

## WILLA CATHER

*"The church looked powerful and triumphant there on its eminence, so high above the rest of the landscape, with miles of warm color lying at its feet..."*

Has anyone ever written about the way Catholicism enters into the work of non-Catholic writers? I am sure this has been done, at least in a piece meal fashion. In reading the Brontes or Thackeray or Dickens or Trollope one notices the odd way Catholics and things Catholic are treated. Recently Robert Fussel wrote *The Catholic Side of Henry James*, a remarkable study that traces the way the Church attracts and repels James's characters.

A bonus of reading this book was learning that Ralph Waldo Emerson had a habit of visiting the old cathedral of Baltimore when he was in that city. Surely this is one of the most American of Catholic churches, architecturally speaking, but it was the difference rather than the similarity that interested Emerson, and his eye was on the service. He wrote his wife that it was such a relief to see a ceremony in which the preacher was not the star.

Surely such a book could be done on Howells and Hawthorne as well, since it was often the European experience that unsettled the native American. At home, the American Protestant might think of Romanism as a foreign and exotic business, but in Europe he was forced to see that it

was he who was outside the dominant culture and religion. The role that Dante played in altering the attitude of Yankee Protestants toward the 'old religion' is well known.

In this century, Willa Cather (1873-1947) is a non-Catholic author whose attitude toward Catholicism moves from the untroubled tolerance of *O Pioneers!* to the empathetic treatments of *Death Comes For the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*. Born in Virginia, raised in Nebraska, an editor first in Pittsburgh, then New York, Cather visited Europe, returned to Nebraska annually, loved the Southwestern United States, and vacationed in Maine and New Brunswick. She is one of the great American novelists of the 20th century.

Alexandra is the dominant figure in *O Pioneers!*, her father's daughter who after his death manages his prairie farm with remarkable success. A casualty of her filial devotion is her love for her childhood friend Carl. The hinge event of the novel is a double murder when Alexandra's brother Emil is caught *in flagrante delictu* with the Catholic Frank Shabata's wife, Marie. The novel has an elegiac tone, set by the invocation of Whitman in the title, with Alexandra providing a wise daughter of the soil's outlook on events. She and the reader are awestruck by the mystery of human freedom as it plays out against the inexorable rhythms of the land.

The French parish of Sainte-Agnes to which the Shabatas belong is

an integral part of the Nebraska setting. "The church looked powerful and triumphant there on its eminence, so high above the rest of the landscape, with miles of warm color lying at its feet, and by its position and setting it reminded one of some of the churches built long ago in the wheat-lands of middle France." Sometimes Alexandra goes to Catholic services with Marie Shabata, and a parish fair that all the main characters, Protestant and Catholic attend, provides a background for one sequence. The reader is confident Cather is describing something she herself has seen.

This confidence is strengthened when we consider her description of the bishop's visit to confirm. The men ride out to meet him. "Five miles east of Sainte-Agnes they met the bishop in his open carriage, attended by two priests. Like one man the boys swung off their hats in a broad salute, and bowed their heads as the handsome old man lifted his two fingers in the episcopal blessing." She doesn't get that quite right -- the thumb and index finger touch with three fingers extended -- but one notices the desire for accuracy.

I think this is the first bishop to appear in Cather's fiction. Soon she will go on from the external glimpse to imaginatively occupying the inside of Catholic prelates with extraordinary effect. *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, based on Archbishop Lamy of Santa Fe, was written when Cather's artistic skills were honed and when her distinctive outlook was formed. It is instructive to compare Paul Horgan's life of Lamy with

Cather's artistic use of the archbishop in this novel. Cather's love and knowledge of the Southwest is everywhere evident in the novel, but one is amazed by her treatment and understanding of her hero. The final lines of the novel give a sense of the portrait she has drawn.

When the Cathedral bell tolled just after  
dark, the Mexican population of Santa Fe fell  
upon their knees, and all American Catholics  
as well. Many others who did not kneel  
prayed in their hearts. Eusabio and the  
Tesuque brothers went quietly away to tell  
their people; and the next morning the old  
Archbishop lay before the high altar in the  
church he had built.

The historical novel Willa Cather wrote of Quebec had as its principal literary sources the histories of Francis Parkman and the *Jesuit Relations*. Parkman's rationalist anti-clericalism had no effect on Cather, and she rejected entirely his negative estimate of Bishop Laval, influenced perhaps by her conversations with the vicar of Ste-Foy, Abbé Scott. She read too the letters of Marie de l'Incarnation, from one of which she took the motto of the novel. Describing the flowers of the region to a sister in France, the nun generalizes: "Tout y est suave, les fleurs aussi bien que les hommes: Here everything is wild, the flowers as well as the men."

