

## “Kings in exile”: Children’s Literature in Willa Cather’s Early Fiction

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Most of Willa Cather’s readers would be surprised to learn that she tried her hand at children’s fiction in the early years of her apprenticeship as a writer. Most of these stories and poems have long been forgotten and neglected by Cather scholars (and probably deservedly so, some would say). All of these pieces were written between 1896 and 1900. Cather was only twenty-two when she joined the editorial staff of the *Home Monthly Magazine*, in 1896. She was then for the first time striking out on her own, far from Nebraska where she had left her family and friends. The *Home Monthly’s* offices were indeed located in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, “City of Dreadful Dirt” (Jewell and Stout 33) as it was nicknamed by Cather in the first letter she wrote to Mariel Gere (one of her childhood friends) after getting there / upon arrival. So far, her literary endeavors had produced no more than a few college pieces but she had gained a local reputation as a drama critic and columnist for both the *Nebraska State Journal* and the *Lincoln Courier*. She had already penned a few short stories, however, and repeatedly professed her worship for the one and only God of Art: “There is no God but one God and Art is his revealer; that’s [sic] my creed and I’ll follow it to the end, to a hotter place than Pittsburgh if need be” (Jewell and Stout 39). She remained in the position of Managing Editor of the *Home Monthly* until 1897, at which point she went to work as an editor and drama critic for the *Pittsburgh Leader* while still contributing regular pieces to the *Home Monthly*. Like Peter Benson, I believe that these were highly formative years in Cather’s development as an artist as she “struggle[d] to reconcile the sometimes debasing limitations of the magazine’s editorial policy (which she, as Managing Editor, enforced) with the contradictory aesthetic standards that were beginning to assert themselves in her own writings and in her literary and entertainment reviews” (228). Such tensions can be felt most powerfully in the poems and stories that appeared in the Young Folks’ Department, a section traditionally devoted to juvenilia in the domestic magazines of the time.

As a university teacher, I have occasionally had to justify the presence on the curriculum of such a book as Cather’s *My Ántonia* in the face of students’ complaints that “this is children’s literature,” obviously not the sort of high literature they expected to delve into when undertaking a degree in English studies. How then can we account for the fact that the same novel is regarded as one of the great American classics? What is it that allows us to classify certain books as children’s literature and others among the acknowledged classics of “serious” or great literature? And to what extent does Cather’s life-long striving for simplicity in style account for such misconceptions and dismissal of her actual artistic achievements? In this essay, I would like to show how writing in such a “minor” mode for children allowed

Cather to deconstruct the opposition between high and low, between serious literature and supposedly minor forms of artistic expression. I will first take a look at the context in which she produced her children's stories and poems before focusing on some of the most significant pieces in that corpus and examining stories and novels that seem to me to grow out of her early fascination with children's literature.

### **Willa Cather in Pittsburgh**

When analyzing the context out of which Cather's fascination with children's fiction appears to have grown, one must take into account three different types of parameters: personal, professional and intellectual.

First and foremost, it is important to bear in mind that Cather's move to Pittsburgh had cut her off from her family and from the only home she had known for almost fifteen years in Nebraska. She was the oldest child in the family and had left behind six brothers and sisters. She was never very close to her sisters who she hardly ever mentions in her correspondence, but she repeatedly expressed her fondness for her brothers, especially the little one, John (or Jack), only five years old at the time, who she missed dearly throughout her stay in Pittsburgh. In a September 1897 letter written to her childhood friend Mariel Gere, she bemoans:

Mariel, I will not be away from Nebraska another year. Of what use are money and success if one is not happy? And I can not be happy so far away from home. O Mariel, I am so tired of it, their gay Bohemia! I have seen enough of it. It is not so black as it's painted, but it's such a lone and loveless land and it's so many leagues from home. Sometimes I wonder if I am the same girl who looked at all these gilded lies so eagerly two years ago. I think my heart was asleep in those days, but ah it is awake now, awake and aching for one little lad [Jack Cather] who is asleep in his bed a thousand miles away. No one but God will ever know what that baby has done for me. I think he has killed every unworthy ambition in me forever. I don't want money or fame at all any more, but just my three boys always. (Jewell and Stout 46, emphasis in the original text)

