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What are Marek Shimerda and Blind d'Arnault
doing in Jim's Pastoral?
Disabled Presence in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*

Florent Dubois

Willa Cather started writing *My Ántonia* at the end of 1916, about a year after the publication of *The Song of the Lark*, a novel about a Colorado girl of Swedish descent who becomes the leading Wagnerian soprano of the Metropolitan Opera House in New York.¹ *The Song of the Lark* follows the typical progression of the *Bildungsroman*: Thea Kronborg, the heroine, embarks on a journey toward fame in which characters and events are all subordinated to the development of the plot. For instance, the death of Thea's friend Ray Kennedy allows her to study music in Chicago (thanks to the money from his life insurance) and thus finds a structural justification in the story. In *My Ántonia*, however, Cather's ambition was to write a novel that was not based on plot but on "the other side of the rug, the pattern that is not supposed to count in a story".² The result is a story that "hasn't any form" (p. 7) in which characters, events and embedded narratives owe their inclusion in the book to their emotional charge (for instance, the story of Pavel and Peter) and more implicitly, on the level of the author rather than the narrator, their capacity to conjure up the figures of a bygone era (a case in point is the character of Tiny Soderball, who corresponds to the type of the bold businesswoman who makes a fortune in the Gold Rush).³ The unity of the novel is guaranteed by its tone—the elegy—and its controlling theme—the pastoral.⁴ If this description is accurate, one character at least does not seem to fit

1. For the approximate dates of composition of *My Ántonia*, see James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1987, p. 284–285. *The Song of the Lark* was published on October 2nd, 1915 (*Ibid.*, p. 265).

2. Brent L. Bohlke (ed.), *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1986, p. 77.

3. See the explanatory notes of the Scholarly Edition of the novel for a possible prototype and contextual information: Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* [1918], Charles Mignon, Kari Ronning, James Woodress et al. (eds.), Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition, 1994.

4. As several critics who studied *My Ántonia* have before me, I use the term "elegy" in the broad sense of a work of art expressing nostalgia for a lost past. Hermione Lee similarly characterizes the narrator's tone as "mournful"; in terms of genre, she views the novel as "a negotiation between traditions of male writing (pastoral elegy, classical epic, romance) and

in *My Ántonia*: Marek, the Shimerda son with an intellectual and physical disability, is neither a character whom Jim admires (like Ántonia or Mrs. Harling) nor one whom he hates (like Wick Cutter). Therefore, he does not stir intense emotions in him which could justify his presence in the narrative. Rather, Jim's feelings are ambiguous toward Marek and the way the "crazy boy" systematically appears in paragraphs that deal with something or someone else could make his presence go almost unnoticed. Marek does not fit in the idealized world of the "pastoral of innocence" that *My Ántonia* is supposed to be.⁵ Nonetheless, Jim chooses to include Marek and his presence in the narrative needs to be accounted for. I will argue that this presence can best be understood by comparing and contrasting Marek with the other disabled character of the story, the pianist Blind d'Arnault. To solve the contradiction between Cather's racist depiction of d'Arnault and her simultaneous praise for his musical talent, Elizabeth Ammons proposes that Cather's racism serves to cover her own indebtedness to African-American music.⁶ My argument will be somewhat different as I will consider that there is no contradiction here, since Blind d'Arnault and Marek Shimerda are used to figure the primitive forces at work on the fringes of the pastoral retreat, their description in subhuman terms being a corollary to their function in the novel. Incidentally, my analysis will lead me to examine in what way Jim and Cather differ or agree, reopening the debate about Jim's reliability.

WILLA CATHER AND DISABILITY

Although the chapter on Blind d'Arnault has been the object of much scrutiny as possibly the most blatantly racist passage in all of Cather's works,⁷ little atten-

the real shapes, the 'true stories' of women's lives, with Jim as a mediator between the two" (*Willa Cather: A Life Saved Up* [1989], London, Virago, 2008, p. 132-133).

5. The writer of the preface says that Jim, with his "naturally romantic and ardent disposition" still cherishes "big Western dreams" and equates Ántonia with "the whole adventure of [Jim's and her] childhood" (p. 6). These notations, along with the possessive in the title of Jim's manuscript, lend weight to the idea that his narrative is a somewhat idealized version of his childhood. The expression "pastoral of innocence" is used by David Stouck to refer to *My Ántonia*. He defines it as "a retreat in time and place to an enclosed, green world, a retreat expressing man's dream of a simplified, harmonious existence from which the complexities of society and natural process (age, disease, and death) are eliminated" (*Willa Cather's Imagination*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975, p. 35).

