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CULTURAL CROSS-POLLINATION IN WILLA CATHER'S *DEATH COMES FOR THE ARCHBISHOP*

Challenges involved in the transplanting of cultures permeate all of Willa Cather's fiction. Her childhood experience of moving from Virginia to Nebraska made Cather particularly sensitive to the difficulties of adjusting to a new environment. As Cather said, '[a]ll human history is the record of an emigration' (qtd. in Winters 1993: 10). In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, set in the Southwest after the annexation of New Mexico in 1848, Cather deals with the differing traditions of the Pueblo and the Navajo native peoples as well as the beliefs and customs of the Spanish, Mexican, French, and American settlers. To highlight the on-going meeting and mixing of interests and traditions, Cather uses detailed comparisons of the native flora and the gardens that the missionary priests introduce into the landscape. While focusing on the life and work of Father Latour, Cather suggests a close association between the problems in cultivating European seeds on mostly desert land and the complexities of propagating Catholic religion in the newly acquired territory.

Cather's treatment of cultural groups other than her own has generated a mixed critical response. Some scholars, such as Elizabeth Ammons and Frances W. Kaye, accuse Cather of racism and cultural appropriation. Others, including David Stouck and Guy Reynolds, praise her inclusiveness and pluralism. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* could easily be seen as celebrating the hard work of missionaries who, consciously or unconsciously, serve the cause of manifest destiny. In his discussion of Cather's perspective within the context of the stereotypes prevalent in works about the Southwestern region, Reed Way Dasenbrock argues that Cather continues the tradition of treating the Southwest 'as a colonial possession by those it is southwest of' (124). As Dasenbrock summarizes, Cather chooses as her protagonist an outsider and 'sympathetically presents his efforts to introduce (or impose) external standards on the area' (125). Father Latour, the typical 'transformer,' is the energetic force, while the indigenous inhabitants only resist the changes and hold onto the past (126). Dasenbrock somewhat balances his critique by pointing out that Cather, herself an outsider, was probably aware that she could not adequately portray the history of the region from within and was conscious that her work was itself part of the Americanization process. Accord-

ing to Marilee Lindemann, though, Cather's position as an outsider and a non-Catholic white woman actually allows her 'to leap [...] delicately over the very real cultural boundaries' and bring the interaction of the various cultures alive (16).

Dasenbrock and Lindemann both emphasize important aspects of the novel's cultural dynamic. However, the novel's central theme is the development of Father Latour's perceptions of the New Mexico landscape which parallels the evolution of his views of the native people's beliefs. While Father Latour's mission undeniably represents American political interests, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* includes elements that clearly subvert the progressive nature of Americanization. In a 1924 interview Cather expressed her belief that the contemporary 'passion for Americanizing everything and everybody [was] a deadly disease' qtd. in (Bohlke 1986: 146–47). Significantly, Cather's chosen protagonist, Father Latour, is French and Catholic. Moreover, the cruelty of Buck Scales, the Protestant couple's mistreatment of Sada, the depiction of Kit Carson's capture of the Navajo, and the references to the "incongruous" style of the new American houses in Santa Fe indicate that Cather's characterization of American culture is transgressive (268). Tracing Father Latour's growing responsiveness to the new natural and cultural environments shows that despite his prejudices, he is more a student and mediator than a dominating force. Gradually, in his gardening as well as his thinking, he learns to harmoniously connect native and European elements.

The cultural diversity represented in the novel is reflected in the experimental form of *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. The novel is repeatedly characterized as a collage or a tapestry of 'heterogeneous range of discourses' (Reynolds 1996: 153). These include folk-tale, legend, historical romance, biography, travelogue, meditation, and parable-like vignette. According to Evelyn Haller, the novel's structure allows Cather to include 'a variety of cosmic visions within a single narrative' (17). Father Latour's tolerant, 'mixed theology' (31) results to a significant degree from his interactions with a whole 'gallery' of characters with varied cultural backgrounds (Thomas 1990: 163). Even though Father Latour is 'the central consciousness in the novel,' people of many differing backgrounds contribute to the discoveries on his journey through life (Stouck 1982: 12). As Marilee Lindemann concludes, it is in this interaction, in the 'quiet encounters of the European priest with the Mexicans, Indians, and Americans of his diocese,' where the 'action of the novel lies' (16).