Her private correspondence before she left Nebraska also gives us valuable information about her siblings' typical childhood reading fare. While Cather herself had been brought up on *Peter Parley's Universal History*, the Bible and *The Pilgrim's Progress* (all of which her maternal grandmother used to read to her, Woodress 23), her younger sisters and brothers could also benefit from such books as *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Arabian Nights* (two of Cather's favorites at the time).<sup>1</sup> As underlined by Juliet Dusinberre in her groundbreaking

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<sup>1</sup> As she had been left in charge of her younger siblings for a few days while her parents were away in Lincoln with the older ones, Cather wrote to her friend Mariel to describe her domestic routine and tell her that "She was sick of *Alice in Wonderland* after reading it to Jim [her 10-year-old brother] sixteen

study of children's books and modernism, "By the time of Carroll's death in 1898 *Alice* had supplanted *The Pilgrim's Progress* in the popular imagination" (1).

Cather's new professional environment in Pittsburgh was instrumental in prompting bouts of nostalgia for her beloved brothers. As "a domestic magazine capitalizing on a vast women's audience" (Benson 227), *The Home Monthly* published feature articles that provided practical advice to housewives as well as poetry that "was, with exceptions, conventionally sentimental. For the most part it was either poetry written for children or poetry of a practically indistinguishable kind for adults" (Benson 236). As for the stories and sketches published in the "Young Folks Department," they "were, as a rule, even more sentimental. Apparently the juvenile audience was an excuse for emotional indulgence," suggests Peter Benson (242), though he makes sure to specify that Cather herself would soon steer away from such sentimentality. In any case, working for the *Home Monthly* inevitably led Cather (or Helen Delay, as her *nom de plume* was) to take an interest in such issues as childcare, childrearing and children's literature.<sup>2</sup>

Cather's move to Pittsburgh also coincided with the dawn of a new age as such immensely popular writers as Robert Louis Stevenson, Thomas Hughes, Alphonse Daudet, and Lewis Carroll died in short succession in the last years of the century. Stevenson's death in December 1894 was the occasion for Cather to pay homage to the one she regarded as "The King and Father of them All,"<sup>3</sup> a true romanticist the fate of whose works she ponders upon as follows:

It is probable that before the advancement of encroaching realism and "veritism" and all other literary unpleasantness Stevenson will be relegated to the children's book shelves, along with Scott and Cooper and the elder Dumas. Fortunately the children are not realists as yet and exult in the imagination their elders have lost. (*The Kingdom of Art* 312)

Cather would have been equally appalled had she known that Daudet the writer of *Sapho*, *Jack*, and *Numa Roumestan* would become associated in the French popular imagination with such pieces as "Mr. Seguin's Goat" and *Tartarin de Tarascon*, two stories that were assigned for many decades to generations of schoolchildren. Thomas Hughes, the author of *Tom Brown's School Days* and *Tom Brown at Oxford*, died in March 1896, prompting Cather to reflect upon the "whole category of child literature," as she called it, in such terms:

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times and had switched to *The Arabian Nights*" (Willa Cather to Mariel Gere, 2 January 1896, qtd in Woodress 105).

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the topic, see M. Catherine Downs's *Becoming Modern: Willa Cather's Journalism* (71-72).

<sup>3</sup> This was the title of the essay she published in the *Journal* (December 23, 1894).