6. Elizabeth Ammons, "My Ántonia and African American Art", *New Essays on My Ántonia*, Sharon O'Brien (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 75-79.

7. Susan Meyer says it is "shocking" and summarizes some of these readings ("Cranometry, Race, and the Artist in Willa Cather", *Prospects: An Annual of American Cultural Studies*, Vol. 27, 2003, p. 341). Elizabeth Ammons also finds the passage disturbing and notes the many racial stereotypes present in Cather's fiction ("*My Ántonia* and African American

tion has been devoted to Marek Shimerda. As far as I know, the longest single piece of criticism concerning Marek is a six-page research article by Patrick Shaw in which he tries to identify the syndrome that could best fit Jim's description of the boy. His conclusion is that Marek's case is not plausible from a medical point of view and that Cather probably used traits characteristic of two different types of syndactyly. He writes that "syndactyly usually manifests itself in the fusion of two digits" and that "Modern medicine would most likely categorize the severe case of webbed fingers and toes such as Cather describes as Cenani Type Syndactyly". However, "Cenani Type is not accompanied by mental retardation and can be repaired surgically with no danger to a normal life span".⁸ This inconsistency leads him to surmise that Cather mixed this syndrome with another one: Filippi Type Syndactyly.

Filippi Type Syndactyly has a milder form of webbing than Cenani Type, usually manifesting itself with webbing between two fingers on each hand, but it is far more damaging otherwise. It includes distorted facial appearance, mental retardation, and the inability to speak [...]—which closely coincide with Jim's description of Marek and his animal noises. The prognosis for Filippi Type Syndactyly is a normal life span, but the mental retardation is irreversible. Little is known about the cause of the syndrome or what transmits it.⁹

Shaw then notes that no prototype has been identified for this character in biographies of Cather. I was myself surprised to find that there is not one explanatory note devoted to Marek in the Scholarly Edition of *My Ántonia*, whereas there is one for virtually all of the other characters in the novel. However, Mildred Bennett mentions that Anna Sadilek, the real-life Ántonia, had a "little sister who was crippled and couldn't go to school" and "a deaf brother whose attempts at friendliness usually startled people".¹⁰ Even though none of them is reported to have webbed fingers, they may have provided inspiration for the character of Marek. But as Shaw remarks,

Cather probably had little interest in developing an extensive etiology for Marek, since she quickly relegates him to an unseen role and soon dismisses him altogether from the text. Moreover, she was not particularly careful about being scientifically precise about his peculiar malady. The questions become,

Art", *New Essays on My Ántonia*, Sharon O'Brien (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 57-83).

8. Patrick Shaw, "Marek Shimerda in *My Ántonia*: A Noteworthy Medical Etiology", *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Winter 2000, p. 30.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Mildred R. Bennett, *The World of Willa Cather* [1951], Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1989, p. 80.

therefore, why Cather includes Marek in the narrative at all and why she exaggerates his syndrome into grotesquerie.¹¹

Of course, answering one question is also necessarily answering the other. Shaw only suggests two possible explanations, which are interesting but rather too summary to address the complexity of the novel. He first offers a biographical justification for the presence of Marek in the novel: Cather's fear of the mutilation or impairment of hands.¹² This explanation is not entirely satisfactory for at least two reasons: firstly, webbed fingers are not, strictly speaking, a mutilation of the hand—and they do not prevent Marek from performing manual tasks; secondly, the two mentions of Marek's webbed fingers are each time associated with him making animal noises, so that his difference is always at once physical *and* intellectual, his vocalizations revealing his incapacity to speak. Then Shaw ventures that what might interest Cather in Marek is his difference—and society's rejection of it as shown in book IV when Marek is institutionalized,—a situation that supposedly echoes Cather's own as a woman writer and a lesbian.¹³ As interesting as it may be, such a reading tends to obliterate the complexity of Marek's character to turn him into a symbol, an overly general signifier of difference. As critics in the field of disability studies have remarked, this is a general tendency when dealing with disabled characters.¹⁴ However, I do not think that Cather's project was to write a plea in favor of difference. Not only does this lumping together of very different kinds of marginality under one label—difference—appear anachronistic, this kind of interpretation also tends to overlook Cather's peculiar interest in and sympathy for disabled characters.

