THE HAPPINESS OF WILLA CATHER

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(Things in bold are restorations of the author’s chosen words, cut by the editor without approval, or consultation.)
What would you teach your children? What stories would you tell them? What old favorites would you read them aloud? And when they can read for themselves, what books would you tell them to read and what ones would you have about for them to discover on their own? These questions, the questions of parents, are immensely consequential for their children, for the nation those children grow into the citizenry of, and for how fast heaven fills up with souls. And even though one can recommend the works of Willa Cather, these questions have deep roots, long histories, and no entirely easy answers.

I. Ever since the Romans were about to become Christians and the Christians were about to assume Roman political offices, thoughtful Christians and thoughtful statesmen have asked how one could be both a Christian and a statesman? Can one be a prince and a saint? A general and a bishop? A warrior and a martyr? A king and a prophet? Can one even be a gentleman and a Christian?1 What, then, is the proper relation of the things of Caesar and the things of Christ?

Various are the answers given by Augustine, Thomas, More, Luther, Pascal, Newman, and Kierkegaard. And various also are the answers given by Dante, Richelieu, Locke, Lincoln, and Churchill.

However, ever since our American colonial forefathers appealed to “Nature” and to “Nature’s God” in their Declaration of Independence and went on to specify the relation of the two in their First Amendment, it has been more than possible to argue that one could be both a citizen and a Christian, that the aims of the priest and the patriot do not clash, and even that the President and the preacher might be the same man. The generation of the Framers thought it self-evident that Republican government and religious liberty, understood as the liberty to practice that form of Christianity a citizen had conscientiously chosen, were mutually strengthening.

Tocqueville made the argument stronger still by pointing out to post French Revolution adherents of throne and altar that America without throne and without established altar was more pious than ancient France had ever been and by simultaneously pointing out to atheist advocates of Liberty that no where was Liberty more enjoyed than in pious America. Coming down to the present day, some students of Tocqueville, also like him affectionate students of America, see a “Catholic moment” in America (and some of these perhaps hope for an “American moment” in the Holy Roman Church).

Certainly for those who respect the principles of the American Founding and revere the Redeeming Christ, it is essential to understand how political respect and religious reverence might cohere.2

The tension between citizenship and discipleship can be seen clearly in daily lives of the many Christian and patriot parents who feel responsible for their children and deliberate about their natural duty to educate them.3 Distressed at the deleterious neglect of their children’s minds and the injurious indoctrination of their children’s souls in the American public school of today, in which neither country, nor good, nor
God seem to have a very important place, many of these parents now find themselves considering home-schooling their own children, alone or together with other Christian families. Whether they elect to do so or not, such dutiful parents will find themselves considering a question all parents, true parents, ask themselves: What stories should I tell my children? Or read aloud to them? And later: What books should I give them to read?4

What you read when you are young is fateful. The boy is the father of the man, the girl the mother of the woman. What we dream about, we become. “To fulfill the dreams of one's youth; that is the best that can happen to a man,” says a priest in one of Willa Cather’s novels.5 The soul of a child yearns for heroes. To the young child almost all adults are heroes. As they grow older, stronger, and more intelligent, they begin to distinguish among adults. They have as their heroes, inventors, explorers, generals, prophets, and statesmen. For instruction they may still look to their parents, or grandparents, or some adult, perhaps some teacher in school, for such youths expect to become fathers and mothers. They read the Bible and Shakespeare, and the best youths read and reread them. They dream of being great and also expect and hope to be good. Pray for the nation that fashions, in place of such youths, “teenagers”!6

Growing up in America today, such youngsters (not “teenagers”) will naturally seek American heroes and Christian heroes to admire and to consider emulating. This is good. However, it does not mean these children will find a coherent pantheon of heroes to emulate. Can we guarantee that all parts of the good cohere or that without intellectual effort the way they do cohere will be discerned? Young boys and girls growing up in America will grow up admiring two sorts of heroes—pioneers and Christians. And young Catholic boys and girls will in addition grow up wanting to emulate priests and saints. Could there be a pioneer saint or a saintly pioneer? Could one man be both? Failing that, since there might be a separation of powers between the two, can one soul want to be both? Do these desires fit in one soul peaceably, or do they make war? Could there be a Catholic moment in America? Is there an American answer to the question of the relation of the things of Caesar and the things of Christ? For American Catholic parents these two questions boil down to the relation of the pioneer and the saint.

