

Romancing the Desert: Landscape and Ideology in Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*

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Willa Cather's mythic tale of the Southwest, *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, does more than memorialize the life of a French priest, it also commemorates the Southwest as a land where history and legend coalesce, and reveals the anxieties underlying the integration of this region into the national imaginary. The story centers on Father Latour's experiences in his Santa Fe diocese, yet by the end it is clear that the story of this man is merely one of many threads in a narrative woven with the aspects which make the Southwest mythic: the desert landscape, its native inhabitants, and both the specific history and a sense of timelessness surrounding the region.

Death Comes for the Archbishop depicts the process through which individual perception distorts a previously inscribed landscape, as Cather's portrayals of the Southwest articulate the Euro-American wish to transform an unfamiliar landscape and culture into a blank space onto which national desires can be projected and ultimately

fulfilled. However, this region was not a "blank space"; it already had a history and people which were mapped over by the Euro-Americans in their desire to conquer the "wilderness." As Mary Lawlor discusses in *Recalling the Wild*, the closure of the frontier as a defined spatial category allowed romanticized imaginings to abound, as "writers and artists across the social spectrum found in the topic of the vanished 'wilderness' an opportunity to memorialize the open-endedness, the sense of possibility of what was now regarded as a storied zone of adventure" (1). The open-endedness of this area describes the multiple possible futures of this region whose past has been so thoroughly re-imagined. Throughout *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Father Latour engages in the process of memorializing this "adventure zone" both concretely, through construction of the cathedral and his cultivation of gardens, and conceptually, with the dictation of "truths and fancies" about the New Mexican diocese to his young disciples. Latour's myth-making remaps the landscape with a European sense of spirituality and possession, becoming the palimpsest under which traces of indigenous history and layers of empire can be unearthed.

A European Chess Game

The novel begins with a scene which depicts not only the romantic image that the Europeans had of the Southwest, but also their belief that they could arrange its destiny and remap its boundaries without a clear vision of the landscape or any reliable knowledge of its inhabitants and their culture. As one Cardinal frankly admits, "[m]y knowledge of your country is chiefly drawn from the romances of Fenimore Cooper" (10) and "I see your redskins through Fenimore Cooper, and I like them so" (13). The

European Cardinals view America through the lens of Cooper's novels and prefer not to have their romanticized image confused by fact, although the probability of them having access to facts about this region is negligible, since the "new territory was vague . . . even to the missionary bishop" (4). New Mexico is portrayed as foreign even to a missionary who has spent time in North America, and it is exactly this unfamiliar exoticism that makes the Southwest the setting onto which expansionist national desires and fantasies can be mapped. Also, distinct tribes and regions are conflated in the Bishops' imaginations; the characters of Cooper's novels are different from the inhabitants of New Mexico, just as the landscape of the Great Lakes region bears little resemblance to the desert Southwest. However, the Cardinals' lack of knowledge about the Southwest did not deter them from determining its spiritual path and arranging the administrative course of the newly founded Apostolic Vicariate in New Mexico.

Neither the temporal importance of 1848, the year in which the Cardinals' maneuvers occurred, nor the situation surrounding the annexation of New Mexico to the United States were noteworthy in the discussion which determines the fate of Father Latour. Cather reveals the date in the first sentence of the novel, which would seem to indicate that this time period and the aftermath of the Mexican-American War would factor significantly into the rest of the narrative. However, the narrative itself seems almost to exist outside time. Readers are moved seamlessly through the stages of Latour's life and the changes in his diocese, which he minimizes at the end of his life, saying "that his diocese changed little except in boundaries. The Mexicans were always Mexicans, the Indians were always Indians"

(284). This statement seems to gesture toward the importance of shifting boundaries, but once again without explaining their significance. In addition, the Mexicans' and Indians' maintenance of their cultural and political identities years after the border had moved around them reveals the lag between political and cultural integration of this region into the nation. Long after the US had acquired this territory, the work of culturally integrating its inhabitants into the nation was still being done, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is itself an example of weaving this region into the fabric of the national imaginary. As Anthony Mora observes in "Resistance and Accommodation in a Border Parish", the Catholic Church played a complicated role in the "Americanizing" of Mexican peoples after the annexation of New Mexico in 1848. Cather's narrative dramatizes a common story after the end of the Mexican-American War, that of the influence of Catholic officials from Europe in the Southwest. As Mora notes, the "irony of European clergy authoritatively asserting their vision of 'American' Catholicism should not be ignored" (306).

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, just as in the actual history of the Southwest, the characters have strong opinions on their national identity. "They say at Albuquerque that now we are all Americans, but that is not true, Padre. I will never be an American. They are infidels" (27). This sets the tone for the remainder of the narrative, a narrative which itself is performing the work of cultural integration of this region into the national imaginary. Although the shifting borders are mentioned, there is no emphasis placed on their political significance or their connections to the end of the Mexican-American war, although the importance of this becomes evident through the characters' anxieties

about their national affiliation. However, the mapping being done by the Cardinals in Rome is on an entirely different ideological plane than the mapping of the Mexican/American border: what does a political border matter when dealing with a space which is to be made sacred?