Cather was confronted with disability early in her childhood, when an intellectually disabled girl, Marjorie Anderson, followed Cather's family from Virginia to Nebraska and became their house help. According to James Woodress, "Cather

11. Patrick Shaw, "Marek Shimerda in *My Ántonia*", *op. cit.*, p. 31.

12. Mentioned by Edith Lewis, *Willa Cather Living: A Personal Record*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1953, p. 26. James Woodress enumerates examples from Willa Cather's fiction where hands appear mutilated or deformed (*Willa Cather: A Literary Life, op. cit.*, p. 27).

13. The Widow Steavens tells Jim that "Poor Marek had got violent and been sent away to an institution a good while back" (p. 167). Since Marek has never shown any sign of being violent before, Shaw takes it for granted that this must be a reaction against his family's lack of acceptance—they forbid him to make animal noises—and lack of care—they let Ambrosch "wor[k] him hard" (p. 75) ("Marek Shimerda in *My Ántonia*", *op. cit.*, p. 31-32).

14. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes that "when literary critics look at disabled characters, they often interpret them metaphorically or aesthetically, reading them without political awareness as conventional elements of the sentimental, romantic, Gothic, or grotesque traditions" (*Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997, p. 9-10).

loved Margie¹⁵ and Cather herself later claimed to have spent “hours” talking with her during her summer visits to her parents.¹⁶ Still according to Woodress, reminiscences of Marjorie Anderson can be found in the characters of Mahailey in *One of Ours* (1922), Sada in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), and Mandy in “Old Mrs. Harris” (*Obscure Destinies* [1932]). While it is often mentioned that the young Willa Cather liked to listen to the stories of old immigrant women who spoke little English,¹⁷ her living daily with an intellectually disabled girl is never invoked to explain her sympathy for outcasts and people who are too old or too weak to defend themselves and make themselves heard. Elizabeth Sergeant, a close friend of Cather’s, remarks that “her deepest compassion was aroused by voiceless human beings who she felt to be at the mercy of life and fate—like an old poor-white servant, or an old grandmother [...]—people who never talked and so never thought, but did feel”.¹⁸ There is indeed a surprising number of intellectually disabled characters in Cather’s fiction: Marek Shimerda and Blind d’Arnault, of course, but also Serge Povolitchky in “The Clemency of the Court” (1893), Mahailey and “Silent Irv” in *One of Ours* (1922), Lawndis in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), and Pierre in *Hard Punishments*, Cather’s unfinished last novel, which Edith Lewis destroyed after her death¹⁹—not to mention those with an acquired disability, due to illness (like Sapphira) or mutilation (like Spanish Johnny in *The Song of the Lark* or André and Pierre in *Hard Punishments*). Although we will see that Jim tends to speak in Marek’s place, revealing his own uneasiness toward disability, it is striking to note that there is no trace in the novel of the eugenic theories prevalent in Cather’s time. As David Braddock and Susan Parish wrote in a synthesis of research on the history of institutions for disabled people in the Western world:

The period from 1880 to 1925 was a time when persons with intellectual disabilities were viewed as deviant social menaces, and intellectual disability was seen as an incurable disease [...]. The eugenic belief widely held during this period was that intellectual disability was inherited as a Mendelian characteristic that degraded the species [...]. Intellectual disability was linked in numerous studies to criminality, immoral behavior, and pauperism [...]. Intelligence tests, developed shortly after the turn of the century, were employed widely in the major cities of the United States to identify children with intellectual dis-

15. James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

16. Letter from Willa Cather to Rose Ackroyd, 16 May 1941, *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*, Andrew Jewell and Janis Stout (eds.), New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2013, p. 606.

17. James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

18. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1963, p. 190.

19. James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life*, *op. cit.*, p. 493.

abilities and place them in segregated special classes. Intelligence tests were also used to support ethnocentric and class biases against immigrants in the United States [...]. Subsequent to the implementation of intelligence testing at ports of entry, deportations for mental deficiency increased 350 percent in 1913 and 570 percent in 1914 [...]. Rampant abuse existed in the classification of both immigrants and poor Americans as mentally deficient. Workers were “trained” to classify people as mentally deficient by sight [...].²⁰

