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The Return to Paganism: Upending Judeo-Christian Hierarchy in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*

The quest for American expansion was, in part, spearheaded by a Judeo-Christian disposition, namely, the innate superiority of human beings to the natural world. The Bible explains that God created the earth and animals for the consumption of humans:

Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground . . . Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground. Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food." And it was so. (*New International Version*, Gen. 1. 26-30)

Because land and animals are intended to benefit humans, the American expansionist sentiment reasoned that it was the duty of humans to act in concord with their superiority, and they did so by blanketing all land and animals as property (hunting animals and conquering land). Since land is subordinate to humans in this religious paradigm, it is no wonder why Anglo-Saxon colonists exploited Native land: Natives, in general, worship the land rather than own it. Yet there is an alternative paradigm that inverts the Judeo-Christian, hierarchical relationship between man and

land. In her novel, *O Pioneers!*, Willa Cather invokes a Pagan paradigm, leveling all humans before the all-encompassing nature of the land, in turn creating a new identity in the American West that supplants the Anglo-Saxon racial identity of Western novels such as Owen Wister's *The Virginian*. Subsequently, the characters who act in concord with this Pagan worldview fare better in the end than those who reject it.

At the outset, Cather portrays the land as primary, vast, and encompassing, by consequence relegating all humans to secondary status. Cather's preface to the novel, a poem entitled "Prairie Spring," displaces the superiority of man with the transcendence of nature. The title references a landscape and a season, both of which are inextricably intertwined with the earth. The poem is nineteen lines in length, but the first couple of lines do not mention humans. The reference to the earth's seasons and its material phenomena in the first line "EVENING and the flat land," establishes that the earth will be the centerpiece of this poem (1).¹ So, when humans are finally introduced, they are merely subsidiary to the earth's relevance; they are described passively as "the tired men" compared to the land, which is described in robust terms, "rich and sombre and always silent; the miles of fresh-plowed soil, . . . (2-3). This passivity, nonetheless, is not to be misconstrued as to make the reaching claim that humans do not matter at all in the equation. Humans matter, but they only matter insofar as they are encompassed within nature. The latter half of the poem is replete with similes concerning humans, animals, and plants only for Cather to unexpectedly "anthropomorphize humans" by proclaiming, "Against all this, Youth/ Flaming like the wild roses . . . (10). When the narrator claims that the "Youth" is "Flaming like the wild roses," he or she imputes a human quality of agency to the roses, suggesting that the youthful lack it. If the phrase were written passively, it would presumably run

¹ Since the poem itself does not rest on an enumerated page, the parenthetical refers strictly to the line number(s).

along the lines of “the wild roses are on fire.” Instead, by suggesting the rose emits fire, the narrator implies that sustained combustion derives from nature rather than human construction. Indeed, as nature provides life in the poem, so too does it in the outline of the plot. If we heed the chapter titles, we notice that they are all related to the land: Part I is titled “The Wild Land;” Part II is titled “Neighboring Fields;” Part III is titled “Winter Memories;” Part IV is titled “The White Mulberry Tree.” Only Part V, “Alexandra,” relates to the eponymous protagonist, Alexandra Bergson. By relegating humans in general and the protagonist's significance to secondary status, Cather has upended the power dynamic between humans and nature on the whole.

Cather, then, concretizes this power inversion in the plot through a two-pronged nexus: the character traits of “Crazy Ivar,” and his relationship to the land.² Ivar is the microcosm for commentary on how to live properly in relation to the land: not only living with but also becoming one with it. That is, Ivar does not live off the land in the sense that he exploits it for his benefit, as others would through, say, tearing down trees to make room for a factory or destroying wildlife for sheer entertainment. Ivar lives in unison with the prairie because he cares for it. When answering Emil's question as to where he sleeps, Ivar proclaims that he sleeps in a hammock (16). A possible reason why Ivar sleeps in a hammock is that it does not derive from an animal that was slaughtered to produce the ingredients necessary for its construction. Assuming the hammock was made from cotton (some hammocks can concededly be made from hide), no animals would have been harmed in the making just so that he could sleep comfortably (cotton can be made from plants, which do not possess pain receptors). However, if Ivar were to sleep in a bed, it could, for instance, be constructed with down feathers, derived from birds'

² Hereafter, I will refer to him simply as “Ivar.”

talons. By refusing to partake in commonplace practices that kill wildlife for the benefit of civilization, Ivar renders himself at the feet of the natural world.

By refusing to partake in the harm of the natural world, Ivar forswears Judeo-Christian notions of the superiority of man and his rightful ownership. By refusing to appoint his needs above what is purportedly the trivial harm done to an animal for the greater good of humanity, he sees himself no more important than those animals and the natural world by extension. Toward the end of the novel, the narrator observes that “Ivar was sitting at a cobbler’s bench in the barn, mending harness by the light of a lantern and repeating to himself the 101st Psalm” (109).