As the focus of the text shifts from Rome to central New Mexico, the reality of the landscape creeps in. Father Latour is depicted as a "solitary horseman" who had lost his way in a landscape which rapidly overwhelms his senses. The depiction of the land evokes Kant's idea of the mathematical sublime. "[What happens is that] our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination,] our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea" (Kant 106). Certainly Latour's imagination seems unable to comprehend the vastness of this desert landscape, in which he is alone, lost and overwhelmed:

As far as he could see, on every side, the landscape was heaped up into monotonous red sand-hills . . . one could not have believed that in the number of square miles a man is able to sweep with the eye there could be so many uniform red hills. He had been riding since early morning, and the look of the country had no more changed than if he had stood still . . . and he had begun to think that he would never see anything else. (17)

The immensity of this monotonous and seemingly never-ending landscape is overpowering, particularly to Latour who is "sensitive to the shape of things" (18). This sensitivity was discussed in the Prologue as a

national characteristic of the French missionaries, and is why the Cardinals considered Latour a good choice to organize the New Mexican Vicariate. "Our Spanish fathers made good martyrs, but the French Jesuits accomplish more. They are the great organizers . . . the Germans classify, but the French arrange! The French missionaries have a sense of proportion and rational adjustment" (8-9). Latour's nationalized sensitivity would seem to be particularly helpful in creating order in his Vicariate, a place which was perceived as a cultural wilderness; however, that sensitivity was a disadvantage in the "geographical nightmare" of the sublime landscape. There it only heightened the violence done to his sensory faculties when he reached the limit of his conceptual ability to imagine and arrange the infinite measurement of the desert. Latour's power of reason as a supersensible faculty had not been able to exert its superiority over nature, for he was not yet viewing this sublime landscape from a position of safety. A position of safety, in this geographical and cultural wilderness, is something that Latour would have to create for himself. He does this through establishing his cathedral and his gardens, signs of civilization in this wilderness. Also, the aesthetic problem of the "geographical nightmare" of the landscape is lessened through "arranging" the socio-political problems presented by the members of his diocese.

Vanishing into the Landscape

Once he reached the relative safety of his Vicariate in Santa Fe, the work of the missionary began in earnest. Latour's work went beyond the saving of souls; he also participated in the cultivation of the wilderness, which in turn contributed to the re-inscription of the landscape with a Euro-

American sense of ownership and power. However, in order to inscribe this sense of ownership, the past had to be effaced. This was done in various ways, but one of the most prevalent was the construction of the areas previously unsettled by Euro-Americans as "wilderness." The idea of this region as a wilderness is itself flawed, as wilderness is the absence of civilization. A civilization existed in New Mexico; in fact many civilizations existed there: many different Pueblo tribes, Navajo, Apaches, and the Nuevo Mexicanos. However, the Native Americans were not viewed as civilized by the Euro-Americans, who "perceived Indians as the functional equivalent of wild animals" (Cronon 144). However, it was believed that "the Indian survivors had the potential to be 'civilized'" and participate in the new culture which was establishing itself in the region (ibid. 144). In this context Cather evokes the image of the vanishing Indian and creates a distinction between the Native- and the Euro-American's methods of inhabiting the land.

The land-use ethics of both cultures are presented in "The Great Diocese", through the depiction of the journey that Father Latour and his Navajo friend Eusabio take from Navajo country back to Santa Fe. Eusabio's interactions are presented as harmonious with the land through which they pass, so much so that "[t]ravelling with Eusabio was like traveling with the landscape made human" (232). Eusabio is depicted as so analogous to the land which he occupies that Latour sees him as its human embodiment. This naturalization of Eusabio's position in relation to the landscape leads immediately to a discourse of Native submission, where Eusabio "accepted chance and weather as the country did" (232). This acceptance of events beyond their control marks the Native Americans in this story as acquiescent to the

inevitability of the imperialism of the Catholic missionaries and, later on, of the Americans.