The period was also one that saw the systematic sterilization of institutional residents of some states’ institutions for fear that they might transmit their disabilities to their children.²¹ Moreover, freak shows “reached the height of their popularity at the end of the nineteenth century” and completely disappeared only in the 1940s.²² And yet, while Marek likes to “exhibit his webbed fingers” (p. 47),²³ possibly because he knows of nondisabled people’s fascination for deformity, and while Blind d’Arnault’s incredible talent is described as something of an anomaly, the only thing Jim calls “a circus monstrosity” is the snake he kills at the prairie-dog-town (p. 30). He never suggests that disabled people are intrinsically dangerous or should be kept away from nondisabled people. Given the contemporary views concerning disability, Jim’s attitude can therefore be construed as rather progressive for its time. This stance seems to be shared by Cather, who explicitly criticized the lack of care toward disabled people in the United States at the time in “The Clemency of the Court”, one of her first short stories, published in her university’s student newspaper in 1893. Although she was to become particularly contemptuous of any form of propaganda in literature²⁴ and would never again state a political agenda as explicitly, the story is a scathing indictment of her country’s mistreatment of people with an intellectual disability. Its protagonist Serge, an orphan, has never been loved by anyone except a dog. One day the farmer who has taken him in gets angry at the dog and strikes it to death with a hatchet. Serge flies into a rage and kills him. He is sentenced to life imprisonment. In jail, because he cannot hoop barrels properly, Serge is sent to solitary confinement where he is

20. David L. Braddock and Susan L. Parish, “An Institutional History of Disability”, *Handbook of Disability Studies*, Gary L. Albrecht, Katherine Seelman, and Michael Bury (eds.), Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage, 2001, p. 38 (I edited out the numerous bibliographical references that followed each sentence).

21. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

23. Marek similarly “[holds] up his hands to show [the Burdens] his fingers” the first time they visit the Shimerdas’ dugout (p. 19).

24. See “Escapism” in particular, an essay she published in *The Commonweal* in April 1936 as an implicit response to critics who blamed her for not addressing the social problems of her time (Willa Cather, *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, Sharon O’Brien (ed.), New York, Library of America, 1992, p. 968-973).

tortured and eventually dies. Cather's last sentence is a bitterly ironic comment: "And so it was", she writes, "that this great mother, the State, took this willful, restless child of her's [*sic*] and put him to sleep in her bosom."²⁵

JIM'S NONDISABLED POINT OF VIEW

Thus, Willa Cather seemed to be rather sympathetic toward people with disability and quite critical of the institutions that were in charge of taking care of them. Nevertheless, sympathy always runs the risk of turning into pity, an affect that has been criticized as patronizing and even oppressing in the last decades.²⁶ Jim could even be accused of adopting an ableist point of view.²⁷ His narrative typically reduces the two disabled characters to their disability and fails to provide them with a full-fledged personality. As David Mitchel and Sharon Snyder explain, "disability entails a kind of immediate prefashioned notoriety"²⁸ that tends to obliterate any other characteristics.²⁹ As such, disability always has to be addressed in some way; it cannot be overlooked in conversation as a mole or thick eyebrows can. The first time Marek appears in the novel, Jim writes that "even from a distance one could see that there was something strange about this boy" and his first reaction is to "draw back" (p. 19), probably from a mixture of fear and disgust, two major emotions frequently elicited by disabled people.³⁰ Mrs. Shimerda hastens to explain what is wrong with her son to the Burdens, Krajiek translating: "She wants me to tell you he won't hurt nobody, Mrs Burden. He was born like that. The others are smart" (p. 20). Once the difference has been acknowledged and the danger minimized, the conversation can move on to other things (here the fact that Ambrosch is a good farmer).

From then on Jim will try his best to make this strange boy fit in the well-ordered world of the pastoral. Just as Ántonia needs to be elevated to a mythical status in the last book of the novel in order to make Jim forget the disgust he experienced

25. Willa Cather, "The Clemency of the Court", *The Hesperian*, No. 22, 26 October 1896, p. 7.

26. Bill Hughes, "Fear, Pity and Disgust: Emotions and the Non-Disabled Imaginary", *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*, Nick Watson, Alan Roulstone and Carol Thomas (eds.), London and New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 70-72.

27. Ablism is to disability what racism is to race.

28. David Mitchel and Sharon Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse*, Ann Arbor, U of Michigan P, "Corporealities: Discourses of Disability", 2000, p. xii.

29. "Disability marks a character as 'unlike' the rest of a fiction's cast, and once singled out, the character becomes a case of special interest who retains originality to the detriment of all other characteristics" (*Ibid.*, p. 55-56).