Noteworthy stanzas of Psalm 101 assert the following: “My eyes will be faithful on the land,/ that they may dwell with me;/ the one whose walk is blameless/ will minister to me.” If we consider this stanza in conjunction with Ivar’s worship of the land and refusal to harm animals, we see how he aspires to the notion of “blameless” as it is interpreted to mean without harming the natural world. The last stanza of Psalm 101 evinces this supposition through its conflation of land and God, “Every morning I will put to silence/ all the wicked in the land;/ I will cut off every evildoer/ from the city of the LORD.” That the reference to a “city” almost immediately succeeds the reference to the “land,” coupled with the specificity of the preposition, “of,” allows us to infer that the scope of the subject of Divinity increasingly widens, engendering the conclusion that the land and the city are part of the whole of God. Rather than God existing outside of those phenomena since he created them after he had already existed—as runs the account of Genesis in the Judeo-Christian tradition—reading through the lens of Ivar’s concern for the land rephrases the Bible to mean that the land and city are as much of God as God is of them.

When the land becomes God, there are consequences to failing to direct the appropriate deference toward it, and these consequences arise in the fate of Emil and Frank. Emil's choice to forswear the Pagan paradigm and instead adhere to the masculine, Judeo-Christian hierarchy (insofar as seeking to lay claim to inferior phenomenon and beings) leads to his death. Although Emil is able to attend college through Alexandra's prioritizing the homestead over her feelings for her love interest, Carl Linstrum, (though both options are much to the chagrin of Lou and Oscar, who ferociously fulminated against the idea (26-27)). Emil does not achieve happiness in life because he is in love with a married woman, Marie Shabata. When Emil converses with Marie and Alexandra, he expresses his frustration with his life in unequivocal terms, "'Then Alexandra will be disappointed, the young man said roughly, 'What do I want to hang around here for? Alexandra can run the farm all right, without me. I don't want to stand around and look on. I want to be doing something on my own account'" (60). By asserting that he does not "want to stand around and look on" but rather wants to "do something on [his] own account," Emil insinuates that he wants to hold more autonomy, much in keeping with the Judeo-Christian worldview. In fact, Emil later intimates that he hopes to adhere to Judeo-Christian tradition by owning a parcel of land; Emil and his friend, Raoul, sing "'Across the Rio Grand-e/ There lies a sunny lane-e/ My bright-eyed Mexico!" (89). Emil's diction, referring to Mexico with the possessive pronoun "my," contravenes the Pagan paradigm. Emil's desire to possess, in a physical sense of the term, leads him to Marie right before they are both murdered by Frank Shabata, whose last name is eerily reminiscent of "Shabbat," the Jewish term for the Sabbath. Given that the novel ends with Frank's imprisonment, uncertain whether the pardon Alexandra seeks will come to fruition, both he and Emil meet their nadir by virtue of their relationship to Judeo-Christianity.

Alexandra, by contrast, receives her happy ending with Carl because she ultimately adheres to the nonbinary, Pagan paradigm (insofar as it does not demand a masculine ferocity whereby humans lay claim to the natural world). Looking at her decisions in retrospect, her deference toward the land turn the tide in her favor:

We had n't any of us much to do with it, Carl. The land did it. It had its little joke. It pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right; and then, all at once, it worked itself. It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself, and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still. As for me, you remember when I began to buy land. For years after that I was always squeezing and borrowing until I was ashamed to show my face on the banks. And then, all at once, men began to come to me offering to lend me money—and I did n't need it! Then I went ahead and built this house. I really built for Emil. I want you to see Emil, Carl. He is so different from the rest of us!" (45)

Since Alexandra admits that neither she nor her family had any effect on the sudden net gain of the land trivializes the agency she exercises over it. From her account, that the land suddenly began to fashion itself marketable suggests she hardly tampered with it, and she made the effort to buy more, at that. As Alexandra did not tamper with the land by exploiting it for monetary gain beyond what is necessary, it decided to pay her back. Mortgaging the homestead out of the hope that it will eventually produce profits, Alexandra gambled her future. She gambled everything for the land—so it paid her back for her sacrifice. Of course, she has not been consistent in her perspective toward it; speaking to Carl after he returns, she says “I'd rather have your freedom than my land” (47). The difference between her terms and Emil's however, is that she does not claim ownership of the land as he did, and she ends the novel once again

appreciating it. Speaking of their father, Alexandra tells Emil, ““Yes, and he died in a dark time. Still, he had hope. He believed in the land.’ And in you, I guess, Emil said to himself” (94). The coordinating conjunction, “and,” is typically used to conjoin what were once two separate ideas into one. Here, then, it conjoins the land and Alexandra. Alexandra receives a happy ending because she is, in essence, as much of the land as it is of her.

In displacing the biblical superiority of humans, Cather reexamines the paradigm of the West and the relationships of people therein. By invoking a Pagan paradigm, the author reveals that, in the end, humans are not as significant as they may think. In the end, humans—their relationships, struggles for power—will disappear, and so too will their ownership of the land as well as the titles they assign and the way they disregard its significance. As Ivar’s reading of Psalm 101 elucidates, humans are just one portion of a grander concoction. Perhaps God did not create the earth for man; perhaps He created man for the earth. For, in the end, only the land will remain.

Works Cited

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