In what follows I shall address these questions by turning to two novels by Willa Cather: My Ántonia and Death Comes for the Archbishop, both about pioneers who may be saints.7

II. THREE PULLINGS OF THE GOOD

More than most other writers, save perhaps Plato, Miss Cather makes the good, its nature, what it points to, and what protects it, the subject of her work. No page is without some savour of it, no loss of it without sadness, no hindering of it without indignation, and no epiphany of it without joy. You cannot read a paragraph from any of her works without being brought into touch with it. She, her characters, and her readers are always struggling to know the good better. How we come to discover it, to know it, to become it even, are her theme, and in her work the good is often the cause of more good, unto the third generation.
There are three prints of the good, like three stages in an etching, three pullings as they might be called, and *My Ántonia* shows us all three. There is first the way things are in the present, especially in the present of childhood, when everything is fresh and for the first time. Fortunate are those whose first experiences in life are on a farm, under a big sky and a warm sun, with good parents (or grandparents), who love us—that is, nurture, teach, chastise, and cheer us. Even imperfect ones will do. For the child turns to the good and avoids the bad like a sunflower seeking the sun. In a city everything depends on humans; in the country nature may somewhat compensate for fallen nature. Nothing in nature is finer than a fine human being, but no fineness gets to be there in a human who is indifferent to fineness elsewhere, which since we begin as children is often founded in the splendid integrity of nature.

I felt motion in the landscape; in the fresh, easy-blowing morning wind, and in the earth itself, as if the shaggy grass were a sort of loose hide, and underneath it herds of wild buffalo were galloping, galloping... I wanted to walk straight on through the red grass and over the edge of the world, which could not be far away. The light air about me told me that the world ended here: only the ground and sun and sky were left, and if one went a little farther there would be only sun and sky, and one would float off into them, like the tawny hawks which sailed over our heads making slow shadows on the grass.

Thus, in this story, Jim enjoys the good in Nebraska and Ántonia enjoys it there too; together they discover it, in treks and adventures, in victories against ancient snakes, in the prairie grass, all under the giant sky.

I sat down in the middle of the garden... and leaned my back against a pumpkin.... The earth was warm under me, and warm as I crumbled it through my fingers.... I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen.... I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great.

Sense and intelligence combine to connect Jim and Ántonia to that something complete and great. In learning the English tongue, she from him and he once again by teaching her, attentive to the very additions her tricksy spirit brings to the language, they know the freshness that all learning brings and that makes the whole world our habitation. Jim will live his life far away from Nebraska. And part of Ántonia already lives far way from the good she first enjoyed in Bohemia. Both, not without suffering, will be sustained by the good they first enjoyed on the prairie, from which they nonetheless departed, and which they nonetheless never lost.

Then there is the second pulling, when these pristine, inexhaustible impressions of the good are shared. In this book, such a sharing takes place when Jim tells Ántonia what he never told her then, how her father's spirit seemed to dwell in their house, after his death, on his way back to Bohemia. Isn't it true, so often, that really good things are increased with sharing? The best, of course, are precious and therefore private, but when they are shared, with proper respect for their preciousness, their good increases.
Thus, Jim's story is a gift to Ántonia; it becomes precious to her. And the fact that it was precious to her makes it more precious to him.

Then there is a third pulling of the good, in which the pristine first partaking is shared with a whole new generation. We see this in Ántonia and her family, how she has shared all that was good in Jim with her family. As he goes up the driveway, he is known to the little boys and girls. More, he is loved. Even before he sees Ántonia he knows that the bond between them has been for the good. There are no regrets in her heart, so there need not be any in his. Nothing is more thrilling in this story than seeing how the good in Ántonia, that was so special and fresh, has bloomed in her and come to fruit in her family. The gifts she always appreciated, in the fields, in the cherished memories, have been multiplied. Although this novel is not very long, it gives us the long view of life as very few others do. Wonderful as she was at sixteen, a delight to delight in and with, Ántonia is greater at forty than she was at sixteen. What was becoming is now being.

As you go through life, if you get to see some of the same people from time to time, you wonder at how they will turn out. Reunions are the way the scattered get to satisfy this desire. Some people seem to be the same as they always were; they could not go far and didn't, but they did keep to what they were. A few surprise us; they surpass themselves; or perhaps we did not know them. Others might have been so much more; their gifts were evident, their desires high, the range of what they might have become immense. They and chance chose and one sees the consequences. Isn't it true that there are very few who turn out well? How often when you compare what a person was as a child, what they are as an adult is inferior, perhaps not in accomplishments, in competencies, or in skills, but in their vital core.

Thus, in this novel, Tiny Soderball is less as a competent, self-assured, wealthy woman than she was as a skipping girl; thus, Lena is less as an elegant companionable lady than she was as a weary girl seeking solitude with the animals and securing it in her Saturday night bath. Even Ántonia and Jim are not quite what we desire them to be. We wonder whether they should have made a marriage. All through the story, knowing the title, we wonder in what sense Ántonia will one day be Jim's "my Ántonia." Then when she returns seduced, abandoned by Donovan, yet firm in her love of her child, we hope that Jim will marry her. It does not happen. What are we to think of this incompleteness? What did Ántonia think then. At their parting, Jim said he would be back. We hoped soon. Did Ántonia hope soon? By the time he comes back, twenty years have passed. Whatever she felt at first, she, we understand, does not regret a thing, and that releases Jim. He sees that she is battered and perceives she is undiminished. Now he sets to writing all the story. He could not have done it before seeing this point reached in it.