30. Bill Hughes, "Fear, Pity and Disgust", *op. cit.*, p. 68-70 and p. 72-75.

when he discovered she could be the object of sexual desire,³¹ so disability needs to be normalized in the novel in order to preserve Jim's idealized memory of his childhood. Indeed the same taboo surrounds disability and sex in modern societies because, as Bill Hughes recalls, "disgust stems from fear of the messiness of our own intrinsic, organic human constitution". Moreover, "disgust is a moral tribunal that is used to judge others, to assign them to an inferior status and at the same time make a compelling case for 'our' superiority, 'our' place above the herd, 'our' purity".³² Because in Jim's mind Marek is necessarily assigned an inferior status due to the disgust he elicits, it never occurs to Jim that Marek could be very happy the way he is. Although Marek never complains or refuses to do anything,³³ which would tend to prove that he is not suffering from his condition, Jim always interprets what Marek does as a way of making the others forget about his disability, transferring his own desire to forget that disturbing child to the child himself, who is expected to be constantly struggling to pass as nondisabled.³⁴ When Marek refrains from making his "queer noises [...] in the presence of his elders" Jim comments, "Marek was always trying to be agreeable, poor fellow, as if he had it on his mind that he must make up for his deficiencies" (p. 47). But the reader could also interpret it as a sign that Marek is simply not afraid of strangers and is always happy to interact with them, behavior that does not suggest unhappiness. Likewise, Blind d'Arnault has "the happiest face [Jim] ha[s] seen since [he] left Virginia" (p. 102). Later on, every time Marek does something unwise or clumsy Jim interprets it as a way for the boy to show off the superior qualities supposed to redeem his "deficiencies", whereas his behavior could simply be attributed to his lack of intelligence and have nothing to do with the way nondisabled people might think of him. If Marek walks outside without a coat he is "coveting distinction" (p. 60). When he pushes too hard on the handles of the cultivator it is because he thinks that "all exertion [is] meritorious" and, the reader deduces, he is trying to earn the

31. This happens when Wick Cutter thinks Jim is Antonia and assaults him. Jim is sickened by the incident, accusing Antonia of having "let [him] in for all this disgustingness" (p. 135). Blanche Gelfant has famously argued that Jim consistently views sex as impossible or disastrous ("The Forgotten Reaping-Hook: Sex in *My Antonia*", *American Literature*, Vol. 43, No. 1, Mar. 1971, p. 60-82).

32. Bill Hughes, "Fear, Pity and Disgust", *op. cit.*, p. 72.

33. For instance, he seems ready to oblige when he quickly throws a grain-sack at the foot of the door to prevent the wind from blowing in the dugout (p. 45).

34. Disability studies scholars use the notion of *passing* to refer to someone who is able to hide his or her disability. The concept originates in African American culture (*passing for white*) and is also used in LGBT culture (*passing for straight*). For more on this and my choice of referring to people with a disability as "disabled people" and to the others as "nondisabled people", see Simi Linton, "Reassigning Meaning", *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, New York and London, New York University Press, 1998, p. 8-33, *The Disability Studies Reader, Second Edition*, Lennard J. Davis (ed.), New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 166.

respect of his elders (p. 75). Jim's stance is similar to the one that makes people use the "overcoming rhetoric." As Simi Linton explains, when someone says that a disabled person has "overcome their disability", that person is making a double-edged compliment because the implication is that "the other members of the group from which the individual has supposedly moved beyond are not as brave, strong, or extraordinary as the person who has *overcome* that designation".³⁵ By constantly emphasizing Marek's supposed desire to conform, Jim reveals that he thinks Marek's identity is less valuable than nondisabled identities. Although Marek does not "overcome" his disability by making himself truly useful on the farm, Jim cannot imagine him not wanting to. Similarly, if Jim devotes a long flashback to Blind d'Arnault's childhood, it is to revel in the fairytale-like story of how a poor misfit—d'Arnault is blind, black, "repulsive" and has a "nervous infirmity"—"coupled himself to [the piano], as if he knew it was to piece him out and make a whole creature of him" (p. 102, p. 104). Once again Jim considers that disability in some way makes someone incomplete and that there is something to be "made up for". Blind d'Arnault's story is satisfying to the nondisabled Jim because it fits the *overcoming* rhetoric doubly, on the level of disability and on the level of race. As Simi Linton shows, there is indeed a similarity between statements such as "he/she has overcome his/her disability" and the phrase that was once "used to describe an African American who was considered exceptional in some way: 'He/she is a credit to his/her race.'" ³⁶ As Linton observes, "The implication of this phrase is that the 'race' is somehow discredited and needs people with extraordinary talent to give the group the credibility that it otherwise lacks".³⁷ Being twice discredited and, therefore, excluded from the sphere of "normal" people, the pianist is perceived as incomplete, a figure of the Other *par excellence*. No wonder that his normalization as an entertainer for white people generates so much enthusiasm on Jim's part.