After articulating Eusabio's acceptance of circumstances, the narrator moves to a discussion of how the Navajo attempts to "obliterate every trace" of his presence in the landscape (232). The description of Eusabio as an early "leave no trace" camper is contrasted with the white man's method of asserting his presence wherever he travels:

Father Latour judged that, just as it was the white man's way to assert himself in any landscape, to change it, make it over a little (at least to leave some mark of memorial of his sojourn), it was the Indian's way to pass through a country without disturbing anything; to pass and leave no trace, like fish through the water, or birds through the air. It was the Indian manner to vanish into the landscape, not to stand out against it. (232-233)

Once again akin to the natural world, the Indian is presented as relating to the landscape of the Southwest as an animal in its natural environment. Through the use of the word "vanish," Cather is evoking a discourse which is unable to depict an appropriate space for Native Americans within Euro-American culture, a culture whose need to shape and manipulate their environment is placed in opposition to the Native ethic of "leave no trace." However, a trace of the Native peoples who have vanished remains in the palimpsest of American history, despite their efforts to leave no mark on the landscape and the Euro-American desire for them to either vanish into or be conflated with the landscape. The Fenimore Cooper novels through which the Cardinals imagined America belong to this line

of “vanishing Indian” literature, but Cather’s own position in this lineage is not so clear. The vexed relationship her narrative has with this tradition becomes evident later in the story, as the removal of the Navajos from their homeland forces Latour to more deeply consider exactly what the relationship between the settlers and the native inhabitants of the land is (or should be), and whether it is possible for them to coexist peacefully.

The Indians’ own attempt to erase the visual marks of their presence seems to explain to readers the subsequent removal of their physical presence as well. This more forceful and harmful removal is perplexingly referenced later in the story, as Father Latour reminisces on his deathbed about the fate of the Navajos. After a description of their defeat at the Canyon de Chelly and their removal from and later return to their land, Latour remarks that, “I do not believe, as I once did, that the Indian will perish. I believe that God will preserve him” (296). Although this statement is presented as a grand moment of hope, their preservation seems less satisfactory in its conditional nature. The Indians’ survival is more due to divine intervention than to the actual humans of the story working through or accepting cultural and racial differences. Cather seems to desire a narrative in which the natives and colonists can coexist, but her language betrays the difficulties in creating such a space.

Kit Carson: A Frontier “Hero”

The Navajos are finally defeated by the famous scout, Kit Carson. This character, like Latour, was based on a historical frontier individual. Carson was a mountain man who became known for his exploring expeditions in the 1840s, and gained fame after the end of the Mexican-American War, which “created an

even greater audience . . . by bringing to bear on everything related to the winning of the West the yeasty nationalism aroused by the conflict” (Smith 84). This nationalism which gave Carson his fame also required a reinterpretation of his character to imbue it with the qualities necessary in a person who was to civilize and domesticate the West. Previous interpretations of the mountain man connected him to the wilderness in which he lived. Vestiges of this image can be seen in Cather’s interpretation of Carson, particularly in the expectations Latour had after hearing the legends about him. “He had supposed him to be a very large man, of powerful body and commanding presence. This Carson was not so tall as the Bishop himself, was very slight in frame, modest in manner, and he spoke English with a soft Southern drawl” (74). Cather makes Carson into a slight, soft-spoken man, characteristics which resist the mountain man stereotypes and seem to make him a living frontier, a figure that exists between wilderness and civilization. Carson’s connections to the values of civilization and progress are further emphasized by the reactions Latour has upon meeting him:

The Bishop felt a quick glow of pleasure in looking at the man. As he stood there in his buckskin clothes one felt in him standards, loyalties, a code which is not easily put into words but which is instantly felt when two men who live by it come together by chance. He took the scout’s hand. ‘I have long wanted to meet Kit Carson,’ he said, ‘even before I came to New Mexico. (75)

Carson shares Latour’s standards, loyalties, and codes, which seems to imply that he will be a partner in Latour’s civilizing mission.

However, their methods for civilizing the "savage" elements of the Southwest differ.

Cather uses Carson's domesticating influence as an example of the extremes which occurred in the "taming" of the West. Rather than coexisting with the Navajos, Carson and the army behind him are depicted as "misguided" in their attempts to gain mastery over this nomadic tribe. "The expulsion of the Navajos from their country, which had been theirs no man knew how long, had seemed to him an injustice that cried to Heaven . . . It was his own misguided friend, Kit Carson, who finally subdued the last unconquered remnant of that people" (290-91). The narrator here seems to sympathize with this tribe and the injustice of their removal from their land. This view is perhaps influenced by the hindsight provided after the attempt to turn them into settled farmers rather than nomadic shepherds failed. When the Navajos were permitted to return to their land and resume the life they had been forced to abandon, the area they inhabited was depicted as "an Indian Garden of Eden" (295). This is a twist on the recovery narrative, which usually attributes the recreation of the Garden of Eden to the Christian settlers who change the land from wilderness to productive, fertile garden. However, settlers did believe that "Indian survivors had the potential to be 'civilized' and hence to participate in the recovery narrative as settled farmers" (Cronon 144). Once again, the inclusion of this story indicates Cather's desire to create a narrative in which the Natives and the colonists can coexist and cultivate a new, hybrid society. Although Cather depicts Kit Carson as soft-spoken and gentle, remnants of the old mountain man remain in his interactions with the Navajos, and his way of civilizing the Southwest is vastly different

from Latour's methods of domesticating the land and people of his diocese.