And this is the fourth impression, or pulling of the good, the story of Ántonia and Jim or, for short, My Ántonia, in which all the first three pullings of the good are included and all shared with people who will, unlike Ántonia's children, never meet the characters in person. Yet is it any wonder that they might want to? I understand that some readers go to Nebraska to visit the grave of the "real Ántonia." It must be a grave like the one made for Ántonia's father, carved out of a country square, causing the road to bend a little, with a cross to mark it, and pristine prairie grass still growing
all around it. Perfectly understandable. A perfect tribute to Ántonia and to Willa Cather, who discerned her goodness in at least four ways. Short of revelation, this fourth impression is the closest we come to knowing that the soul is immortal. All Miss Cather's people, Neighbor Rosicky, Cecille, Archbishop Latour, Claude, Thea, Mrs. Harris, Nancy, become more translucent as their lives transpire; it is as if a light behind a stained-glass figure grew stronger, making the figure ever clearer, as the light grows brighter. Often that light grows brighter for her people themselves; the deaths of Claude, of Frontenac, and of Bishop Latour are completions of life and of earthly understanding. All might say, "That is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great," as the gravestone of Willa Cather in Jaffrey, New Hampshire says. Looking back from this vantage, we realize that everything wonderful in Willa Cather's books is written from the point of view of a loving eternity. What is was first loved and ever shall be.

If it is perfectly understandable then why people who read Willa Cather go to visit the graves of her characters and her, and also perfectly understandable why one loves to reread her good books especially. Everyone who visits a graveyard does so for a simple reason, which we are chary of admitting, to find some dead person. That is why we reread a good story too, one with persons in it, who are that unique mixture of soul and body, for whom the earth was created and who will perdure it. We believe in such ghosts and sometimes, in a moment of self-knowledge, see we ourselves are such ghosts in bodies.

This belief has nothing to do with the worship of art. Indeed, it is one of the most important qualities of Miss Cather's work, that in it there are real people who like to read a good book, who know what a difference in life good books can make, who yearn for the good that a good book has discovered to them, and who will make the search for that good a habit of a life time. Thus in The Professor's House we have Tom Outland studying his Vergil in the Southwest desert, and in My Ántonia we have Jim making the same Vergil the path to College. In what other author does one witness what College can mean to a untutored, desiring heart? Upon discovering the world of ideas, Jim in My Ántonia says, "when one first enters that world everything else fades for a time, and all that went before it as if it had not been." With her peculiar clarity, Ántonia once told him, "It must make you very happy, Jim, to have fine thoughts like that in your mind all the time, and to have words to put them in. I always wanted to go to school, you know."

Willa Cather is the most teacherly writer there has ever been, save Plato; she is always looking for sparks of virtue, honorable ambition, and real excellence in people. Her insight finds them everywhere, in rich variety—evil is far more often dull, even to itself, than good—and her charity finds noble sparks in many of the frail, old, or immature; however, she has a special eye for the gifted, for how far they might go, and how far they will have to. Again and again she writes of the impediments that oppose a gifted youngster, how their virtue overcomes them, and how, by growing strong, they become who they were meant by nature to be. Miss Cather's years of teaching in Lincoln and Pittsburgh and her years of teaching herself, before, during and after, were never an impediment to her writing. In her writing, she always favors those who can see beautiful, true, good things; she was a teacher through and through, and was
always looking up to superior things in heart and mind. Yet important as teaching is, she knew that it never succeeds where the teacher forgets that all important learning is self-learning. Thus, important as Thea’s teachers are in *Song of the Lark*, none is as essential as the great learner Thea herself. Something good and great lures her on.

The great lesson of the heart, of how the most important qualification in life is desire, is summed up in the scene in *My Ántonia* where a blind child, blind from birth, climbs in an open window, and makes his way to the piano, whose melodies he has been secretly hearing, and, despite his fear of a whipping, starts to play the keys he has never touched before. Nor do they refuse his ardor:

Through the dark Samson found his way to the Thing, to its mouth. He touched it softly, and it answered softly, kindly. He shivered and stood still. Then he began to feel it all over, ran his finger-tips along the slippery sides, embraced the carved legs, tried to get some conception of its shape and size, of the space it occupied in the primeval night. It was cold and hard, and like nothing else in his black universe. He went back to its mouth, began at one end of the keyboard and felt his way down into the mellow thunder, as far as he could go. He seemed to know that it must be done with the fingers, not with the fists or the feet. He approached this highly artificial instrument through a mere instinct, and coupled himself to it, as if he knew it was to piece him out and make a whole creature of him. After he had tried over all the sounds, he began to finger out the passages from things Miss Nellie had been practicing, passages that were already his, that lay under the bone of his pinched, conical little skull, definite as animal desires. It is as a teacher in another of Miss Cather's novels says, “A man can do anything if he wishes enough.... Desire is creation, is the magical element in that process. If there were an instrument by which to measure desire, one could foretell achievement.”

