

An anchor in the wind: inner and outer space in Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!*

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In *The poetics of space*, Bachelard names “original contemplation”¹ the perception and awareness of the world’s grandeur. The “origin” – a point zero of both the soul and the world, determining the grid (or open field) where the human and the natural interact: reality. To Bachelard, this lucid contemplation is necessary to step beyond being “cast into the open world”², without attachments, uprooted, a vagabond, a pioneer. Written in the early years of the 20th century – at a moment when the American Empire was established and already in the process of being solidified, thus allowing a reflection on the nature of the conquest itself – *O Pioneers!* by Willa Cather proposes a contemplation of both the vision that led to the conquest of American space, but also of this conquest *per se*. Building on the themes evoked in the novel’s opening sentence and Bachelard’s theory of contemplation, this essay discusses how the novel’s structure is founded upon the interaction between interior and human space (contemplation) and the external, physical world.

“One January day, thirty years ago, the little town of Hanover, anchored on a windy Nebraska tableland, was trying not to be blown away”.³ Sober as well as gently ironic, the opening of the book is powerfully evocative. It encompasses many of the different elements that Cather will further develop: the pioneer’s activity (the founding of a nation), the untamed and rough nature, the passage between the old world and the new, as well as our mental perception of the land. A “January day”: the hardest time of the year, yet also its beginning, the precise sense of starting anew. The wind is all-powerful. There is no mention of women and men in the little town, but only of its effort not to fly away. This is the land of wind and effort: men threw this town as an *anchor* upon the land in an effort not to be blown away themselves – by poverty, by hunger, by history. By the *wind*. Perhaps incidentally, the word “tableland” carries the word “table” in it, recalling the perception – or is it *contemplation* already? – of the land by the pioneers: a virgin land destined to be filled by their people. To be filled by children and houses and chairs. And tables.

The power of words – mysterious gateways that connect men and their perception of the world to the world itself – was important for Bachelard. Two words battle against each other in the opening: Nebraska and Hanover. Hanover/ Ne-braska. Both carry their histories and links to representations and emotions: the Land of the ancestors (Europe) and the New World. Both are but

¹ BACHELARD, Gaston, *The poetics of space* (translated from the french by Maria Jolas), Boston : Beacon Press, 1969. P.184.

² *ibid.*

³ CATHER, Willa, *O Pioneers!*, Mineola, NY :Dover publications, 1993 (first edition : 1913). P.4

fragments (T.S. Eliot: “*These fragments I have shored against my ruins*”⁴) of two worlds that are no longer able to convey the new reality that is being created. In becoming Americans, the pioneers are gradually losing their European identities (Hanover); they inhabit the Native Americans’ land (Nebraska) – yet, these Natives stay silenced, absent. Only their misinterpreted, mispronounced name for the land remains. The pioneers contemplate the new land as a fertile ground to build a newness that still needs the push of the Old World to definitely spring away from it. Its name – the Divide – names the pioneers’ mental map of and conveys this traction between the old and the new, between what was there and what is brought. A divide: a line. Separating into two, leading towards the future.

The main protagonist of the opening sentence (the little town) will remain largely absent throughout much of the book. It serves as an entry point, as an anchor for the reader to enter the still untamed land. This metaphor – more than a simple literary device⁵ – reflects our mental behavior when surveying a new land: we look for signs and possibilities of human activity. Once eyes have set their gaze upon it, there is no virgin land. “*All landscape is first of all a mental projection*” argues Simon Schama.⁶ All landscape is human contemplation, human possibility.