It is difficult to know whether Cather would have used the exact same language as Jim to talk about disability. The expression "crazy boy" that recurs several times in the novel sounds insensitive today and Cather as narrator never uses it to describe a character in the rest of her work. She does use, however, expressions such as "poor Mahailey" or "poor Lawndis".³⁸ As for Blind d'Arnault, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between what belongs to ableism and what belongs to

35. Simi Linton, "Reassigning Meaning", *op. cit.*, p. 165.

36. Simi Linton, "Reassigning Meaning", *op. cit.*, p. 165.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Willa Cather, *One of Ours* [1922], Richard Harris, Frederick M. Link, and Kari A. Ronning (eds.), Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, The Willa Cather Scholarly Edition, 2006, Book 1, Chapter 1 (no pag. online). Willa Cather, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* [1940], *Later Novels*, Sharon O'Brien, New York, Library of America, 1990, p. 850.

racism—and rightly so, since both attitudes had to do with eugenics and the fear of the degeneration of the white race. Elizabeth Ammons has underlined how animalistic the physical description of Blind d'Arnault is and she attributes it to Cather.³⁹ It can indeed be assumed without much doubt that Cather does not dissociate herself from Jim here. The description of d'Arnault's head, for instance, is consistent with Cather's concern for "questions of racial hierarchy" as identified by Susan Meyer, who notes Cather's strong belief in the biometrical findings of anthropologists such as Franz Boas, whose research was reported in *McClure's* when Cather was its managing editor. Throughout her work, a head "full behind the ears" is synonymous with a superior intellect while a head that is "flat behind the ears" denotes a feebler mind. Thus, Blind d'Arnault's "Negro head" signals his ranking as an inferior being (p. 102).⁴⁰ Similarly, the use of the word "wool" (p. 102) to describe a black person's hair can also be found in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940), her last novel.⁴¹ Moreover, artistic talent in Cather's fiction is always dependent on genetic determinisms, race being one of them. In *The Song of the Lark* Thea Kronborg, the successful soprano, is of Swedish descent (and the narration keeps emphasizing the whiteness of her skin and the perfect shape of her head),⁴² and while the Mexicans appear as gifted musicians they seem to lack the discipline and intelligence necessary to channel their energies. Spanish Johnny, for instance, is a famous artist but sometimes "goes crazy" and leaves town for days, coming back home with a missing finger or a wound in the neck.⁴³

39. "Although [d'Arnault] is granted some self-respect [...] Cather's racism (via Jim Burden) has the upper hand" (Elizabeth Ammons, "My Antonia and African American Art", *op. cit.*, p. 75-75).

40. Susan Meyer underlines, however, that Cather seemed to follow Franz Boas's relatively progressive view that races could improve under the influence of the environment, meaning that someone from a "lower race" could nonetheless display the physical and intellectual attributes of a "higher race". She reports the example of Sampson in *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, a very capable slave whose head is "full behind the ears" ("Cranometry, Race, and the Artist in Willa Cather", *op. cit.*, p. 341-342). For examples of similar skull descriptions from *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920) and *The Professor's House* (1925), see *Ibid.*, p. 345-346. The rest of the article deals with *The Song of the Lark*.

41. About Jezebel Cather writes, "Her grizzled wool was twisted up in bits of rag" (*Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, *op. cit.*, p. 825-826).

42. Susan Meyer, "Cranometry, Race and the Artist in Willa Cather", *op. cit.*, p. 347-349.

43. "His talents were his undoing. He had a high, uncertain tenor voice, and he played the mandolin with exceptional skill. Periodically he went crazy. There was no other way to explain his behavior. He was a clever workman, and, when he worked, as regular and faithful as a burro. Then some night he would fall in with a crowd at the saloon and begin to sing. He would go on until he had no voice left, until he wheezed and rasped. Then he would play his mandolin furiously, and drink until his eyes sank back into his head" (*The Song of the Lark*, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1915, p. 43).