Just as any one who hates speech, who despises the word, should be invited to read Helen Keller's story of the day she discovered all at once the intelligibility of the world and the equal miracle that this intelligibility can be shared—and then she was no longer angry—so any one who doubts the beauty of music, whom music mads, should be invited to read this episode in *My Ántonia*. And anyone doubting the bounty of the good in our suffering world might be invited to read both, I suppose.

*My Ántonia* is primarily about the good, about the good as seen in peace and in a good mother. The scenes in which we see this are wonderful. First we see it in the children, their good manners, their direct gazes, the way they know Jim because they have been told good stories about him—he is already an “Uncle” to them—and their affectionate respect for their parents, especially their mother. After a lapse of twenty years, she looks this way to Jim:

She was a battered woman now, not a lovely girl; but she still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one’s breath for a moment by a look or a gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. All the strong things of her
heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions.

It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races.\textsuperscript{15}

It is wonderful to see how the good in Ántonia, which we first enjoyed in her as a girl, has grown mature and become fruitful.

The role of fathers in defending the good from evil is not emphasized in My Ántonia. There is so much good in the book, in its lovely heroine, and in the family life centered around her, that one might be tempted to believe that there can be families without fathers, and thus without countries, that rural paradise—or what Plato’s Glaukon calls “sow city”—in which everybody lives simple, healthy, peaceful, and just, without ever having to be just to each other, or to enemies, by defending their country, is possible. It is not so, and Willa Cather knows it.

Becoming a mother means for Ántonia being no longer able to kill something; \textit{even to make merry at the visit of an old friend, she cannot bring herself to wring the neck of a fatted chicken}. This reluctance is right, right for Ántonia and for many other mothers; it is right to be reluctant, although it would not be right to refuse or oppose. Ántonia knows this when she acknowledges that her great failing was not being able to acknowledge evil in any one she loved. This weakness made her slavish to her brutal brother, got her into trouble with greasy-whiskered Mr. Cutter, and allowed her to be seduced and abandoned by a smooth jerk. How fortunate that her good husband is good! This she now understands. She cannot bring herself to shoot anything now, might be tempted to forbid her children to play with guns, but she knows better. Where there are humans there will be vices, which means other humans will have to be on guard, risk killing and being killed, to smite the wicked and hinder evil.\textsuperscript{16}

Ántonia might have known this earlier, as Willa Cather does. There is first of all Jim’s killing of the large snake. Had Ántonia remembered that there are snakes, even in the paradisial prairie, let alone in town, she might have suffered less and visited less suffering on others, for example Jim who gets caressed by the oily, whiskered, lecherous Cutter, and then bashed black and blue. Augustine says “Hate the sin and love the sinner.” Without disagreeing, Miss Cather says, “Forgive the sin but oppose the sinner.”

\textbf{III. Bishop, Statesman, Saint}

After the Mexican War, with the vast oceans away from Europe, and with the mighty British Navy to clear them, and after the Civil War, when slavery was forever denied advancement, America was set free to civilize the West, to go from sea to shining sea, spreading the fruits of peace, with land for families to work, own and enjoy, America was so free that it would have been possible to forget war and preparation for war, to believe that there could be families without countries, that there could be women like Ántonia and children like hers, without statesmen like Lincoln and generals like Grant, but Miss Cather did not forget these things. In peace and isolation the soul often rejoices in the good, but isolationism is irresponsible.\textsuperscript{17}
In another of her novels she treats us to the discovery of the peace of Mesa Verde. Here high into the side of a cliff, protected by a strong river and a narrow pass, a lone cowboy discovers an Indian city. No one has been to this beautiful city in 368 years. We agree wholly with the narrator’s wish never to leave this peaceful place and also with the priest who suggests that the peculiar towers must be for stellar observation. Here, the priest goes on to say, these people, at first rude and barbarous, though farmers, must have begun to cultivate the arts of peace. Those arts are wonderful, but Miss Cather never forgets the probable end of these peaceful people; protected by their natural fort, too protected, they are one day slain, every one of them, by some rude, unruly people happening upon them while they cultivate their fields across the river. Nor does the narrator, Tom Outland, forget. When America enters World War One, its peaceful shipping having been subjected to the unrestricted submarine attacks of Ludendorff’s total Germany, Tom signs up.

Although Willa Cather thought it made sense to live your life for something greater than your country, she did not think it foolish to die for your country. So, Claude Wheeler and his mother in One of Ours follow the battle of the Marne as if it were happening in North Dakota. Although Claude dies in the futile trench slaughter of the Western Front, neither his life nor the cause of his country is futile. Although Miss Cather appreciates the fact that the idealism of Wilson is something different from the good we should have been fighting for, that does not mean the two do not overlap considerably. And it does not mean the good of the individual soldier is lost in service to country. In his death Claude not only shows courage and loyalty, risking himself for others, but on the way to it finds something he always wanted, inarticulately and awkwardly, but would never have found without the war. Claude and his mother cringe at the rape of Belgium and understand the battle of the Marne as a struggle to protect civilization, but when Claude gets to France, he gets to understand what civilization is. Although “mediocre” by his family and town more than himself, in truth, Claude is mediocre, awkward, his choices in life, such as his wife Enid, too accidental. It is a wonder that we care so much for him, but we do, and we rejoice, with him, that he is going to war. There on the Western Front, in France, he finds the higher satisfaction he has dimly sought all his life, in a comrade who plays violin, in the French way of eating, with a delicious meal that is meant to frame a conversation, and in the rose window of the Church of St. Ouen in Rouen which he wanders into, all before he dies, more satisfied than he has ever been in his life. Service to country, even unto death, also rewards the soul.