The whole category of child literature is largely a farce anyway. Generally it is read much more devotedly by their sentimental mammas than by the boys to whom it is presented. As soon as a boy is old enough to read at all he is old enough to read the classics; unless he is not a boy of the reading kind, and in that case it is useless to thrust a lot of weak literature upon him, he had much better be playing shinney. (*The Kingdom of Art* 337)

She then goes on to lambaste books like *Little Lord Fauntleroy* as “an injury to the highest interests of literature,” remarking that “Things were much better in the old days when a boy read only *Pilgrim’s Progress* and *The Holy War* and Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* and was pounded through a dozen books of the *Aeneid*. He had the foundation then of a pure and classical literary taste” (337). The damning conclusion to this essay brings Cather to rhetorically wonder: “Who are these writers of child literature anyway?” to which she immediately brings the final answer: “Generally people who have ingloriously failed in every other line of authorship” (338). From this we can infer that, in Cather’s eyes, good children’s literature should have a more universal appeal, cutting across geographical barriers, age groups and social classes alike. Great works of art are those in which the fine line between children’s literature and adults’ literature becomes indistinguishable, those to which the “minor voice” of the child within each of us can eagerly respond. Cather’s awareness of these fine lines is what allowed her to introduce certain French writers who she greatly admired to an American readership who tended to associate French literature with immorality, sensuality, and a decadent flavor. When Helen Delay presented a book like Daudet’s *Kings in Exile*, for instance, she emphasized the mother-child bond between Queen Frédérique and her son, thereby downplaying the political satire intrinsic to the novel (Downs 74) and skillfully playing on the fact that some of these books could be read on two different levels. Daudet’s death in December 1897 (followed close on the heels by Lewis Carroll’s in January 1898) was another heavy blow to the young woman who regularly lamented the demise of romance and deplored the advent of naturalism.

### **Writing for Children**

“The Princess Baladina—Her Adventure” (August 1896) was the first story Cather wrote for children as a contributor to the *Home Monthly*. Although it has long been dismissed as a mere children’s tale without much literary value, its deeper concerns actually reverberate across much of Cather’s fiction. Not only is the story based on the tension between home and the wider world that would run through most of her later works; it also allows Cather to undermine the conventions of fairy tales in a playful way, as when the little princess considers the idea of “cut[ting] off her beautiful golden hair,” but eventually decides against it since “she had no scissors; [and] besides, if a young Prince should happen to come that way it

would be awkward not to have any golden hair.” The self-reflexive mode is made even clearer when Baladina runs away from the castle: “Once fairly outside, she drew a long breath and looked about her; yes, there was the green meadow and the blue sky, just as they always were in the Princess books.” Her desperate search for a wizard who would agree to cast a spell on her so she could be rescued by a prince remains inconclusive as the few available wizards make fun of her while the only prince she comes across ungratefully turns down her offer: “‘You foolish child, have you stopped me all this time to tell me a fairy tale? Go home to your parents and let me follow my dogs, I have no time to be playing with silly little girls,’ and [he] rode away.” In the end, all Baladina can do is “[weep] at the dearth of princes,” just as Cather’s young readers can either lament the demise of fairytales or rejoice at Baladina’s realization that the poor miller’s son who assisted her in her search for a wizard might actually be more worthy of being a prince than the heartless young man who shatters her romantic illusions.

A few months later, Cather wrote a similar tale in a more realistic vein this time: “Wee Winkie’s Wanderings” (November 1896) tells the story of another headstrong, adventurous little girl who decides to leave the family home and explore the wider world after her mother tells her she can’t ride on the mower with her father and had better go and take a nap or “hem some towels.” Unaware that her loving mother is watching her from the window all that time, she sets off in the direction of the mountains but comes back home full of scratches and dust after wandering for a few hours and trying to set up a camp in the wilderness: “mamma washed her and gave her supper, and tucked her into her little bed and never said a word about her running away, and neither did Winkie.”