The Prologue introduces both the necessity of negotiating cultural diversity and the importance of creating fruitful, artistically elaborate gardens in the Catholic priests' missionary work. The French, Italian, and Spanish Cardinals who decide that Father Latour should become the vicar of New Mexico meet in 'the gardens of a villa in the Sabine hills, overlooking Rome' (3). The rays of the sinking sun illuminate the orange, oleander, and ilex trees with 'a ruddiness as of much-multiplied candlelight,' which gives the scene an artistic 'climax' (4). The rest of the novel records the story of Father Latour's learning to adapt the cultural heritage represented in this opening garden scene to the new environment so that it can take root and thrive after his death.

When Father Latour arrives in New Mexico in 1851, he is zealous and bold, sure of the purpose of his mission. He is determined to help the soldiers at the fort in their efforts to 'make these poor Mexicans "good Americans"' and believes that 'there is no other way in which they can better their condition' (35–36). He finds many of the old Spanish churches in ruins. In Acoma, for instance, the roof of the 'old warlike church' is 'sagging' (100) and the garden contains only 'two thin, half-dead peach trees' and a solitary vine stump (102). Accordingly, the Catholic faith is just barely surviving, like 'a buried treasure,' in isolated Mexican villages in the desert (207). Nevertheless, Father Latour is not discouraged, not even by the stories about native revolts or the resentment of the old Mexican priests. He is convinced that the 'Faith planted by the Spanish friars and watered by their blood [is] not dead; it await[s] only the toil of the husbandman' (32). As Father Vaillant, Latour's assistant and companion, observes, the local people are 'like seeds, full of germination but with no moisture' (206). The two missionaries' work as gardeners is an organic part of their work as priests and they set out to 'make a garden' as soon as possible (39).

In part, creating a garden is for Father Latour a way of establishing order and 'the comfort of the familiar' in his new surroundings (Collins 1988: 40). He creates a walled garden, an element first introduced by the Spanish and still relatively alien in the New Mexico landscape. Additionally, as J. Gerard Dollar points out, Father Latour's early gardening displays 'a certain mistrust of native species' (8). He takes pride in the 'more than a hundred lotus blossoms' which he grows in an artificial pool and which come from the 'five bulbs that [he] put in [his] valise' when he was in Rome (205). His garden also supplies the apple blossoms and daffodils for the altar decoration of the chapel (209). Indeed, Father Latour's first garden is not much different from Father Baltazar's earlier attempt at cultivating his imported plants on the rock in Acoma. Father Baltazar was one of the 'early churchmen' who 'did a great business in carrying seeds about' (105). Father Baltazar's 'wonderful garden' in its unlikely environment could survive only by his forcing the Pueblo women to carry water up the rock (104). It reflected Father Baltazar's 'overbearing disposition' with which he tried to introduce new, culturally incongruous practices and ideas in the community (103–04).

Therefore, Father Latour's first garden represents a certain imposition of a foreign cultural perspective. His efforts to create a 'spacious orchard and a kitchen-garden' parallel his desire to start a Catholic school (201). From his trip to Baltimore he brings back the starters for his fruit trees as well as five nuns, Sisters of Loretto, to found the Academy of Our Lady of Light. He foresees that by the time the school is established in the community, the trees will also be bearing. Just as the pupils will share what they learn with their families, the cuttings from the trees will be 'yielding fruit in many Mexican gardens' (201).

Nevertheless, for Father Latour 'planting and pruning' also have a deep personal significance (201). Like Captain Forrester in Cather's *A Lost Lady* and Professor St. Peter in *The Professor's House*, he takes pleasure and satisfaction in gardening itself. His enclosed garden is for him a place of physical and spiri-

tual renewal, a place of his 'only recreation' (201). Despite the walls surrounding it, the garden brings him in touch with the world around him. After winter, the 'air and the earth interpenetrated in the warm gusts of spring; the soil was full of sunlight, and the sunlight full of red dust. The air one breathed was saturated with earthy smells, and the grass under foot had a reflection of blue sky in it' (200). Such mingling of the material and the spiritual worlds plays an important role in Father Latour's opening up to the New Mexico country and peoples. With time, his exploratory trips and his growing awareness of the complex cultural history of the area begin to relax his missionary enthusiasm.