Hanover – barely anchored to the land – becomes a metaphor for the pioneers’ life and endeavor in this rugged new world. While yearning for an epic description of America’s foundation, *O Pioneers!* remains at heart a psychological novel. Accordingly, in the course of the book, it is the house rather than the small town that serves as a metaphor and stage for the pioneers. “*The dwelling-houses were set about haphazard on the tough prairie sod; some of them looked as if they had been moved in overnight, and others as if they were straying off by themselves, headed straight for the open plain.*”⁷ The prairie sod, the open plain: the landscape is barren, vague, implacable. It lacks the fixed points that create the sketch upon which the mind can work. “*Moved in overnight... straying off...heading for the plain*”: expressions of transience and insecurity, unusual to designate houses; one would rather expect them to describe a group of men or a migrating flock.

These lonely houses serve as a metaphor for the pioneer’s condition. They have no embellishment, they are mere function stripped down to a core. Their task is to protect the pioneers against a nature above which neither they nor their inhabitants have risen yet: “*most of them were built of the sod itself, and were only the inescapable ground in another form.*”⁸ The *inescapable* land: a land that requires of those who tread it to accept this condition, to accept to be like the sod houses and the log houses, to become one with the earth itself. It is a question of survival. At first, the houses are like ground itself, because there is no other possibility. But to rise above this condition, one must embrace this union. Survival passes first of all through the mind: consciousness must allow the new land to seek deep into the pioneer’s heart. An act of surrender: it is Robert Frost’s vision to explain what is at the foundation of the American dream – “*And*

⁴ T.S. Eliot: *The Waste Land*

⁵ For instance, in Faulkner’s *As I lay dying*, the fragmented structure of the book also stresses the sense of divided, uprooted social space.

⁶ SCHAMA, Simon, *Landscape and memory*, London, Harper Collins, 1995.

⁷ Cather, p.4

⁸ *Ibid.* p.12.

forthwith found salvation in surrender /Such as we were we gave ourselves outright"⁹. In its style and theme, *O Pioneers!* is still, deeply, a 19th century novel: it is a romantic celebration of the homeland, the mystical *heimat* to which the soul of its inhabitants must be linked.

The description of the sod house may be compared to Ruth's grandfather's sod house in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*¹⁰: viewed from a sod house, the horizon is a boundary that simultaneously magnifies the power of the ground: there is no life beyond it. It protects life like a fortress and keeps it as a grave: rather than describing John Bergson's death through his human figure, Willa Cather focuses on nature and the house: "*on one of the ridges of that wintry waste stood the low log house in which John Bergson was dying.*"¹¹ The house is more important than the man, it gives shelter to him, allows him to die and will be there for his children when he'll be long gone. The house stands; the man lies on a bed, dying. Houses do not die on the Divide, however precarious they are. They endure, trying not to be blown away. "*None of them had any appearance of permanence, and the howling wind blew under them as well as over them.*"¹² The wind blows over them: the wind of personal lives and bodies. The wind blows under them: Braudel's deep current, the indomitable, impersonal *longue durée*. Even if the houses eventually rise above the ground and some of them even become grand and rich, this perenity remains an illusion. The real house is the ground. "*You feel that, properly, Alexandra's house is the big out- of-doors, and that it is in the soil that she expresses herself best.*"¹³ To express one's self best *in the soil*: Alexandra's achievement is to have linked the mental and the physical, inner and outer space. She understood the land and embraced it and was embraced by in in return. In this process of exchange and acceptance, the soil gave permanence to her *contemplation*.

How must one anchor oneself to the ground in order not to be blown away? According to Bachelard "*even when a poet gives a geographical dimension, he knows instinctively that this dimension can be determined on the spot, for the reason that it is rooted in a particular oneiric value.*"¹⁴ In other words, the only fathomable geography is the geography of the self, of the subjective. But then what are the anchors in the geography of the self? Our actions, our love or commitment to-space, as well as death. Death fixes the timeline of our lives, sets the milestones along their winding roads. The third chapter of the book starts thus: "*One Sunday afternoon in July, six months after John Bergson's death...*"¹⁵ The second part of *O Pioneers!* also starts with his death: "*It is sixteen years since John Bergson died. His wife now lies beside him. Could he rise from beneath it, he would not know the country under which he has been asleep.*"¹⁶ The dead John Bergson

⁹ Robert Frost, *The gift outright*.