A further proof lies in Miss Cather’s novel, Death Comes for the Archbishop. The good man who stands at the center of this Christian story is no pacifist. Early in his service on the way to Santa Fé, stopping at a hovel, he and his Vicar are warned by a terrified woman to flee the cunning host, but they do not just slip away. Drawing a pistol he has carried for just such encounters, Fr. Latour makes the malefactor appreciate he means business, and when he reaches the civil authorities, he sends them to apprehend the man and save the wretched wife. It is precisely at this point in his apostolic service that Latour meets Kit Carson; their mutual regard and alliance is a harmony of the civil and the ecclesiastical powers; the established American
government and the unestablished Church want things that not only co-exist but support each other.

Not that the pistol-packing priest is a trigger-happy, violent man or even a practiced warrior. If need be, he is ready to defend himself and the innocent with weapons, but wherever he can, he will turn to the civil authority. Shane he is not; the pistol he draws on the villain Scales has no dry powder, although Fr. Joseph’s does. In sum, this archbishop is a statesman. Arriving at a diocese long untended, he knows which evils and evildoers to remove immediately, whatever the popular fuss (Fr. Gallengos), and which ones to wait out patiently, only seeming to condone (Padre Martinez). Festina lente. The quality of the prudence that works in the scope of an Archbishoprlic is evident in a good work accomplished long before Archbishop Latour reaches Santa Fé; back in Auvergne when a young man, Fr. Latour watched his future Vicar, Fr. Vaillant, nearly torn apart by his vow to become God’s missionary and his reluctance to leave his parent’s house. With the sound of the approaching coach in their ears, Fr. Latour improvises a solution: come along to Paris and if you still feel this way, we will ask the bishop to release you from your vow. It is a perfect stroke; at that moment to tell his troubled friend, however gently, “You must decide,” would have split him in two parts that might never have been put back together.

If Archbishop Latour is a statesman, he is also a Christian. Not only does he recognize superior spiritual gifts in others, in his indefatigable Vicar and in the long suffering Sada, but he has some of them himself. His heart leaps to see a cruciform juniper in the place where he discovers Hidden Water and where the lost community living around it discovers him; in this he sees the same Hand that guided the prophet of the Children of Israel. When Fr. Latour sees he has some hard decision to make, he retires, into mediation and solitude, seeking it now in his chapel and now in a solitary, wind-encircled hogan. His day begins in prayer, his daily works are prayers in action, and so are his long designs. Archbishop Latour enjoys the world, but gravely, always gracious but never warm, good to all yet known to few; that his favorite author is Pascal fits something in his temper.19

Yet like Cicero and his Scipio in his De Re Publica, this statesman heading for eternity is much concerned with friendship. The friendship of Ishmael and Queequeg exists more to make a Melvillian point than to enjoy anything more important than a pipe; the friendship of Huck and Tom is all play, that of Huck and Jim, although it is just, brave, and loving, is no more lasting than the bonds of boys out of school for summer. By contrast, the friendship of Fr. Latour and Fr. Vaillant is mature and full and lasting; it combines civil pleasures, thoughtful inquires, and shared good works. Work and calling unite these friends and also divide them. Together they set out to serve God and His creatures in the vast Southwest. Together they proceed; together they succeed step by step. Without the directness of the one and the courtesy of the other, Madame Isabella Olivares would never have sacrificed her vanity in court and delivered the willed wealth of her husband so the Archbishop’s cathedral might be built. Jean is the more contemplative, Joseph the more active; the latter’s motto is “rest in action,” the former’s might be “through action to rest.” Neither would be so fine without some of the other’s dominant virtue.20
Yet the same Voice that brought these two so complementary souls together for work then separates them for more work, when He calls Fr. Vaillant away to Utah and Colorado. The only important mistake, perhaps sin, that Fr. Latour ever commits is to call his dear Vicar away from his work west of Santa Fé, but this mistake is reversed and even perhaps justified and redeemed by his ready acceptance of Fr. Vaillant’s subsequent call to Colorado. Contendo and Angelica, the fine pair of white mules, should not be separated, but this fine pair of priests needs must be. The friendship of Jean Marie Latour and Joseph Vaillant is lifelong and, their faith being true, may not cease with death.