Commenting on the 'suffusion of bright light' and the 'vibrant color' that envelop Father Latour's travels, Kevin A. Synnott stresses that 'the senses do matter in this novel' (13). For example, the peculiar smell of the piñon trees inspires Father Latour to write to his brother in France that there is 'a perpetual odour of incense' about the place (35). At times Father Latour's sensual perceptions are so acute that they transport him in time as well as space. The sight and smell of a flower can take him from New Orleans into 'a garden in the south of France' before he can even think of the flower's name, mimosa (43). After savoring the onion soup prepared according to an old French recipe and followed by the 'compote of dried plums' one Christmas Day, Father Latour is carried back to 'the old Latour garden at home' and the 'great yellow' plums growing there (41). He imagines the 'tilted cobble street [...] with the uneven garden walls and tall horse-chestnuts on either side' (41). These transcendental journeys between present and past landscapes help Father Latour adjust to his new surroundings.

Additionally, Father Latour's aesthetic sense is an important medium in his interaction with the new environment. His duties take him on horseback expeditions out into his vast diocese. At first the country seems 'an unimaginable mystery' to him and he is 'eager' to get to know the region (81). As a man of 'fine intelligence' who is 'sensitive to the shape of things,' Father Latour pays close attention to the native vegetation, the land, and the climate (18–19). The sharpness of his impressions is expressed for instance in the minute description of a wild pumpkin growing in the desert west of Albuquerque:

It is a vine, remarkable for its tendency, not to spread and ramble, but to mass and mount. Its long, sharp, arrowshaped leaves, frosted over with prickly silver, are thrust upward and crowded together; the whole rigid, up-thrust matted clump looks less like a plant than a great colony of grey-green lizards, moving and suddenly arrested by fear. (88)

Father Latour is just as captivated by the color and shape of the 'wrinkled green mountains with bare tops, wave-like mountains, resembling billows beaten up from a flat sea by a heavy gale' (21). His response to the New Mexico sky is similarly imaginative. Travelling through the desert one spring day, he observes: 'The sky was as full of motion and change as the desert beneath it was monotonous and still,—and there was so much sky [...]. Elsewhere the sky is the roof of

the world; but here the earth was the floor of the sky' (231–32). These inspiring impressions prove vital for Father Latour's gradual understanding of the native people's relationship to the land.

In her discussion of Cather's 'geographical imagination,' Laura Winters points out the close association of 'character and topography' in Cather's writing (63–64). Winters shows that Cather uses landscapes as a 'dynamic presence' and that she describes the process through which 'places allow people to understand their authentic selves' (3). According to Winters, 'Cather's characters do not simply live in places; they *live* places emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually' (3). This observation certainly applies to Father Latour whose intellectual openness and artistic susceptibility to the peculiarities of the new surroundings enable him to experience moments of miraculous sense of connection between the old and new worlds. In his own unconventional view, '[t]he Miracles of the Church [...] rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always' (50).

Father Latour's travels through the southwestern landscape do 'blossom [...] with little miracles' of this kind (277). The first important sign of recognition that Father Latour is not in a completely alien world is his discovery of the 'cruciform tree,' a native juniper grown into a shape of a cross (18). This familiar symbol appears to him when he is feeling desperately thirsty and lost in a maze of sand hills. The juniper inspires a spiritual illumination and assumes for him the sacredness of the Christian cross. It is a sign of hope and he kneels in front of it to pray. As Barbara Bair puts it, Cather employs a 'magical natural phenomenon' that 'sustain[s] the past in the present,' investing the landscape with religious symbols (103). During this moment, the distinction between "old" and "new" loses its sharpness and the two worlds become intermingled.