¹⁰ "*He had grown up in the Middle West, in a house dug out of the ground, with windows just at earth level and just at eye level, so that from without, the house was a mere mound, no more a human stronghold than a grave, and from within, the perfect horizontality of the world in that place foreshortened the view so severely that the horizon seemed to circumscribe the sod house and nothing more*" In: ROBINSON, Marilynne, *Housekeeping: A Novel*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005 (first edition: 1980).

¹¹ Cather p.12.

¹² Cather, p.4.

¹³ *ibid*, p.44.

¹⁴ Bachelard, p.187-188.

¹⁵ Cather, p.18.

¹⁶ *ibid*, p.40.

would not recognize the land: it marks the passing of time more than his own death – from within the grave, the dead continue to contemplate. The final part of the book also starts with the dead: “when you get so near the dead, they seem more real than the living”¹⁷ says Alexandra to Ivar after a storm kept her near Emil and Mary’s tombs. Tragically, it is only after their deaths that Alexandra can live and accept her own love for Carl. The young couple’s love served as a sacrifice to the land, fertilizing it; theirs is an original transgression that allows the community to flourish thereafter. But Alexandra’s mental space is also inseparably linked to the land and defined by it. The lovers’ transgression suddenly opens up new possibilities in the land, expands it and simultaneously, expands Alexandra’s inner space as well. This is the mutual deepening and expanding between self and space that Bachelard refers to as “two wedded creatures that are paradoxically united in the dialogue of their solitude.”¹⁸ The city, with its houses and lives disconnected from the soil, does not offer this type of anchor into the land: “when one of us dies, they scarcely know where to bury him” says Carl to Alexandra.¹⁹

Alexandra’s inner space is expanded in life through her deep attachment to the land and in death through her parents’ passing away and Emil and Mary’s transgression. But is she conscious of it? Is the epic vastness described in the opening sentence reflected in her soul? For Bachelard, “immensity” is not only an a noun describing a condition, but also a “philosophical category of daydream”²⁰, a concept bridging time, space and mind. Neither the word “immensity” nor “grandeur” are to be found in *O Pioneers!*, but there are four occurrences of the word “vast” which occupies such a central place in Bachelard’s argument. Cataloging Cather’s use of the word allows one to sketch out Alexandra’s development through the novel.

The first use of “vast” appears when the young Alexandra and Carl have just left Hanover in the direction of their homes. Sad-faced and “muted”, they are watching the sky. “But the great fact was the land itself, which seemed to overwhelm the little beginnings of human society that struggled in its sombre wastes. It was from facing this vast hardness that the boy’s mouth had become so bitter”.²¹ This vastness does not welcome humans or anything beyond itself. There is nothing beyond the land’s mere existence: this is the “fact” that embitters Carl. One does not fight a fact – flight or acceptance are the only choices. The land will inhabit the two friends differently: Alexandra accepts it, whereas Carl flees it, however unwillingly. The struggle is silent, “muted”: nothing more can be heard than the silence of the land.

“His Bible seemed truer to him there. (...) If one listened to the rapturous song of the lark, the drumming of the quail, the burr of the locust against that vast silence, one understood what Ivar meant.”²² The passage is narrated through Alexandra’s point of view. She understands what her brothers do not: listening

¹⁷ *ibid*, pp.145-46.

¹⁸ Bachelard, p.190.

In *The production of space*, Henri Lefebvre also rhetorically asks the reader if the notion of the *ban* shouldn’t be considered to be at the basis of our societies. Lefebvre’s *ban* must not be understood only through a legal or behavioral perspective – setting a norm for the community – but as fixing it within a strict space.

¹⁹ Cather, p. 64.

²⁰ Bachelard, p.183.

²¹ Cather, p.9.