In *Shadows on the Rock*, Cather writes of 17th century French Canada and of two forceful men, Count Frontenac and Bishop Laval. But the story is told through lesser characters and in a sense the rocky promontory on which Quebec stands is the subject insofar as it symbolizes the "narrow but definite" culture the French established there.

Sometimes writers choose their subjects, as often as not the reverse is true. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* grew gradually from Cather's visits and study of the southwest; *Shadows on the Rock* was worked up on the basis of less personal experience. In either case, we can be surprised that such characters and events appealed to a non-Catholic author. Cather's authorial voice owes much to Scripture. Her acceptance of the misfortunes and follies of men depended upon seeing life whole and catching an intimation of its deeper purpose.

In *O Pioneers!*, Alexandra takes a long train ride to the prison in which Frank Shabata is paying for killing her brother and Marie Shabata. This is done matter-of-factly but it is clearly the kind of thing Willa Cather expects a Christian like Alexandra Bergson to do. It is no wonder that an author capable of finding nobility in the simple could also find the common clay in the mighty.

## WILLA CATHER'S CATHOLIC NOVELS

Among the imaginary conversations I would like to overhear, one between Willa Cather and biographers claiming her for feminism, even sexual aberration, would rank high on the list. As with Kate Chopin, she is often subjected to an ideological reading that misses not only the high artistry of her work but also its sane serenity.

She was a church-going believer all her life; she was confirmed in the Episcopal Church along with her parents on December 27, 1922 by the Bishop of Nebraska, a family friend. Even her slightest works convey a sense of life completely different from that of those angry females who presume to speak for their sisters. But this correction does little to solve one of the great mysteries about Willa Cather. How was she able to write two of the most Catholic novels in American literature?

*Death Comes for the Archbishop* first appeared seventy years ago, in 1927 when Cather was fifty-four. The novel had been forming in the author's imagination for over a dozen years, triggered by her reaction to the Catholic history and artifacts of the American Southwest during frequent visits.

The more I stayed in the Southwest, the more I felt that the story of

the Catholic Church in that country was the most interesting of all its stories. The old mission churches, even those which were abandoned and in ruins, had a moving reality about them; the hand-carved beams and joists, the utterly unconventional frescoes, the countless fanciful figures of the saints, not two of them alike, seemed a deeper expression of some very real and lively human feeling.

Cather's roots were in Virginia, but her family had moved to Nebraska when she was ten years old, and it was on the prairie that her imagination was formed. The pioneers, coming as they did from a variety of countries, provided a corrective for the received vision of America as merely an extension of the Puritan colonies. When Cather encountered the Catholicism of the Southwest, she had already written of European Catholics emigrating to the New World. In the early novels, Catholics are not presented as Americans *manqués*; their difference is due to their eastern European origins rather than their faith.

The bronze statue of Archbishop Lamy in front of the cathedral in Santa Fe fascinated Cather and he became "a sort of invisible personal friend" in her vacation wanderings through the Southwest. He had come, a well-bred, distinguished Frenchman, as bishop into a land whose Catholicism had Spanish roots. Lamy was a 19th century version of those Spanish priests who had arrived in the desert to evangelize the natives and

to create the little pockets of civilization that are still there for the viewing. The missionary bishop Lamy arrived in a land where vestiges of a vast earlier missionary effort were all around him and prior to that had been the culture and religion of the natives. How old the New World was.

Who has not marveled at the Spanish missions, in California, in New Mexico, in Texas. In Albuquerque one stands before a church that shatters the notion that American history has its only roots in New England. Willa Cather might have seemed a perfect recruit to the WASP ascendancy. When she went east, she was soon at home in the worlds of art and publishing. But some inner need took her back to Red Cloud, Nebraska year after year, and on camping trips to remote parts of the country, an impulse that brought her eventually to the Southwest and the layered Catholic history of that country extending back over centuries.

When Mortimer Adler became a fervent advocate of Thomas Aquinas, he was regularly asked if he intended to become a Catholic. He replied by quoting the *Summa theologiae*: faith is a grace and a gift. So when *Death Comes for the Archbishop* appeared, similar questions must have arisen about its author. The editors of *Commonweal* asked her about it and she replied with a letter of essay length. In the three volume Library of America edition of her works, this essay appears twice, once in the notes to the novel and a second time in the volume called *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*.



One is struck by two things in this essay. First, speaking in her own name, Cather conveys the same matter-of-fact sympathy with Catholicism and its history that permitted the artistic adoption of that outlook in the novel. Neither in this novel, nor in the next, *Shadows on the Rock*, is there any distance at all between the author and her characters. There is never the sense that things are being viewed with an alien albeit friendly eye. Second, there are precious remarks about the method she employed in the novel, a method that would be employed as well in *Shadows on the Rock*.

I had all my life wanted to do something in the style of legend, which is absolutely the reverse of dramatic treatment. Since I first saw the Puvis de Chavannes frescoes of the life of Saint Genevieve in my student days, I have wished that I could try something like that in prose; something without accent, with none of the artificial elements of composition.