Out of all the southwestern natural features, the mesas that dominate the spacious desert west of Albuquerque have the strongest influence on Father Latour's growing appreciation of the native peoples' views of the natural environment. The mesas seem to him 'generally Gothic in outline' and reaching toward the sky like the towers of Christian cathedrals (94). He is intrigued by the cloud formations accompanying the earth towers. He perceives that they are actually two parts of one phenomena, just as 'the smoke is part of the censer, or the foam of the wave,' uniting the land and the sky (95). The setting of the Acoma pueblo, built on top of one of these rocky towers, impresses him as embodying 'the utmost expression of human need; [...] the highest comparison of loyalty in love and friendship' (97). He remembers that 'Christ Himself had used that comparison for the disciple to whom He gave the keys of His Church' and makes a parallel between the situation of the Pueblo with the Hebrews of the old Testament who were 'always being carried captive into foreign lands' (97). Perceiving the mesas' unique natural beauty while at the same time drawing on his cultural heritage enables Father Latour to see their 'great antiquity' and sacredness (94). Through making these connections, he takes another step closer to understanding how crucial their religion is for the survival of the Pueblo.

Furthermore, as a keen gardener, Father Latour is especially affected by the oasis of lush, carefully cultivated gardens that sometimes miraculously appear to him on his journeys. Soon after his encounter with the sacred juniper in the middle of the desert, he comes upon a scene of '[r]unning water, clover fields, cottonwoods, acacias, little adobe houses with brilliant gardens, a boy driving a flock of white goats toward the stream' (24). In this small Mexican settlement called Hidden Water, he is warmly welcomed and taken to 'comfort and safety' (29). His impressions of the natural setting during the visit are permeated with a 'spiritual tone which gives the literal scene more mythic dimension' (Synnott 1987: 13). The Mexican villagers remind him of 'the Children of Israel' (30) and it seems to him that 'the smoke of burning piñon logs [rises] like incense to Heaven' (31). The gardens he later finds in the pueblo of Isleta also make a strong impression. Father Latour's 'spirits r[i]se' at the sight of the friendly acacia trees that remind him of 'a garden in the south of France where he used to visit young cousins' (84). More importantly, he admires the large variety and size of the cactuses that the local priest, Father Jesus, domesticates in his garden. Significantly, from his visit with Father Jesus at Isleta, Father Latour learns not only about the benefits of cultivating these native plants but also the possibility of mutually tolerant cohabitation of the different cultures.

Eventually, Father Latour begins to realize how difficult, if not impossible, his effort to supplant the native beliefs with Christianity really is. He observes that for the Pueblo, 'their rock was an idea of God, the only thing their conquerors could not take from them' (97). He reflects that, in fact, 'neither the white men nor the Mexicans in Santa Fé understood anything about [...] the workings of the Indian mind' (133). The warning he later receives from Zeb Orchard that 'he might make good Catholics among the Indians, but he would never separate them from their own beliefs' confirms his growing doubts (135). Serving a mass at Acoma, Father Latour is confronted with something outside or beyond the concepts of his own Catholic religion, '[s]omething reptilian [...] a kind of life out of reach' (103). Inside the church that feels 'more like a fortress than a place of worship,' he experiences 'a sense of inadequacy,' even 'spiritual defeat' (100).

Father Latour's stay in New Mexico broadens his concept of his own Christian religion. Guy Reynolds points out that Cather portrays Catholicism not as a 'monolithic autocracy' but as 'a repository of European culture, endlessly adapting itself to alien environments' (157). When Father Latour wakes up one morning, he can hardly believe what he is hearing. The unexpected sound of the angelus takes him on a cyclical journey through time and cultural history. In a moment he travels from New Mexico to Rome, on to the East and then back to New Mexico. He remembers that he had heard from a 'learned Scotch Jesuit in Montreal' that the first Christian bells came 'from the East,' and that it is 'really an adaptation of a Moslem custom' (45). As he develops this thought further, Father Latour recollects that the 'Spaniards handed on their skill to the Mexicans, and the Mexicans have taught the Navajos to work silver; but it all came from the Moors' (45). Inspired by the sound of the bell, he realizes that Ca-

tholicism is 'an amalgam of different cultures' and is itself already influenced by the artistry of the indigenous peoples in the Southwest (Reynolds 1996: 157).

Gradually, Father Latour learns to respect the other cultures' validity and right to exist. In turn he earns respect from his friends among these groups. The natural environment plays an important role in the growth of these friendships. During their trips to remote villages Jacinto, Father Latour's travel guide from the Pecos pueblo, talks to the priest about his people's concept of the stars. After the conversation, Father Latour reflects that they each come from a different tradition, a long 'story of experience, which no language could translate,' and that there are things that cannot be communicated across cultural boundaries (92). He accepts Jacinto's belief that the stars are 'great spirits' as a viable possibility (93).