Latour's Legacy: "Mastery" of the Landscape

The construction of Latour's cathedral stands in sharp contrast to the "leave no trace" attitude of the Native Americans and is emblematic of the white man's way of impressing himself onto the landscape of this text. More than his religious converts and saved souls, the cathedral represents Latour's memorial of his time in New Mexico. Built in the Midi-Romanesque style, the cathedral "was of the South . . . how it sounded the note of the South" (269). The "South" Cather's narrator refers to, however, seems purposefully vague. Does this cathedral embody the spirit of the Southwest, or is Latour juxtaposing this region with Southern Europe, the American South, or an even further south of the Americas?

The use of the French Gothic Revival style in the architecture of Catholic buildings was prevalent throughout the Southwest in the period following the Mexican-American War. European clergy arrived in Southwestern parishes to replace Mexican priests as part of the administrative changes that were a part of the integration of the Mexican church into the new vicariate apostolic of New Mexico. In addition to the doctrinal changes the (mostly) French priests came to enact, they also brought architectural ideals shaped in their native Europe (Mora 304). In "Texas Gothic, French Accent: The Architecture of the Roman Catholic Church in Antebellum Texas", Richard Cleary traces this architectural movement and its consequences in parishes throughout Texas as he positions the use of Gothic-style buildings as "instruments of the church's

strategy for securing its place among the institutions shaping the future of Texas" (60). The Euro-Americanization of the Catholic Church was seen throughout the Southwest through the visual presence of the imported architectural style as well as through the structural doctrinal changes the French priests sought to make. The presence of these French priests, most notably Jean-Baptiste Lamy, the Archbishop that Cather's Latour is based upon, served as a symbol of the Euro-American institutional framework that the Church hoped to establish in the newly annexed region. As such, considerations of international diplomacy were woven into the local church politics, and officials often sought to reconcile ideas native to the region with those being brought in from the outside.

Perhaps the cathedral, in addition to memorializing Latour's presence in New Mexico, stands as a symbol of this type of hybridized culture that Cather is trying to imagine throughout the text. Its connections to Europe become clear through the architect's description of the cathedral in relation to the landscape it occupies, as "only in Italy, or in the opera, did churches leap out of the mountains and black pines like that" (270). This description not only connects the cathedral to Europe with the reference to Italy, it also solidifies the architecture as decidedly non-Indian. Rather than vanishing into the landscape, this structure "leaps out", creating a physical/visual manifestation of the ideological dominance the Catholic Church attempted to establish. This monument is depicted not only as leaping out from its physical environment, but doing so in an authoritative manner: "the tawny church seemed to start directly out of those rose-coloured hills—with a purpose so strong that it was like action" (269). This emphasizes the intent and logic behind the Euro-American

expansionist mission, and is suggestive of its overwhelming suitability; the intent is so strong that purpose seems almost able to stand in for action. This vision of the rightness of the "Americanizing" mission of the Catholic Church seems to justify the irony that Mora points out regarding European clergy asserting the "Americanizing" vision of Catholicism.

Yet the cathedral has an element which is definitively connected to the Southwest: it is built from stone native to the area, quarried west of Santa Fe. The ridge on which the rock was found was "covered with cone-shaped, rocky hills" which remind the reader of the "geographical nightmare" of cone-shaped hills which confronted Latour at the beginning of his time in the Southwest (238). His reaction to this landscape is quite different than when he was first overwhelmed by the sublimity of the Southwest so many years ago, suggesting that his efforts at taming this wilderness have been successful. He is accompanied by Father Vaillant on this trip, so he is not alone in the face of the wilderness, and his efforts at arranging the land in which he lived seem successful: there is no trace left of the overwhelming power this land once had on his sensitive faculties of perception. In addition, these hills are green, a color suggestive of fertile land, whereas the hills at the beginning of the narrative, with their red coloring, were more suggestive of a harsh landscape.

In the midst of these verdant hills, one golden hill stands apart. The original description is somewhat misleading: the reader is led to believe that gold has been discovered in this yellow hill, with "picks and crowbars lay[ing] about, and fragments of stone, freshly broken off" but the value of this rock is cultural and spiritual, not monetary (239). Yet even though the stone is local, the

French priests cannot help but project their memories onto it. Vaillant suggests that it is a “good color, certainly; something like the colonnade of St. Peter’s,” while Latour sees it as “more like something nearer home—I mean, nearer Clermont” (239). This simple statement conveys so much about Latour’s predicament. He has settled in New Mexico and has made it his home, yet he can never quite leave his past or the ideological framework that it provides behind him. “Home” for him seems like it will always be a place that spans two continents and contains aspects of both. He is never able to view the landscape and culture around him without seeing it through the lens of his European past. This is further evidenced by the end of his life: he chooses to stay in New Mexico, yet he reverts to speaking his native French when he knows his life is drawing to a close, breaking his own rule that Spanish always be spoken in his New Mexico home.