Cather was obviously pandering to her young readers’ seasonal tastes when she published the Christmas tale “The Strategy of the Were-Wolf Dog” a few weeks later (December 1896). Once more, however, the flimsy storyline barely manages to hide the deeper concerns that appear to have plagued Cather since her arrival in Pittsburgh. As underlined by Mildred Bennett, when Cather arrived in Pittsburgh, “she did not [...] suspect that she had been branded by the prairie, and that her life was to be forever a tug-of-war between east and west” (64) but also, one might add, between the claims of her home state, Nebraska, and her yearning for the greater adventure lying in store for her in the wider world—a world that she knew to be full of pitfalls and disillusion, as her hero Dunder the reindeer bitterly realizes when all his companions are lured to their deaths by the wicked were-wolf bent on spoiling Christmas. Like Cather, Santa’s reindeer feel the pull of home, but home is not to be found in the safe shelter of Santa’s barn; it is associated with the “wide white snow plains” for which the reindeer feel pangs of nostalgia on certain “glorious moonlight nights.” In the end, Dunder manages to enlist the help of other reindeer and save Christmas: “seven new

reindeer, headed by Dunder, flew like the winged wind toward the coast of Norway. And if any of you remember getting your presents a little late that year,” the narrator concludes, “it was because the new reindeer were not used to their work yet, though they tried hard enough.” Cather herself was trying “hard enough,” determined as she was to make a name for herself, and one might wonder how much of her own feelings of homesickness she projected onto the protagonist of this Christmas story. What might appear as a mere cautionary tale for children in the tradition of “big bad wolf” stories actually reveals much about the author’s determination to keep plodding on the path that she chose to follow when she decided to strike out on her own far from Nebraska.

Beside these three stories, Cather also wrote a number of poems mining a similar nostalgic vein, such as “My Horseman” (published in the *Home Monthly* in November 1896), a poem in which she draws on her own experience, imbued with homesickness for the little brother who has remained “in the West Countree” (Cather, *April Twilights* 68). Under Cather’s pen, however, the sentimentality one might have expected in such a magazine is often undercut by disturbing overtones, as when the mother of a little girl who does not want to comb her hair “found a mouse inside,/ found a mousie pink and bare,/ who had crept for warmth in there ...” (“Bobby Shafto,” October 1896, p. 18; signed John Esten, qtd by Benson 237). Most of these early poems owe a debt to Stevenson whose *Child’s Garden of Verses* (1885) had left its imprint on Cather’s mind. Stevenson’s influence, combined with Cather’s nostalgia for Nebraska and her love for the “three boys” she had left behind, can also be felt in Cather’s obsession with the theme of treasure island that was going to crop up at regular intervals in her fictional output. I would now like to turn my attention to the first two stories that grew out of this fascination to show how the minor mode of children’s literature actually informs Cather’s artistic growth as she proceeds to deconstruct the opposition between high and low, between serious literature and supposedly minor artistic forms.

#### **“The games that live forever”<sup>4</sup>: The Lost Treasure of Childhood**

“The Treasure of Far Island” was originally published in 1902. By that time, Cather had wearied of journalism and found a teaching position in a high school in Pittsburgh. The story focuses on a famous playwright’s return to his homeland in the West and on his rediscovery both of the island where he and his friends used to play many years ago and of the only girl—now a beautiful young woman—who shared in his childhood dreams of adventure. James Woodress summarizes the opinion of many early scholars when he states that the story is

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<sup>4</sup> The expression was used by Cather in an interview to talk about romances like *The Three Guardsmen*: “That kind of writing, at its best, is like fencing and dancing, the games that live forever” (*The Kingdom of Art* 447).

