hold too great a sway over her. What has happened in the previous two novels is that she has concluded that Aestheticism *alone* is enough. Its primary shortcoming, she implies, is that it is ultimately inward-facing. Aestheticism (and its close cousin Romanticism, who falls victim to the same charges) is in the end about one's own perception of beauty, one's own passionate feelings, one's own experience of ardent love. Though an exterior object or person may instigate those feelings, it is the feelings, and not that which instigates them, that matter; therefore, Aestheticism and Romanticism will ultimately fail when one finds that one can no longer sustain the powerful emotions that they require to find satisfaction. Cather is in search of a belief system, then, that allows for the enjoyment and the appreciation of the beautiful but that pulls those emotions outwards, not inwards. To that end, Christianity, and specifically Catholicism, do quite nicely.[9]

Cather had been taking small, steady steps toward incorporating Catholicism into her previous works, first with Augusta and then more prominently with Myra. However, up until Death Comes for the Archbishop, Catholicism received a mixed-at-best treatment; here, Cather makes a strong move to engage Catholicism positively and head-on; critic John Randall notes that "of all the books Willa Cather ever wrote, Death Comes for the Archbishop has the most obviously Catholic subject matter, since it describes the labors or two missionary priests" and that "Catholic commentators themselves have praised the book for its sympathetic and

[9] Of course, much biographical evidence supports these assertions. We are concerned here, though, only with what belief systems undergird these novels, not where they came from in Cather's life.

understanding treatment of Catholicism" (295). That Catholic commentators speak well of the book's treatment of Catholicism attests to its relative doctrinal orthodoxy. However, as Father Vaillant points out to Father Latour, "'Doctrine is well enough for the wise, Jean; but the miracle is something we can hold in our hands and love'" (50), and Cather has given us more miracle than doctrine. Death Comes for the Archbishop is not an apologetic or evangelistic novel; the idea that the book is an explanation of Catholic belief or an attempt to win converts is laughable. Rather, it is, like Father Vaillant's ungainly mountain wagon, an ingeniously constructed vehicle full of palpable objects of the faith. Like the celebrated wooden figure of the Virgin, it is "something to fondle and something to adore, as Mary's Son must have been to her" (257).

As we begin to unpack the wagon, we first notice, front and center, Father (and eventually Bishop and Archbishop) Jean Marie Latour, and he could not be a protagonist more different than the Professor or Myra. Entirely absent in him (and, in the work as a whole, as a result) is the resignation that bettered St. Peter or the bitterness and desperation that consumed Myra. In their places we find centeredness and assurance. Though he becomes distressed at times, it is always related to a specific, palpable problem and never to existentialist despair. Moreover, though he is a private man, liked by many but known by few, all his energy is directed upward toward God and outward toward those in his diocese, and most of all toward his dearest friend and his co-worker, Father Joseph Vaillant.

The friendship between the two priests centers the novel. Though Latour is certainly the novel's main character, his friendship with Vaillant is the thread that ties the loosely-gathered novel together. Critic Nicholas Birns describes their relationship well, saying, "Latour and Vaillant are Catholic structural complements, not the kind of ethical opposites that readers usually expect in a culturally Protestant novel, especially one set in the American West. The tension between protagonist and antagonist that animates most narratives is here replaced by a more unusual and subtle tension between two characters who are friends" (12). The two men do in fact differ in many ways, but the bond of their friendship is unshakable and unlike any relationship in either of the two previous works. Latour and Vaillant legitimately care for one another and not just for the emotions that each enables the other to feel. Their relationship is primarily about care for the other person and therefore consists of energy directed outward, away from self. The surprise, of course, is that each man, in caring for the other, receives a deep, personal joy.

The idea of receiving joy in return for submission to its source--for the two priests, that source is God, just as it was the mesa for Tom Outland--defines the lives of Latour and Vaillant. Vaillant, when he is able to devote the month of May to the worship of the Virgin Mary, takes a profound personal pleasure in being able to pursue the beauty of worship without distraction from mundane affairs:

> Once more he had been able to worship with the ardour of a young religious, for whom religion is pure personal devotion, unalloyed by expediency and the benumbing cares

> of a missionary's work. Once again this had been his month; his Patroness had given it to him, the season that had always meant so much in his religious life. (203)

Though he earnestly desired the time of worship, he did not pursue it; he waited to receive it. A similar posture of thankfulness for a thoroughly enjoyed moment of delight is taken by Latour in response to helping a repressed Mexican servant worship at the altar for the first time in nearly two decades:

> Never, as he afterward told Father Vaillant, had it been permitted him to behold such deep experience of the holy joy of religion as on that pale December night. He was able to feel, kneeling beside her [Sada], the preciousness of the things of the altar to her who was without possessions; the tapers, the image of the Virgin, the figures of the saints, the Cross that took away indignity from suffering and made pain and poverty a means of fellowship with Christ. (217)

Just as Father Vaillant's time of worship was "given" him by Mary, Father Latour was "permitted...to behold such deep experience of the holy joy of religion." Beauty, delight, pleasure, joy--all that Aestheticism values and seeks--is experienced by the two priests, but they have also a great peace that neither the Professor nor Myra ever approach. The difference, it seems, is that in seeking first the kingdom of heaven, all things--heavenly *and* earthly--truly have been added unto the two men.