²² *ibid*, p.21.

like Ivar to the land, the vastness becomes less oppressing. It relents. It allows for some space inside its unforgiving immensity. The *song*, the *drumming* and the *burr* are not human. Yet they are open to human hearing, to the possibility of a human listening and understanding them and through them understanding one's self. They allow for inner space to expand – Alexandra must feel it, for she is not sad anymore, or *muted*: she may not speak words, but her silence joins Ivar's and their understanding speaks out against that vast silence.

The third evocation of vastness finds Alexandra alone:

*Alexandra (...) stood leaning against the frame of the mill, looking at the stars which glittered so keenly through the frosty autumn air. She always loved to watch them, to think of their vastness and distance, and of their ordered march. It fortified her to reflect upon the great operations of nature, and when she thought of the law that lay behind them, she felt a sense of personal security.*²³

The shift is complete. Vastness is no longer a force blowing everything away or an enemy space, but a sign of life that *fortifies* Alexandra. The march of the stars – the universe – gives meaning to her works. *Vastness* has become a refuge and a possibility. She is the only character in the novel who was able to imagine the possibility of living in such a vastness, of making an ally and a resource of it. *"That night she had a new consciousness of the country, felt almost a new relation to it."*²⁴ She understands the land and can contemplate it: this understanding of *the relation* she has to the land inextricably binds together her inner space and the vastness of the land.

Placed at the opening of the second part of the novel, entitled *"Neighboring fields"*, the last evocation of vastness is entirely different: *"from the Norwegian graveyard one looks out over a vast checker-board, marked off in squares of wheat and corn; light and dark, dark and light. Telephone wires hum along the white roads, which always run at right angles."*²⁵ This is vastness tamed. It is a vastness that has been dreamt and can now be contemplated at ease. It is no longer nature battling and rejecting the pioneers. It is the vastness of human possibility, of the American dream, it is the grid on which men plan their flourishing enterprises and farms; it is the projection of their mental space. Hardly naturally, roads run at right angles– reflecting the mental structures of the mind. The passage from the brutal external landscape that oppresses, overshadows and structures internal space towards a possessed and subdued landscape is total. Yet – unlike many other pioneering stories – Cather's account is not brutal. In her own words, it is the story of a taming rather than a conquest. This is made possible by Alexandra's persona. *"We must have faith in the high land"* she tells Emil²⁶; no matter how her fortune improves, she always remains humble and grateful, remembering that the *great fact* will never be humans and their miseries but the land itself. She remains in awe of the greatness of this *great fact*. This is what allows her to sketch her dreams upon it.

²³ *ibid.* p.38.

²⁴ *ibid.* p.38.

²⁵ *ibid.* p.40.

²⁶ *ibid.* p.35.

O Pioneers! concludes: "fortunate country, that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom..."²⁷ Alexandra gave her heart to the land and received the land's heart in return. Bachelard mentions the double movement inherent to the *original contemplation*: dissolution and finding one's self. To him, Narcissus' pond is the most perfect expression of this state; Alexandra dissolves herself into the land and thus simultaneously gives meaning to it and to herself. For Bachelard, it is inner imagination that gives meaning to the visible world. And in order to achieve success, "a pioneer should have imagination".²⁸ But unlike what Bachelard seems to imply, this imagination does not necessarily have to be "poetic": "Alexandra watched the shimmering pool dreamily, but eventually her eyes went back to the sorghum patch south of the barn, where she was planning to make her new pig corral."²⁹ Through Alexandra, we understand that contemplation is not solely the domain of the idling *flâneur*, but can also mean hard work and toil. Alexandra does not dream about Arcadia but about sorghum patches and new pig corrals. This is maybe what it takes to build a country: to be able to *contemplate* what can emerge from the windy tablelands.

²⁷ Cather, p.160.

²⁸ *ibid*, p.26.

²⁹ *ibid*, p.25.