One day when Father Latour and Jacinto are caught in a sudden snow storm, Jacinto takes Father Latour to the sacred cave that guards secrets crucial to his people's religion. By descending into the cave and listening to the underground river, 'one of the oldest voices of the earth,' Father Latour comes intimately close to powers that go beyond any particular system of belief (130). The unimaginable depth of 'utter blackness' and the more than ancient age of 'antediluvian rock' inspire respect and humility (130). This submergence into the earth itself results in Father Latour's deeper understanding of the universal human nature that transcends cultural differences.

Father Latour's friendship with Eusabio, a leader of the Navajo, also brings him closer to the natural as well as cultural worlds around him. Like Jacinto, Eusabio grows to trust Father Latour. When he accompanies Father Latour on his way back to Santa Fe, Eusabio judges the progress of the spring season from the flowers around them. Voluntarily, he teaches Father Latour the flowers' Navajo names. As Father Latour observes, '[t]ravelling with Eusabio [is] like travelling with the landscape made human' (232). He admires the 'caution and respect' that Eusabio and his people exercise toward the land, 'as if the spirits of earth and air and water were things not to antagonize and arouse' (233-34). He notes that they treat the country as if it 'were asleep, and they wished to carry on their lives without awakening it' (233-34). Father Latour's friendships with Jacinto and Eusabio lead to a significant change in Father Latour's view of the vitality of the native cultures. As he tells his pupil Bernard, he no longer thinks that 'the Indian will perish' (296).

Toward the end of his life, Father Latour accepts that he still does not understand much of the beliefs of the indigenous peoples as well as those inhabitants of his diocese whose Catholicism differs from his. Neither does he ever fully uncover the life-giving secrets hidden in the 'dry, prickly, sharp' native plants like juniper, greasewood or cactus (275-76). However, he himself puts down such deep roots that he cannot tear himself away. He chooses to stay in New Mexico instead of returning to France after his retirement. In David Stouck's words, in New Mexico Father Latour feels 'free and perpetually young' (12). The 'stinging air' (232) and the 'light dry wind [...] with the fragrance of sun and sage-brush and sweet clover' have become essential to him (273). A com-

parison of his first garden in Santa Fe with the garden he establishes in his retirement shows the change in his views.

His gardens are Father Latour's re-creations. In the earlier Santa Fe garden, which was enclosed within the walls of the church grounds, he focused mainly on growing European fruits, vines, vegetables, and flowers that reminded him of his old home. His later garden, however, is set in the open country, on an 'admirably suited' hill near his small adobe retirement house (263). Alongside an orchard of cherries, apricots, apples, quinces, and 'the peerless pears of France,' there is a profusion of the native wild flowers:

He had one hill-side solidly clad with that low-growing purple verbena which mats over the hills of New Mexico. It was like a great violet velvet mantle thrown down in the sun; all the shades that the dyers and weavers of Italy and France strove for through centuries, the violet that is full of rose colour and is yet not lavender; the blue that becomes almost pink and then retreats again into sea-dark purple [...]. (265)

Thus, this later garden much closer reflects the cultural diversity of Father Latour's diocese.

The life story of Father Latour portrays the difficulties and rewards of bridging cultural barriers. It shows the importance of open interaction with the natural world and establishing personal friendships in the gradual process of accepting as well as finding acceptance in a new environment. While well aware of the historical reality of cultural conflict, in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* Cather chooses to explore the possibilities of harmonious co-existence of cultures. She exposes the limits of cross-cultural understanding but at the same time offers a vision of mutual tolerance. While upon his arrival Father Latour supported the purpose represented by the military officers at the fort, in the course of his stay he grows more sensitive to the problematic nature of the policy of Americanization. He eventually comes to understand that there is the interest of 'a political machine and immense capital' behind the Indian wars (290). He can identify with the Navajo religious point of view to such a degree that he sees their removal as a 'great wrong' (290) and a violation of an 'inseparable,' sacred bond to their ancestral land (292). With a certain degree of resignation but also peace of mind he observes that the 'Mexicans were always Mexicans' and 'the Indians were always Indians,' implying that it is likely that things will—and should—stay that way (284).

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