“mawkish and uncontrolled” (156), but later critics also emphasized the value of the tale as a poetic manifesto and even as a feminist revision of the all-boys adventure story.<sup>5</sup> As underlined by Demaree Peck, indeed, though it can be read as the story of “two children who play on an island in a Nebraska river as its ‘original claimants’ [...], ‘Far Island’ is more profoundly about Cather’s own original claim upon her regional subject matter” (6). It seems to me, however, that the story’s major interest lies in its combining both this “rediscovery” of her true poetic material and a questioning upon the child’s gaze that would allow Cather to refine the “démouillé” style<sup>6</sup> that would later become her trademark. “A child’s normal attitude toward the world is that of the artist, pure and simple. The rest of us have to do with the solids of this world, whereas only their form and color exist for the painter” (156), states the narrator before concluding that “A child’s standard of value is so entirely his own, and his peculiar part and possessions in the material objects around him are so different from those of his elders, that it may be said his rights are granted by a different lease” (157). One of the ways in which Cather articulates the tension between the child’s gaze and the adult’s gaze in this story is through an excessive use of literary allusions. “The Treasure of Far Island” undoubtedly suffers from an overdose of intertextual references in which one could either see the symptoms of a heightened self-reflexive dimension or the author’s shoddy attempts to situate herself in the continuity of the great works that she delights in quoting. Both sections in the tale open with a direct quotation from Stevenson’s poem “Where Go the Boats?” as a tribute to the master whose death she had lamented only six years before. The first stanza of the poem is used as an epigraph while the second one is sung by Douglas Burnham, the nostalgic playwright, as he sets out for his lost treasure island in the company of his childhood friend Margie. But these are not the only references to be found; every page is saturated with allusions to the Bible, Greek mythology, Greek and Roman literary classics, and numerous landmarks in English, American, and even French literature (Keats’s odes, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, Daudet’s *Kings in Exile*, etc.). As pointed out by Joan Wylie Hall, “[b]y resorting—often openly—to such literary models, Cather risks the charge of arrested development that [such stories as ‘The Treasure of Far Island’ and ‘The Professor’s Commencement’] direct against men too bound by their books. Yet, at the same time she relies upon the male tradition, Cather clearly warns against over-dependence” (Hall 150) by using Margie as a foil to Douglas. The young woman does not hesitate to rebuke her friend’s boundless imagination and flights of literary fancy when she

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<sup>5</sup> See Rosowski’s analysis in Chapter 3 of *Birthing a Nation*: “By adding a girl to her band in no-man’s-land, Cather laid the groundwork for a woman to succeed in the previously male art of ‘creating ... making epics.’ She made it clear in ‘The Treasure of Far Island’ that Margie was one among equals when she was a girl” (89).

<sup>6</sup> In the eponymous manifesto published in 1922, Cather advocated an art of suggestion based on strict principles of economy and inspired by Prosper Mérimée’s own writing practice. By the time she wrote *My Mortal Enemy* (1926), Cather had achieved a perfect command of this minimalist art.

warns him against “strain[ing] [his] inventive powers to make compliments” (161) and remarks that he is “only a case of arrested development” (154). This throws an ironic light upon a text that exhibits such a high degree of self-consciousness.

The comparison with “The Enchanted Bluff,” published seven years later (1909) in *Harper’s Magazine*, yields many insights into Cather’s artistic growth. Rosowski similarly reads the two stories side by side and sees “The Enchanted Bluff” as “a comic subversion of the quest romance adventure” (8) to be found in “The Treasure of Far Island.” Whether she applies the adjective “comic” to the story itself or to Cather’s intentions remains unclear, but it seems to me that her interpretation fails to do justice to one of Cather’s most beautiful stories. “The Enchanted Bluff” introduces a group of teenagers who have gathered round a campfire for a night by the riverside. As they exchange their wildest dreams of adventure in the unknown, the boys let their imagination follow the meandering river to its original spring until it reaches the mysterious enchanted bluff that gives its title to the story—a sacred place lost in the American desert which they all dream of exploring one day. The appearance of the moon at nightfall marks their entry into the world of adventure, just as it brought the story of Douglas and Margie to a romantic climax in “The Treasure of Far Island,” but the two passages in question are worth looking at in more detail. Here is Cather’s description of the episode in “The Treasure of Far Island”:

The locust chirped in the thicket; the setting sun threw a track of flame cross [*sic*] the water; *the willows burned with fire and were not consumed; a glory was upon* the sand and the river and upon the Silvery Beaches; and these two looked about over God’s world and *saw that it was good*. In the western sky *the palaces of crystal and gold* were quenched in night, like the cities of old empires; and out of the east rose the same moon that has glorified all the romances of the world—*that lighted Paris over the blue Ægean and the feet of young Montague to the Capulets’ orchard*.” (165, emphasis mine)

And here is now the description to be found in “The Enchanted Bluff”:

We were speculating on how many times we could count a hundred before the evening star went down behind the corn fields, when someone cried, “There comes the moon, and it’s as big as a cart wheel!”  
We all jumped up to greet it as it swam over the bluffs behind us. It came up like a galleon in full sail; an enormous barbaric thing, red as an angry heathen god. (253)

In the first extract, what should be presented as the center of attention is drowned out by the many bookish associations that cause interference and detract from what is really at stake at such a dramatic moment: explicit borrowings from the Bible (Exodus 3:2 and Genesis 1:4), Homer and Shakespeare combine with a number of trite phrases (“the palaces of crystal and gold”) and archaic diction inspired by the Bible (“a glory was upon ...”) to make the reader



lose sight of the characters' experience and the specificity of the setting. Inversely, Cather's treatment of a similar topic in "The Enchanted Bluff" reveals the extent to which she had by then perfected the art of discarding unnecessary allusions. She does not dispense with literary references altogether, though, as shown by her skilful reworking of Flaubert's *Salammbô* in the passage,<sup>7</sup> but these references have become less obtrusive and now form an integral part of the work's design. The images she makes use of follow a clear sequential pattern of exploration back in time that is perfectly adapted to the American imagination, from the pioneering epic ("as big as a cartwheel") to the conquistadores ("like a galleon in full sail") and even earlier "barbaric" times when only bands of wild Indians roamed through the desert. The movement that leads the boys away from the constricting atmosphere of their small-town environment through the power of imagination and storytelling consequently stands in sharp contrast with the inertia which eventually seals the fate of these would-be adventurers.

Let us see now how a similar scene is described in the novel *My Ántonia*, published in 1918:

As we walked homeward across the fields, the sun dropped and lay *like a great golden globe* in the low west. While it hung there, the moon rose in the east, *as big as a cart-wheel*, pale silver and streaked with rose colour, *thin as a bubble or a ghost-moon*. For five, perhaps ten minutes, the two luminaries confronted each other across the level land, resting on opposite edges of the world.

In that singular light, every little tree and shock of wheat, every sunflower stalk and clump of snow-on-the-mountain, drew itself up high and pointed; the very clods and furrows in the fields seemed to stand up sharply. I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end there. (171, emphasis mine)

Cather's choice of images reveals a marked predilection for similes over metaphors, as if to suggest the primacy of a child's vision of things behind the poetical quality of the passage. These similes are carefully chosen to evoke powerful images in the mind of the pioneer: the first one associates the westward movement with something that directs the destiny of the whole world (the *global* movement of "a great golden globe"); the second one conjures up the memory of all those who ventured west in horse-wagons; the third one conveys the fragile, evanescent quality of the moon, and thus the fragile quality of Jim's own romantic fantasies. At this stage, *Ántonia* is already turning into a "ghost" in his memory, albeit a "beautiful

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<sup>7</sup> As pointed out by Bernice Slote in her famous essay on Cather's conception of art, *Salammbô*'s invocation to Tanit, goddess of the moon, on the hills of Carthage is echoed by Cather's description of the moon rising above the little Western town (Cather, *The Kingdom of Art* 99-100): "Où donc vas-tu? Pourquoi changer tes formes, perpétuellement? Tantôt mince et recourbée, tu glisses dans les espaces *comme une galère sans mâture*, ou bien au milieu des étoiles tu ressembles à un pasteur qui garde son troupeau. Luisante et ronde, tu frôles la cime des monts *comme la roue d'un char*" (Flaubert 101, emphasis mine).

ghost” like those that would haunt Cather herself for many years.<sup>8</sup> There is something ungraspable and elusive about her and all that she represents.

What prevails in this passage from a stylistic point of view is the use of a predominantly monosyllabic style and of repetitive patterns, two devices that stand out on account of their very lack of sophistication. However, one-syllable words also appear to be most effective to reflect the impression of weight (the sun dropping) and the downward movement that is suggested here (“the old pull of the earth”). On the other hand, repetitive patterns provide a sense of balance and order that is perfectly in keeping with what is at stake here: Cather uses syntactic parallelisms (every / every); she adopts the poetic rhythm of French verse<sup>9</sup>; the alliterations in voiced plosives (great / golden / globe) reinforce the grandeur and magnificence of the sun as well as the ongoing westward movement of conquest while the liquids and sibilants (lay / like) (silver / streaked / rose) produce more fluidity, repose and serenity.