_Death Comes for the Archbishop_ is also about death, about how Death comes for Archbishop Latour, about how he came to Death, and about how his whole life was a preparation for death. No other American novel I know of, save others by Willa Cather, such as _My Mortal Enemy_ and _The Professor’s House_, presents such a preparation. There is plenty of death in Hawthorne and Melville, in Poe and James, and in Hemingway and Fitzgerald, but none that anyone prepares for. Death is violent or accidental, sickly or swift, but in any case not anticipated, awaited, prepared for. Nor are the last words of these representative American men and women memorable.21

Willa Cather shows us that Archbishop Latour dies of having lived. As death comes for him, he has chosen to meet it, in Santa Fé, rather than, as others and even he himself expected, in his native Auvergne. In the Southwest, death weighs less heavily on a man, there it is always morning, the air fragrant with sage brush, light and vivacious. “Something soft and wild and free, something that whispered to the ear on the pillow, lightened the heart, softly, softly picked the lock, slid the bolts, and released the imprisoned spirit of man into the wind, into the blue and gold, into the morning, into the morning!”22

Moreover, the Southwest is for the Archbishop the scene of his life’s work. On his way to death, he is more conscious of the whole pageant of his life, especially with his great friendship with Fr. Vaillant, than of the present; as he approaches death, all scenes of the past are equipresent to him; he sees time as God does. “He was soon to have done with calendared time, and it had already ceased to count for him. He sat in the middle of his own consciousness; none of his former states of mind were lost or outgrown. They are all within reach of his hand, and all comprehensible.”23

Yet when he returns to the present, to speak with Bernard, to greet Eusabio the Navaho, or to move back to his study at Santa Fé, he sees the lovely countryside, which he trusts will always endure, and the human scene, so transformed by his own apostolic labors, so threatened perhaps by future progress, but, so he also trusts, worthy of the same loving support he has received from the Creator. This man has so lived that the coming of death is for him a not entirely unwelcome visitation. Death completes his life; his tomb, the cathedral he built for his diocese, from local stone in a Romanesque form brought from his native Southern France, will be his gift to every future diocesan soul and as such, only as such, a monument to himself.

One of the things that gives Fr. Latour most pleasure as he lies dying is the unusual justice of a government. Most unjustly had the American Government forced the noble Navahos to vacate their native lands, especially that green bastion of civility, the Canyon de Chelly, where they were at last done in, by Latour’s for-once-misguided
friend, Kit Carson. The destruction of these Indians might have meant the destruction of nature, for they have “none of the European’s desire to “master” nature, to arrange and re-create. They spend their ingenuity... in accommodating themselves to the scene.... It was the Indian’s way to pass though a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through the water or birds through the air.”

The mystery of Jacinto’s cave is safe with the courteous Christian who thinks these thoughts.

Yet despite all likelihood the American Government admits its mistake and restores the Indians to their native lands. In recognizing civility these Americans qualify as civil, however belatedly. These dry ancestral lands mean more to the Navaho than almost anything. They are at once the basis of their shepherding way of life and the object of their religious reverence; they cannot exist elsewhere, take up new ways, go into a distant land, sojourn in Egypt, or labor among the Moabites. Their gods are fixed and fix them. Father Latour not only recognizes this, thinks their cause just, but blesses them and their affection, however fixed and primal.

That he does so is all the more remarkable when we consider that he, although loving his native Auvergne, not only accepts the call of God to voyage to America, journey to Ohio, and trek to New Mexico, supping on thin imitations of his beloved French soups, but chooses to die in Santa Fé rather than in the region of his nativity. The Creator God he is guided by not only blesses each earthly place with peculiar beauties, but being the God of all peoples, calls many to pilgrim forth to foreign lands, and being the God of all the earth, is not unhappy to send death to His servant in a foreign land, and being as easy to please as He is hard to satisfy, also smiles upon His servant for succoring those whose reverence for the Creator is focused on one place and one place only. Although Willa Cather never says Archbishop Latour is a saint, she suggests a great deal that might make one ask, as he never would, whether he is one.

Whether patronizing or cozy, the characterization of Willa Cather as a regional author is constricting. That she loved great-plained Nebraska is true; not since the Georgics has there been such an appreciation of the farmer’s relation to the land, the original rough love, of the farmer for the land and the land for the farmer; but she loved many places, from Virginia and Chicago to Quebec and Avignon, and all with a persuasive power; as you read, you think you are there, there in Red Cloud, there at Mesa Verde, there at Quebec in 1690, and, at the same time, you very much want to go there. From this appreciation of place arises her intelligent patriotism, no regional chauvinism, but a loyalty to our civilization. Even more than places and regions, Willa Cather loves human beings. She understands them as souls, passing through nature to eternity, not selves, who claim to have made themselves and thus of right to rule themselves, even unto suicide. Each of her souls is capable of gratitude and admiration. The greatness she speaks of being absorbed into is on the way to the greatest something, which orders all the lesser goods in the plenteous good of Creation, and within it especially really good souls, the Creator’s best images.