As the final image of the text and as Latour’s tomb, the Cathedral seems to have a privileged position in deciding the tensions that pervade the text. After Latour’s death, “when the Cathedral bell tolled just after dark, the Mexican population of Santa Fe fell upon their knees, and all American Catholics as well” (297). The ideological influence of Latour and the Church seem expansive in this final vision; however, the Native Americans are notably missing from the groups paying homage to Latour’s memory. Although “Eusabio and the Tesuque boys went quietly away to tell their people” (297), the Indians are not a part of the Santa Fe population depicted in communal mourning for Latour, leaving the reader with more unanswered questions regarding the possibility of an ideological and geographical space in which natives and settlers can coexist peacefully.

Cultivating the “Blessed Lettuce”

In addition to the cathedral, Latour memorialized his time in the Southwest through his cultivation of gardens. Latour’s gardening differed from that of the Native Americans and Mexicans, who “were satisfied with beans and squashes and chili, asking for nothing more” (105). Latour yearned for green vegetables, the “blessed plant” lettuce, and other edible vegetation of his boyhood in France (36). In *Recalling the Wild: Naturalism and the Closing of the American West*, Mary Lawlor connects Latour’s gardening to his missionary work, as developing not only the religious life of the New Mexicans, but also the landscape itself:

The work of transforming the religions of the region overlaps with the work of transforming aesthetics and work habits. Ways of thinking and imagining are themselves at stake, and indeed missionary work is, to some degree at least, aimed at the transformation of culture. Where the Western missionary perceives that religious difference means there is no culture, the trope of cultivation becomes more appropriate than that of transformation. In either case, though, religious influence is a part of the larger umbrella of empire, which seeks to alter politics, language, even soil, in the project of transplanting European ways of being and knowing to North America. (180-81)

The difference between transformation and cultivation seems significant; the process of cultivation is focused on nurturing something new rather than an absolute alteration of the

old. Latour's garden represents a mixture of cultures, as he seeks to develop the soil not only by transplanting European plant species like the "peerless pears of France," but also through the domestication of native species (265). Perhaps Cather uses the domestication of the native wildflowers as a metaphor for the question of peaceful coexistence which was left open-ended in her discussions of the Native and Euro-American peoples, and the possible solution she envisions is the domestication of the native. If this is so, then the method of domestication seems to matter, as is evidenced when the gardens of previous missionaries such as Friar Baltazar are considered.

Baltazar Montoya, whose tale is told in "The Legend of Fray Baltazar," was a "long-forgotten friar" who served at Acoma during the early eighteenth century (103). His cultivation of the land and its inhabitants was not nearly as benign as Latour's, as he believed that "the pueblo of Acoma existed chiefly to support its fine church" and exploited the people of the pueblo to do the labor required to sustain the church and his garden within it (104). Baltazar journeyed far and wide to collect grape cuttings and peach seeds; however, there is no mention of any native plants being domesticated in his garden. Baltazar clearly does not have the same goal of hybridization or peaceful cohabitation that Latour seems to be working toward, as is evidenced by his tyranny over the inhabitants which grew until the breaking point was reached when he murdered an Indian boy in a fit of rage. For this Baltazar was flung to his death from the cliff of Acoma, whose inhabitants "took pleasure in watching the garden pine and waste away from thirst, and ventured into the cloisters to laugh and chatter at the whitening foliage of the peach

trees, and the green grapes shriveling on the vines" (114).

The differences between Latour's and Baltazar's gardens are revealing. Baltazar made no attempt to cultivate either native plants or the native spirit, and as a result his legacy is a "half-dead peach tree that . . . never bears" and "an old vine stump" (102). Although we do not get to see how durable Latour's garden is within the space of the novel, one is left with the feeling that the residents of Santa Fe will be enjoying the fruit from his orchard for generations to come. Also, Latour passed on his desire to cultivate, as he "urged the new priests to plant fruit trees wherever they went" (265). Through these future generations of priests, Latour's legacy will live on long after he has died. The text offers one final glimpse of imperial gardening, or the lack thereof, when Father Vaillant relocated to gold-rush era Colorado, a place where nobody planted gardens, and "nobody would stick a shovel into the earth for anything less than gold" (258). These differences disclose Cather's ideas about how the imperial project can be successful or suffer defeat depending upon how it is implemented, or, as Lawlor suggests, "[t]he kind of garden one has measures one's ability, as a cultivated, civilized, relatively comfortable aesthete, to measure, interpret, and manage the primitive" (181).