* * *

For Cather, Catholicism's beautiful trick is that if one but renounces the pursuit of earthly pleasures, it not only gives the peace one seeks but never finds in Aestheticism or Romanticism but also returns and even increases those same earthly pleasures as soon as they are relinquished as one's chief end. Having caught on to this trick, some critics decry Cather's embrace of Christianity as nothing more than a subtly rebranded form of Aestheticism. Yet, such critics fail to understand a crucial component of the Christian faith. In the eyes of such critics, Christian faith is an aspect of life cordoned off from all the rest; sacred is sacred and secular is secular, and never the twain shall meet. Therefore, when they see a strong appreciation of aesthetic beauty in Cather's Christianity, they cry foul. If, after all, she walks like an Aesthete, talks like an Aesthete, and writes like an Aesthete, must she not then, be an Aesthete?

In reality, though, Christianity makes no such distinction between sacred and secular areas of life. As critic Richard Giannone explains:

> Creation, through [Father Latour's] eyes, is the work of an artist. All matter enjoys the indwelling of that divine initiative. In its genesis and evolution, the entire world is sacramental. Latour's aesthetics, then, is his theology. Seeing and believing are reciprocal as faith and sensitivity refine and deepen each other at every turn along the missionary's long, divagating journey in an America that is alive with providential manifestations. Signs of God's presence abound...Like his kind down the ages, Cather's priest is part of God's direct revelation in the concreteness of human conduct. (2)

Latour's aestheticism is not in conflict with his Christianity; rather, his Christianity encompasses his aestheticism. Latour understands God as maker of the world, and, in appreciating the world's beauty, he delights in it as the craftsmanship of God. For Latour, all the beauty and joy found in the world is not an end in itself; it is the wondrous means graciously given him to draw near to God.

Interestingly, because God's touch pervades all of creation, Latour, though of refined sensibilities, does not seek to impose only his understanding of God's beauty on his parishioners. He demonstrates a truly catholic understanding of the ways in which people can interact with God through his creation. For example, Latour allows for one understanding for white men and for another for the Indians:

> Father Latour judged that, just as it was the white man's way to assert himself in any landscape, to change it, make it over a little (at least to leave some mark of memorial of his sojourn), it was the Indian's way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through the water or birds through the air. (233)

And, graciously receiving an elaborate and dramatic welcome as he arrives in a village, he allows for yet another for the Mexicans:

> In his own country all this would have been highly distasteful to Jean Marie Latour. Here, these demonstrations seemed a part of the high colour that was in landscape and gardens in the flaming cactus and the gaudily decorated altars,--in the agonized Christs

> and dolorous Virgins and the very human figures of the saints. He had already learned that with this people religion was necessarily theatrical. (142)

How different than the snobbish Aestheticism of the Professor and of Myra! Gaudy Mexican ceremony, Indian naturalism, and the white man's desire to leave a mark all find acceptance and understanding in Jean Latour's Aesthetic Christianity.

Of course, just because Latour understands and accepts other perceptions of beauty does not mean that he does not hold his own specific preferences. Showing Father Vaillant the quarry of yellow stone from which he extract the materials to build his Cathedral, Latour remarks that:

> "Every time I come here, I like this stone better. I could hardly have hoped that God would gratify my personal taste, my vanity, if you will, in this way. I tell you, *Blanchet*, I would rather have found that hill of yellow rock than have come into a fortune to spend in charity. The Cathedral is near my heart, for many reasons. I hope you do not think me very worldly." (245)

Within Latour's attitude of accepting what God gives him, his preferences are given room to exist and even, here, to be satisfied. Though he has no less acute an aesthetic sensibility than the Professor and Myra--he admits that he would rather have the quarry of yellow stone than "a fortune to spend in charity"--, Latour did not actively seek to fulfill his own preferences. Rather, he was given the chance, a chance for which he exhibits extreme gratitude, knowing as he does that it is a chance given to few men.

* * *

In the final movement of Death Comes for the Archbishop, we see Father Latour as he nears his death, and his attitude toward death could not be more different than that of Myra. Critic Mary Ryder rightly argues, "The peace that Archbishop Latour finds when confronting death is not that of Myra Henshawe who, defeated and alienated from those around her, turned to religion and the past out of penance and long suffering. Rather, the Archbishop finds personal completion in religion" (257). Death, in Father Latour's (and, for that matter, in Father Vaillant's) eyes, is to be expected, accepted and prepared for in advance, not feared and fought against (as did Myra) or numbly submitted to (as did St. Peter). Father Latour, when he first contracts the chill that eventually leads to his death, is approached with concern by the young Seminarian, who worries that he shall die from the chill. In response, "The old man smiled," and he replied, "'I shall not die of a cold, my son. I shall die of having lived'" (269).

As Latour nears his death, he reflects back on his life and, especially, on his friendship with Father Vaillant. As he prepares to meet the source of all beauty, his gaze is directed outward and upward, and he delights in gratitude as he remembers all the experiences of beauty he has been given on this earth and looks toward the even greater joy to come in the next. In Father Latour's death, Cather at last finds the solution she has so long desired: joyful submission to God, instead of requiring complete abstention from the enjoyment of Aesthetic pleasures, passionate emotions, and meaningful friendships, allows one to put them in their

proper places and, in so doing, permits them to be enjoyed fully, freely, and, perhaps most significantly for Cather, without disappointment or regret.

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