Willa Cather has a peculiar power to elevate the reader. It is not merely that she identifies the ways low souls hinder young persons with noble desires, as they do
Claude in One of Ours and Thea in Song of the Lark, but that she describes, so a young person might discover them, a whole range of high and happy things, from good coffee to good music, slow dinners at which conversation reigns, and how good good water can be. She has eyes for all fine shapely things, the keys of a piano, the shape of a cup, a violin. Her scenes often remind us of the daily beauties the Impressionists and their confreres paint. Braque, Bonnard, and Jules Breton, more than Monet, Manet, or Cezanne, however. And yet a few, such as the plough against the setting sun, have the intensity of Van Gogh. In her works, Cather gives us the smiles of human things.

All her novels are Bildungroman, for the range of beautiful lofty things are there to educate the young reader; and to those among us who are older, who may suffer, as the couple in My Mortal Enemy do, they are reminders. Though they be enjoyed by others, not us, the sheer existence of them might comfort us. And one of her novels is wholly a Bildungroman. The drama of the Song of the Lark consists in following the calling of one’s talents, adhering to them with desire, strengthening them with discipline, and with practice, practice, practice, until one become who one really is meant to be. Watching Thea achieve that is thrilling. Everyone beginning a summer or a fellowship year should begin by reading this book.

Yet Willa’s world of high happiness is not without suffering. There is the suffering intrinsic to nobility. In her world we meet souls with longing. To long is to love, but to love is to ache. It could not be otherwise. If you love a person, you may hope to be loved in return. But if you love truth, or goodness, or beauty, you cannot hope for a return, aside from the presence of the good thing itself. There are actually few requited loves in Cather, and no happy marriages, just one contented one (Thea Kronborg’s parents). Life is filled with good things, but human relations are at best mixed. Some things in human life seem more important than the experiences that call forth the passions. There are betrayals, though not so piercing as in Shakespeare; there are deaths, though not so poignant as in Tolstoy, and, except for O Pioneers, there are frustrated loves but not so mortally absorbing as in Constant, or Keller, or Wagner. Instead, there are works and duties, but not so cheerless as in Vergil; thus in O Pioneers, Alexandra labors for fruits her younger brother Emil, not she, will enjoy, but she is not unhappy. However, the point the couple in My Mortal Enemy have reached is truly the dead end; their suffering shuts out the good entirely, which a friendship, or perhaps a child, would have invited in; it is solitude à deux; what is Hell, Cather might say, but being so shut in, there are for you no other people. More characteristic are the sufferings that spring from the good itself: that its parts are seldom, or never, to be enjoyed all together in one life. Something must be sacrificed; thus Thea’s great opportunity, of replacing the sick diva in Dresden, comes just when her mother is dying back in Moonstone. These are the sufferings that only very good persons experience. The good friends such as Fr. LaTour and Fr. Valiant, are united by the very purpose that must separate them by region. And Thea’s dedication to her art means she shall never marry.

Moralists write stories in which characters choose between good and evil. (In Macbeth Shakespeare transcends the genre.) Tragedians write stories in which human beings choose between bad and worse, or evil and evil. Again and again Miss Cather’s humans face choices between one good and another. Hers are high comedies that
Aristotle’s lost treatise *On Comedy* might have been about. Throughout, however, there is the satisfaction of lives well lived, as Thea Kronborg’s, Tom Outland’s, and Neighbor Rosicky’s, are, despite their incompleteness, for these men and women are connected, through both enjoyment and service, to something complete and good.

That whole, complete and good as it is, must include the current state of divided and subdivided Christendom. It is remarkable to reflect that if a Christian were asked to point to the books in American literature that portray a good Christian, someone of whom one might say, “Yes, that’s the sort of soul I aspire to be,” there are none better than those in the novels of Willa Cather, and few competitors.\(^\text{27}\) That these portraits are most notably of Catholics should give food for thought to Protestants, and that they are written by one who never ceased to profess herself an Episcopal ought to give thought to Catholics. Perhaps C. S. Lewis might resolve whatever is perplexing in these facts by remarking, “I too wrote as a mere Christian.”\(^\text{28}\)

Michael Platt FRIENDS OF THE REPUBLIC

And for Catholic Christians, it is acutely essential, for we look to the Holy See for guidance and even commands in a way few Protestants look to a foreign principality or prince.

What Thomas calls a part of the natural law shared with the animals seems nearly denied as a parental right by state attempts to regulate or hinder home-schooling; Christians may take comfort in the fact that Christ is the most notable example of a home-schooled child there has ever been.

The best sources of counsel and advice I know of are John Senior’s *The Restoration of Christian Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), and the many books of Mary Pride.