The Other Mythic Southwest

The idea of leaving a legacy or a trace of one's existence is scattered throughout the text. It is evident in the idea of cultivating gardens, it is present in the vanishing Indians who leave a trace of their presence in the palimpsest of American history, and it is apparent in the construction of Latour's cathedral, which also becomes his tomb. Latour is the character who most actively

engages in the process of creating a legacy, and he is also the character who most actively engages in the process of shaping the landscape. Lawlor describes the interrelation of these two processes as such:

Although her terrains are given as entities that precede and stand apart from their human witnesses, the very process of granting them some kind of dialogic agency suggests the extent to which Cather thought about landscapes as metaphors of human experience. Her anthropomorphisms strongly imply that what is important about nature is not that it is a force in its own right, but that it serves as a record for human subjects of their own histories with it, of their own entanglements with its textures and contours. (166-7)

Latour understands the importance of nature and the landscape as a record for human history, which is why he so actively engages in shaping it. He not only wishes to shape the physical record, but also the verbal myths of the Southwest. This is why he spends his final days "dictat[ing] to his young disciple certain facts about the old missions in the diocese; facts which he had come upon by chance and feared would be forgotten" (274). He and his disciple work to preserve both the history which they found in New Mexico, and that which they created. In this circumstance, he is acting as an authority by recording history and myths he may not completely understand, recording his version of this history which is influenced by his past and his prejudices. This history might have included the "dark legends" of Pecos, which "had had more than its share of history," the legend of

Fray Baltazar, the "long-forgotten friar at Acoma" as well as the central legend of the novel, that of Latour himself (103, 122).

This idea of interpreting and managing the native, seen in the cultivation of gardens, is also present in the way that Latour reacts to the myths of the Native Americans' and the Mexicans' local interpretations of Catholicism. Latour's reactions to the Native American myths occur primarily in "The Mass at Acoma" and "Snake Root", the chapters which concentrate on his journeys and interactions with his two native friends, Jacinto and Eusabio. Responses to the Catholicism of the Mexicans, altered from official Vatican doctrine after many years without a strong connection to the European arm of the Church, are scattered throughout the narrative, making the attitude toward this "deviant" Catholicism more pervasive yet harder to detect. Latour's civilized sensibilities are horrified at the Native American myths: they are too "other" to be understood, but the Mexicans he views merely as misled children who are in need of guidance.

Latour finds the Native American myths repulsive yet fascinating. His repulsion perhaps stems from the alienation he feels from the belief system and history which created these legends. The Native Americans are portrayed as mysterious and other, and the narrator informs us that the barrier between Latour and his native friends is multi-layered; it stems from cultural, racial, religious, and linguistic differences:

The Bishop seldom questioned Jacinto about his thoughts or beliefs. He didn't think it polite, and he believed it to be useless. There was no way in which he could transfer his own memories of European civilization into the

Indian mind, and he was quite willing to believe that behind Jacinto there was a long tradition, a story of experience, which no language could translate to him. (92)

The narrative does not dwell further upon the matter of translation here, yet this passage is a good example of the vexed relationship between Latour and the natives. It seems that he would prefer to "transfer his own memories" into the minds of these people; his missionary work would be simpler if this was possible. However, these people will never possess memories of European civilization; their minds are full of their own civilization and history. Latour is "willing to believe" that they have a cultural tradition, although that statement implies that he does *not quite* believe in a Native American tradition equivalent to that of the Europeans, but is willing to if presented with further evidence. Whatever the "story of experience" behind Jacinto's beliefs, Latour recognizes that this history is likely to remain sealed off to him. He is better able to maneuver around matters of linguistic translation, such as Jacinto's way of structuring the languages in which they conversed. "Jacinto usually dropped the article when speaking Spanish, just as he did in speaking English, though the Bishop had noticed that when he did give a noun its article, he used the right one. The customary omission, therefore, seemed to be a matter of taste, not ignorance" (91). The issue of sentence structure Latour is willing to accept as "a matter of taste," but the strange legends are another issue altogether. That is not a matter of taste, but an offense to his system of beliefs.

The "dark legends" themselves are discussed shortly after Latour admits they will

never be completely accessible to him. Before delving into the myths, the narrator slips into a language reminiscent of fairy-tales, setting the mood with "it was said that this people had from time immemorial . . ." (122). "Time immemorial" is a term commonly associated with tales of Native American history, suggesting the same idea of time outside the limits of memory that is connected to the desert and "wilderness". The legends presented here provide reasons for the diminishing numbers of the tribe: a fire kept burning from time immemorial which weakens the best young men chosen to serve and tend it; babies sacrificed to a great snake the tribe worshipped (122). The legends are both introduced and followed by what is, from the narrator's rational world-view, the "more likely" explanation; in fact, the legends are short in comparison to the rational set-up they are given. The reiteration of this explanation at the end of this section explains the situation clearly. "It seemed much more likely that the contagious diseases brought by white men were the real cause of the shrinkage of the tribe" (123). However, the language used before the presentation of these myths is more interesting. "Pecos had more than its share of dark legends,—perhaps that was because it had been too tempting to white men, and had had more than its share of history" (122). An alluring place, Pecos seems to have attracted more "history" than it warranted, and this proved destructive to the people who called it home. However, one might wonder what the allotment of history for one place is, and how it is possible to exceed. This list of legends is accompanied by the one and only footnote in the text, which refers to a temporal incongruity present in the legend of the Pecos pueblo. "In actual fact, the dying pueblo of Pecos was abandoned some years before the American occupation of

New Mexico" (123). This footnote provides the only outside interruption by the author in the tale woven by the narrator, and stands as an example of the complex relationship of the "actual facts" of history and legend. With this narrative interruption, Cather uses history to debunk the legend which attributed the decline of the Pecos pueblo to the sacrifices the tribe performed to appease the sacred snakes.