## Conclusion

By the time she wrote “The Enchanted Bluff,” Cather was well on her way to becoming a master in the art of simplifying which she praised with so much fervor in a 1913 interview: “[...] art ought to simplify—that seems to me to be the whole process” (*The Kingdom of Art* 447). To do so, she had to draw from her early training as a children’s writer, learn how to privilege “form and color” (156) over useless displays of erudition, throw her own boats down the river of the imagination and hope, like Stevenson’s persona, that “Other little children / Shall bring [her] boats ashore” (“Where Go the Boats?”). While Cather’s actual experience as a children’s writer was quite limited in time, she probably remained, at heart, a writer for those “kings in exile” that Margie identifies with in “The Treasure of Far Island,” i.e. grown-ups who still believe in the sheer power of the imagination to carry them away to places of enchantment.

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<sup>8</sup> Cather’s vision of the creative process involved a dual process of trans-figuration and incorporation, that is the ability to give bodies to the “beautiful ghosts” that had been haunting the writer’s mind for years sometimes, the ability to give literary expression to elusive figures that the writer does not so much want to fully capture and fix on the page as she wants to reveal their ability to radiate with meaning. She evoked this type of writer in an interview she gave in 1925 after the publication of *A Lost Lady*: “The type of writer we have been talking about has a brain like Limbo, full of ghosts, for which he has always tried to find bodies. *A Lost Lady* was a beautiful ghost in my mind for twenty years before it came together as a possible subject for presentation” (*Willa Cather in Person* 79). The same is true of the character of Antonia, another “beautiful ghost” that had been on Cather’s mind for many years before she could use it as literary material.

<sup>9</sup> From “the moon” down to “the East,” one counts 6 feet for the first two clauses and 9 for the last two. On the influence of French poetic rhythms on Cather’s prose, see Françoise Palleau-Papin’s “The Hidden French in Willa Cather’s English.”

*My Ántonia* probably marked the apex of Cather's progress in the art of simplifying and the novel deservedly remains a milestone in her career. The spare, limpid style that characterizes it was the outcome of a long artistic process that allowed Cather to achieve striking effects of economy and eventually to find her own voice and her own place in the world of American literature. It seems to me that she reflects on this long process of self-discovery in a later novel, *The Professor's House*, when Tom Outland comes back to the Blue Mesa and has the same revelation about the power of simplifying and coordinating, which allows him to come into his inheritance, just like Cather before him:

I'll never forget the night I got back. [...] The moon was up, though the sun hadn't set, and it had that glittering silveriness the early stars have in high altitudes. The heavenly bodies look so much more remote from the bottom of a deep canyon than they do from the level. The climb of the walls helps out the eye, somehow. I lay down on a solitary rock that was like an island in the bottom of the valley, and looked up. The grey sage-brush and the blue-grey rock around me were already in shadow, but high above me the canyon walls were dyed flame-colour with the sunset, and the Cliff City lay in a gold haze against its dark cavern. In a few minutes it, too, was grey, and only the rim rock at the top held the red light. When that was gone, I could still see the copper glow in the piñons along the edge of the top ledges. The arc of sky over the canyon was silvery blue, with its pale yellow moon, and presently stars shivered into it, like crystals dropped into perfectly clear water.

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 coordinate and simplify*, and that process, going on in my mind, brought with it great happiness. *It was possession*. The excitement of my first discovery 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. (226-227, emphasis mine)

In retrospect, one can read this passage as encapsulating the process that led Cather to experience a similar epiphany in the Southwestern desert when she went there in the summer of 1916, just before she started work on *My Ántonia*. Something happened there that allowed her to “simplify and coordinate” while coming into her own, something that she expressed most beautifully through the character of Tom Outland a few years later.

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