Only since parents in the 1950s in the West began orphaning their children to T. V., Rock Music, and Drugs have young people grown up without admiring some adult or wishing to become one. Before the Second World War there were no “teenagers;” compare the entries in Webster II and Webster III or spend a rainy day looking through old *Life* magazines; in that faraway time, there were youths. The highest ambition of the teenager is to become a more perfect teenager, perhaps a rock and drug star, a movie star, or a personality, some slick version of their vices. See my review essay on Allan Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind*, entitled, “Souls Without Longing,” especially section IV, in *Interpretation*, XVIII 3 (Spring 1991), and my essay “The Teenager and the West,” forthcoming somewhere, I hope; and meanwhile available from me, at mplatt@ktc.com.

This essay is a portion of a much longer one, growing toward a book, entitled “Nature and Nature’s God,” which treats the *Ur*-Western, Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, and much else, including the Declaration, Tocqueville, and Lincoln. I would like to thank the Weathersfield Foundation for the opportunity to deliver a version of this essay at Marymount College in New York City, fifty paces from my boyhood home; the snowballs with which I, along with my friends, pelted the girls of this Catholic college, every snowfall, were, I now believe, inspired with an ardor and directed by a divinely accurate aim the true target of which only many a year later was graciously disclosed.


As for example when Pierre and Natasha in *War and Peace* share the as yet untold-to-anyone stories of their suffering.

Her name is Anna Pavelka (1869-1955); she was born Anna Sadilek in Missovic, Bohemia, and is buried on the treeless prairie north of Red Cloud, Nebraska. For one American reader’s visit to Red Cloud, enjoy the chapter in Fred Setterberg’s *The Road Taken: Travels Through America’s Literary Landscapes* (Univ. of Georgia Press: 1995).


*My Ántonia*, p. 187.

*The Professor’s House* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1925) p. 29.
In the Politics Aristotle says that the man who lives outside the polis (or political community) must be either a beast or a god, and that he will ever be making war. Thus the first lesson little Helen, who had become a tyrant through her parent’s pampering, had to learn was obedience; only then did she trust her teacher, Anne Sullivan, soon after find W-A-T-E-R, and take what Socrates would call “the second sailing.”

*My Ántonia*, p. 353.

Although the American polity has enshrined the right to bear arms in the militia as among the Rights that protect and, for many, define self-government, it has also long recognized a conscientious aversion to bearing arms as a just excuse from doing so, but it has not recognized a selective right to do so, not only as the Supreme Court recently ruled (Gillette v. United States and Negre v. Larson, 1971) because it would be hard to have an army, but because while there is free government the proper place to object selectively is in politics, through persuading your fellow voters, supporting candidates you agree with, or running for office yourself.

On the way America came to misunderstand its own Monroe Doctrine, its tacit alliance with the British Navy during the nineteenth century, and, after it acquired an interest in the Philippines, misunderstood the necessity of increasing its power to match its responsibility, and thus contributed not a little to two world wars and their consequences, see Walter Lippmann, *U. S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (New York: Pocket Books, 1943).

I appropriate a remark of C. S. Lewis’.

In *Shadows on the Rock*, even as she admires the nobility of the nun Jeanne Le Ber, Willa Cather criticizes her; Jeanne gave hurt to her father by living as a shut in and she was wrong to say “No, I will not go with you” to the good Pierre Charron. Stealing into her Church one night and overhearing her wretched voice, Pierre is finally sure she was wrong and that her wrong choice means he should have no regrets; choosing wrong means you are wrong. Miss Cather seems to believe that the wholly cloistered life is not a calling; the pattern of Christ, with its intermittent solitude and teaching, would dictate something closer to the lives of Latour and Vaillant and Thea Kronberg, with their service, denial, and suffering, alternately *activa* and *contemplativa*.

These types receive extreme portraits in Thea in *Song of the Lark* and Ántonia in *My Ántonia*. Between the artist and the mother there is no middle, mixed choice, Miss Cather seems to suggest.

*Cf. Death Comes for the Archbishop*, p. 170 for remarks on this theme; in the novel there is also the prepared death of the miserly Padre Lucero and the lustful Padre Martinez.

*Death Comes for the Archbishop*, p. 276.

Ibid., p. 290

Ibid., pp. 233-234.

The novel she was working on when she died was set in Avignon in the thirteenth century.

Noticing all the savoring of good things to eat and drink in Cather, Roger and Linda Welsch wrote a book with Cather’s receipts, *Cather’s Kitchen* (Bison, 2002). A better motive for literary criticism than increasing the good available from the author would be hard to imagine.
Perhaps Lena in Faulkner’s *Light in August* or Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*. I have asked friends for other examples and what they say suggests that however Christian the perspective of Walker Percy or Flannery O’Connor, there are no good Christians in their work, only seedy or grotesque ones respectively, vessels of Christian discovery perhaps, but not patterns of Christian virtue.

Judging from her high school graduation speech, “Superstition and Investigation,” in which she contrasts scientific enlightenment with religious obscurity, the girl who dissected animals and at college still intended to be a doctor traveled a long way to become the author of *My Ántonia* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, albeit a circular way considering she had always loved the Ántonia she met on first coming into the plains country. Simone Weil might say, “All school studies diligently pursued are a preparation for prayer.”