DISABILITY AND THE PASTORAL

Whether or not Cather intended Jim to be less sensitive than herself when writing about people with a disability, the fact remains that the latter are presented as objects of pity and, as such, they trouble the serene world of the pastoral. Interestingly, since he cannot evade the question of their irreducible otherness, Jim manages—in a gesture typical of his “romantic disposition”—to include his disabled characters in the world of the pastoral through a contortion that turns their deficiencies into powerful primitive symbols. As Leo Marx explained in his foundational study of the pastoral in American literature, “the pastoral ideal is an embodiment of what Lovejoy calls ‘semi-primitivism;’ it is located in a middle ground somewhere ‘between,’ yet in a transcendent relation to, the opposing forces of civilization and nature”.⁴⁴ Thus the “middle landscape” the pastoral novel tries to evoke needs both poles: nature and civilization. Mirroring Cather’s situation, Jim writes from New York a novel about the settling of Nebraska; like her, he seems to be acquainted with the refined culture of cities⁴⁵ and yet, paradoxically, strives to be as artless as possible when writing about his childhood.⁴⁶ I would argue that Blind d’Arnault and Marek are used to dramatize this tension. Standing in opposition to Jim’s urban refinement, they are champions of the raw, unbridled vitality of the body. They represent the vital energy without which art is but a lifeless form.

As a child Blind d’Arnault’s body is overwhelmed by its own energy and can work it off only through “rocking” motions and “fits”.⁴⁷ From the moment he unites his body with the “highly artificial” piano, he finds an outlet for his pent-up energies. The piano becomes the “mouth” of his otherwise dysfunctional body. The result is something that is not artistic in the academic sense but which is “real”, proceeding from “animal desires”:

As piano-playing, it was perhaps abominable, but as music it was something real, vitalized by a sense of rhythm that was stronger than his other physical senses—that not only filled his dark mind, but worried his body incessantly. (p. 103-104)

44. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* [1964], Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 23.

45. His detailed analysis of the performance of *La Dame aux Camélias* that he and Lena attend in Lincoln shows his acquaintance with a more refined theater as much as it reflects Cather’s past experience as a theater critic (p. 147-149).

46. “I didn’t arrange or rearrange. I simply wrote down what of herself and myself and other people *Antonia’s* name recalls to me. I suppose it hasn’t any form” (p. 7).

47. “his body rocking automatically” (p. 103); “[he] fell screaming and bleeding to the floor. He had what his mother called a fit” (p. 104).

This strong “sense of rhythm” signals the Dionysian impulse that sustains his music, as opposed to the Apollonian poise of the narration. Even though the physical description of the pianist and his “sense of rhythm” correspond to the racial stereotypes of the time, they are here embedded in a discourse on primitivism that goes beyond race. As Susan Meyer judiciously remarks,⁴⁸ Blind d’Arnault’s “close-clipped wool” and the shape of his head (“nothing behind the ears”, p. 102) find an echo in Leo Cuzak, Ántonia’s “faunlike” son—a “Bohemian”, not an African American: “He hadn’t much head behind his ears, and his tawny fleece grew down thick to the back of his neck” (p. 184). Quite tellingly, he is Ántonia’s favorite⁴⁹ and responds to her affections with a “jealous, *animal* little love” (p. 186, emphasis added). He too is a gifted musician, who “play[s] very well for a self-taught boy” (p. 183). Here, Jim takes these animalistic traits not as something negative but as the source of these characters’ musical talent. Being “less civilized” than the others, they are closer to nature as their feeble minds fail to stifle some of their bodies’ impulses. Blind d’Arnault cannot control his rhythmical movements, “like a rocking toy” (p. 102), and as a boy had “an expression of idiotic rapture” when he was listening to music (p. 103). Similarly, Leo Cuzak cannot always control his facial expressions.⁵⁰ Though she is not as “savage” as they are, it can be noted in passing that the actress playing Marguerite Gautier in the performance of *La Dame aux camélias* that Jim and Lena attend has a physical disability⁵¹ and, while she proves to be a very powerful actress, she is also blamed for lacking refinement and “b[earing] hard on the idea and on the consonants” (p. 148-149).

As for Marek, although he is not an artist in the traditional sense of the word, his voice is an instrument which, like Blind d’Arnault’s piano or Leo’s violin, he imbues with tremendous vitality. Since it is not impoverished by the use of language, which reduces vocal sounds to phonemes, he is free to produce a much greater variety of sounds than the other characters. Although his vocalizations are considered “uncouth noises”, they are able to express his emotions very vividly. When Ántonia empties the basket of food Mrs. Burden has brought, Marek “beg[ins] to make soft, gurgling noises and stroke[s] his stomach” (p. 45). He also “beg[ins] to smack his lips” when in return Mrs. Shimerda offers dry mushrooms to Mrs. Burden (p. 47). This physical manifestation of the pleasure of eating speaks for itself and points to the importance of simple physical pleasures in the novel,

48. “Cranometry, Race, and the Artist in Willa Cather”, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

49. Ántonia tells Jim: “That Leo; he’s the worst of all. [...] And I love him the best” (p. 177).