The day after Latour was reminiscing on these stories, he and Jacinto encounter a storm on their journey which forces them into the realm of legend themselves. Overtaken by a blizzard, they cannot go further. Jacinto knows of a cave nearby, although he is reluctant to reveal it to Latour. "I do not know if it was right to bring you here. This place is used by my people for ceremonies and is known only to us. When you go out from here, you must forget. 'I will forget, certainly'" (128). Latour is in a location where the strange ceremonies of which he had heard rumors take place. He is uncomfortable in this cave, offended by the strange odor that permeates it, frightened by the terrible force of the river which rumbles below, and confused by the strange and secretive behavior of his friend and guide while they spend the night there. His reaction to this place and the mysterious possibilities of foreign religious ceremonies makes such a strong impression on him that it is impossible for him to forget:

The Bishop kept his word, and never spoke of Jacinto's cave to anyone, but he did not cease from wondering about it. It flashed into his mind from time to time, and always with a shudder of repugnance quite unjustified by anything he had experienced

there . . . he still felt a certain curiosity about this ceremonial cave, and Jacinto's puzzling behavior. It seemed almost to lend a colour of probability to some of those unpleasant stories about the Pecos religion. He was already convinced that neither the white men nor the Mexicans in Santa Fe understood anything about Indian beliefs or the workings of the Indian mind. (132-33)

Time may have dulled the memory of his promise, which he in fact did not keep. He promised Jacinto he would forget the cave after they left, however, this seems to be something that Latour cannot do, and his alteration of this promise may be unconscious so he can believe that he remained true to his word. Nevertheless, this incident conveys the difficulties Latour encounters when attempting to access the spiritual beliefs of his native friends and understand the "workings of the Indian mind."

Latour is so intrigued by this place and its possible religious significance that he searches for another opinion on the matter. He seeks out an acquaintance of Kit Carson, who "had grown up a neighbour to these Indians, and knew as much about them as anybody" (133). This man gives his own interpretation of the Indian myths, as do the other people who had related these tales, yet as a local white male Latour seems to view him as an authority. In this unnamed "authority's" opinion, the fire myth is true, but he relates a slightly different version than the one Latour had heard. He admits he cannot give an definitive answer on whether the "varmit" they keep hidden in the mountains and bring to the pueblo for ceremonies is a snake, which leads him to reminisce on his

own questionable authority, and how “no white man knows anything about Indian religion” (134). He also predicts that Latour might make some Indians Catholics, “but he would never separate them from their own beliefs” (135). Undeterred, Latour manages to turn their resistance to abandoning the very beliefs and ceremonies he had previously found so repugnant into a positive character trait, and “remarked that their veneration for old customs was a quality he liked in the Indians, and that it played a great part in his own religion” (135).

An “Indigenous” Catholicism

The locals’ interpretations of his own religion are less foreign to Latour, and he views the common peoples’ diversions from original doctrine leniently. However, the abuses of power and laxity of the Mexican priests are just as repugnant to his sensibilities as the mysterious cave. The behavior of Padre Martinez, who does not adhere to the requirement of celibacy for priests, is particularly unacceptable to Latour’s sensibilities. As Latour converses with Martinez on their different interpretations of Church doctrine, he explains that he will have no tolerance for such behavior, and “I shall reform these practices throughout my diocese as rapidly as possible” (146). Padre Martinez laughs at Latour’s desire to bring the New World Church back to the European doctrines in which he was trained. “If you try to introduce European civilization here and change our old ways, to interfere with the secret dances of the Indians, let us say, or abolish the bloody rites of the Penitentes, I foretell an early death for you. I advise you to study our native traditions before you begin your reforms” (147). Martinez’s advice is sage. The New Mexican diocese was both culturally and geographically different from

Claremont, where Latour was trained, and had been influenced by an entirely different ideology. If Latour were to merely come in and reform without understanding the reasons why these deviations occurred in the first place, the reforms would not be long lasting.