This method seems peculiarly apt for the novel she undertook. "The essence of such writing is not to hold the note, not to use an incident for all there is in it -- but to touch and pass on." She had come upon a life of Father Joseph Machebeuf, an associate of Lamy's and eventual first bishop of Denver, written by a Father William Joseph Howlett and printed, as she put it, on a country press at Pueblo, Colorado. The book was thick with letters the priest had written to his sister Philomene and Cather found in these letters "the mood, the spirit in which they accepted the accidents and

hardships of a desert country, the joyful energy that kept them going."

It is easy to imagine someone else coming upon such a book and setting it aside with a smile. A little amateur hagiography, published in the sticks since it could not possibly interest a 'real' publisher. For Cather it was a priceless source of the spirit of the missionary, his trust in providence, his holiness. In her Catholic novels, it is the simple holiness of the main characters that is conveyed with authority. It seems demeaning to refer to those letters home of a missionary priest as Willa Cather's principal 'research' for her novel. She tells us that she deliberately avoided steeping herself in Catholic lore, but when she needed advice she sought it from Father Dennis Fitzgerald in Red Cloud, Nebraska, who had studied in Rome. But she set aside most of what he told her: it was not the furnishings of the faith but its essence that she was after.

*Shadows in the Rock* shifts from the American Southwest to Quebec. Francis Parkman had written of these matters in a series of works that fill two chubby volumes in the Library of America. We are told that Willa Cather began to reread Parkman in 1928 during a visit to Quebec, where she also met Father Henri Arthur Scott, a Canadian church historian.

I am sure that someone has studied the contrast between the outlook of the historian Parkman and the novelist Willa Cather toward the French Catholic culture of Quebec. I think it fair to say that, for all his industry and amazing comprehensiveness, there remains a barrier between

Parkman and his subject matter. Parkman was a Protestant, the son of a Boston minister, who had felt the lure of Catholicism that Henry James spoke of, but had danced out of danger. The fascination continued, but it was a wary curiosity. Toward the end of his life, he became a foe of feminism and women's suffrage and campaigned against parochial schools as dangerous competition to public schools. His anti-clericalism proved an impediment to his receiving an honorary doctorate from my *alma mater*, Laval University. Willa Cather, on the other hand, enters the world of her Catholic characters in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock* and tells their story in such a way that there is no authorial otherness at all.

As with the earlier novel, so here some of her characters are based on historical figures. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* covers a lifetime; *Shadows on the Rock* covers a year, the interval between the sailing of the last ship in the Fall to the arrival of the first ship from France in the Spring. Monseigneur Laval is a major figure but we see him as we see everyone else through the eyes of the pharmacist's daughter Cecile. It is hard not to see her as the girl Willa Cather had been and this makes the adoption of the simple Catholic piety of the girl all the more moving.

Brian Moore, an excellent novelist, published *Black Robe* a few years ago, a novel of a Canadian missionary. Comparison of the artistic achievements of this novel and Willa Cather's *Shadows on the Rock* would

take one very far afield. Moore was raised Catholic and his story is manifestly a sort of Graham Greene inside/outside reenactment. In *Catholics* Moore created the haunting character of an abbot who had lost his faith yet held his community together. Cather is interested in the firm and unwavering faith of the archbishop and of Marchebeuf. There are irregular clergy on the scene, priests with concubines, gourmands, but her method of "not holding the note," of touching and passing on, does not give them equal billing. Indeed, they are seen through the eyes of the faithful priest who is living out the promises of his youth.

A poignant note in Cather's letter to *Commonweal* is struck when she notes that "newer priests down in that country have been taking away from those old churches their old homely images and decorations, which have a definite artistic and historic value, and replacing them by conventional, factory-made furnishings from New York. It is a great pity." Indeed it is.

Those of us who have lived through even more egregious dismantling, carried on in the mistaken belief that it was a response to Vatican II, can only agree. The language, the place, the reverence of the liturgy have been reduced to a point where the Mass seems only a meeting like a dozen others. It is not nostalgia that is at issue. There may be an English equivalent of the gravity of Latin; there may be another music that engages the mind and heart in the way that Gregorian chant does; there

may be churches that can match the achievements of an earlier day. But they will have to arise out of the same vibrant and simple faith that produced their counterparts. Now cardinals commission agnostics to design cathedrals, tinkling pianos and ill-plucked guitars fill the churches, and translators with tin ears twist the liturgy into conformity with alien ideologies. Willa Cather became Archbishop Latour and Cecile but this was more than an artistic achievement. She shared their Christian faith and aspiration to holiness. The faith that moves mountains also builds cathedrals, finds the right music, inspires a language appropriate to its aspirations. And it produces novels like *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and *Shadows on the Rock*.