Martinez’s view on the differences of the New World and Old World Catholicisms provides an interesting glimpse of the narrative’s view of the transformation that occurs, to both doctrine and people, when they become attuned to the particulars of life in the desert:

Nature has got the start of you here. We have a living Church here, not a dead arm of the European Church. Our religion grew out of the soil, and has its own roots. We pay a filial respect to the person of the Holy Father, but Rome has no authority here . . . The Church the Franciscan fathers planted here was cut off; this is the second growth, and is indigenous. (146)

Martinez views the church to which he belongs as a different entity than that of Latour’s. Influenced by the region and the land itself, it developed into an “indigenous” church. This idea of a separate church, native to the Southwest, is developed further when Latour removes Martinez and another priest from power. They rebelled, and “organized a church of their own. This, they declared, was the old Holy Catholic Church of Mexico, while the Bishop’s church was an American institution” (159). This schism reveals many of the tensions inherent in Latour’s mission in New Mexico, and how his endeavor to arrange and domesticate the Southwest was received. The narrative gestures at the connection between Latour and a more “Americanized”

version of Catholicism, referenced earlier in the text when Latour is explaining his new life in a letter to one of his acquaintances in France. "We missionaries wear a frock-coat and wide brimmed hat all day, you know, and look like American traders . . . All day I am an American in speech and thought—yes, in heart, too" and "[t]he Church can do more than the Fort to make the poor Mexicans 'good Americans'" (35-6). One of the few concrete spots in the text where Cather allows the political reality of Latour's situation to creep into the otherwise timeless, mythic narrative, Latour's admission that part of his work in New Mexico was to turn the inhabitants into "good Americans" is an example of how his mission in the Southwest coincides with the need to integrate this region into the political imaginary of the rest of the nation.

The variations which have been shaped by the common people, the other manifestations of this "indigenous" branch of the Church, are more acceptable to Latour. He finds the veneration of the dolls which represent saints endearing and prefers these homemade versions to the plaster ones he found in his work in Ohio; he sees the love and energy poured into these figures as demonstrative of the Mexicans' devotion to their faith. The local variations of saints' legends he understands as having been modified to suit the reality of the region, such as the saint who was the patron of horses in New Mexico, a region in which people rely heavily on these animals. "The boy looked at him in surprise. 'But he is the saint of horses. Isn't he that in your country?' The Bishop shook his head. 'No. I know nothing about that'" (28-9). He may know nothing about this local variation, but these small changes do not contradict Church doctrine, so he does not view them as a threat to his mission; in fact,

they are further evidence of the tenacity of the Mexican people in retaining their faith even without proper supervision. To Latour and Vaillant, these people are the human equivalent of what they are trying to accomplish through their domestication of the land through gardening:

They are like seeds, full of germination but with no moisture. A mere contact is enough to make them a living part of the Church. The more I work with the Mexicans, the more I believe it was people like them our Saviour bore in mind when He Said, *Unless ye become as little children*. He was thinking of people who are not clever in the things of this world. (206, emphasis original)

This statement encompasses both the devotion that he sees in these Mexican Catholics, as well as his condescending conception of them as children who are in need of proper guidance, which he is more than willing to provide.

Conclusion

Latour creates the history of his presence in New Mexico through the construction of his cathedral and the cultivation of his gardens. His ideological imperialism is memorialized through the physical presence of these images, and they serve as the representations of the legend of the first Archbishop of New Mexico. The process of myth-making in which Latour participates is significant because the Southwest of *Death Comes for the Archbishop* is "a country which had no written histories", yet the historical trajectory of the region was being defined through the Euro-American

expansion which serves as the background for the entire narrative (151). The characters traveled ahead of the boundaries of the printing press and landed in a place which relies upon oral tradition and myth to preserve history and culture—Archbishop Latour realized this, and created his own myths which helped to inscribe European cultural traditions onto a foreign landscape.

Cather's depiction of this process reflects the issues involved in "Americanizing" the Southwest while still engaging in the process of myth-making about a region that was already viewed as legendary and enchanting. Through her representation of the interactions and conflicts between the French priests and the local Native American and New Mexican populations, Cather participated in the process of creating the narrative trajectory of this region as it was being integrated into the national consciousness. This process was similar to, and indeed modeled on, the experiences of the actual French priests who were sent with Vatican approval into the Southwest after the end of the Mexican-American War to "Americanize" the Mexican arm of the Church, and who brought doctrinal, political, and architectural ideals with them that transformed the position of the Catholic Church in regards to both the long-term residents of the Southwest and those who were just entering the region. As Anthony Mora observes in "Resistance and Accommodation in a Border Parish", the ways in which twentieth-century individuals "explained, remembered, or forgot" this region's past is significant, as memories and stories about past events "sometimes obscured racial and religious tensions" (302). Cather's narrative presents a story about the Southwest which leaves such tensions unresolved; she seems to want to depict a hybridized and harmonious existence between

all the inhabitants of the Southwest, but is unable to imagine such a space. Her avoidance of directly addressing these political conflicts and their consequences, which still have resonance in the region today, does not seem to release her from the implications of these issues, as they are the shadow which hangs over the entire text. Cather's process of myth-making results in an enchanting legend that has endured the test of time, yet the potential of her narrative to serve as more than a myth remains unfulfilled.

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