50. “He frowned and wrinkled up his face. He seemed to be trying to pout, but his attempt only brought out dimples in unusual places” (p. 183-184).

51. “She was already old, with a ravaged countenance and a physique curiously hard and stiff. She moved with difficulty—I think she was lame—I seem to remember some story about a malady of the spine” (p. 148).

which the disabled characters seem to understand instinctively. Although Marek does not name the physical sensations related to eating, he makes the other characters unequivocally understand what he means. Similarly, Jim makes the reader feel the pleasure that *Ántonia*, Peter, or himself derive from eating melons thanks to extremely sensuous descriptions which are suggestive enough not to need any explicit reference to the characters' emotions.⁵² Like the scenes where the characters dance at the Vannis' pavilion or at Mrs. Gardener's hotel with Blind d'Arnault, these passages are moments of freedom from convention: the characters eat with their hands, their ravenous appetite taking on mythical proportions when Peter eats "all the melons that he ha[s] put away for winter" after all his possessions have been auctioned off (p. 39). They suggest that happiness is found at its purest in simple things, where nothing artificial is interposed between the senses and what they perceive. Jim's notion of happiness consists indeed in a reduction of the distance between perception and percept to the point where one feels "dissolved" into one's environment. The first time he visits his grandmother's garden he goes through such an experience:

There in the sheltered draw-bottom the wind did not blow very hard, but I could hear it singing its humming tune up on the level, and I could see the tall grasses wave. [...] I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep. (p. 16-17)

Jim will never experience such a fusion with his environment again but other passages in his narrative are reminiscent of that foundational moment and they are all characterized by motionlessness accompanied by the soft song of nature. In Chapter 14 of Book II, while Jim is walking toward the river where the hired girls are having a picnic, he is "overcome by content and drowsiness" and stops at the edge of the bank to listen to the "high, sing-song buzz of wild bees and the sunny gurgle of the water underneath" (p. 128). His ideal of stasis always corresponds to the pastoral ideal of the middle landscape, striking a balance between what belongs to nature and what belongs to men. In the first case "sun and air" are alter-

52. These descriptions mainly appeal to the senses of touch, with a repeated emphasis on the juice that wets their hands and faces, and hearing, with the "delicious sound" the melons make when they are split with a knife, while the taste itself does not need to be mentioned (p. 23, p. 26, p. 39). No words are needed either in *Ántonia's* cellar when three of her daughters point to the shelves of fruit preserves and "trac[e] on the glass with their finger-tips the outline of the cherries and strawberries and crabapples within, trying by a blissful expression of countenance to give [Jim] some idea of their deliciousness" (p. 178).

nates of “goodness and knowledge” and in the second the idyllic nature of the riverside is a retreat where young people come to eat and bathe.

According to a similar logic, the disabled characters are used to represent the primitive impulse that lies dormant in each of us and is necessary to our happiness, as well as to the making of great art, even when one has found refuge in the “world of ideas”. At university Jim is introduced to this world by Gaston Cleric and notes that “when one first enters that world everything else fades for a time, and all that went before is as if it had not been” (p. 139). Yet Jim eventually realizes that he needs to connect what he reads to his own experience—in very simple terms, that literature is about life and proceeds from life. When Lena suddenly revives his old memories he is struck by this “revelation”:

It came over me, as it had never done before, the relation between girls like those [the hired girls] and the poetry of Virgil. If there were no girls like them in the world, there would be no poetry. I understood that clearly, for the first time. (p. 146)

Art, however refined it may be, is about life; it aims to express emotions everybody may feel and should always be connected to our most fundamental instincts and desires, as well as to the natural world where they originate. Marek, who is capable of “bark[ing] like a dog or whinny[ing] like a horse” (p. 47) but cannot speak, could very well embody the ideal of prelapsarian humanity, before knowledge erected a wall between mankind and the other creatures of the world. Unable to survive in a world where innocence has vanished, he becomes violent and is institutionalized, his fall reenacting the fall of man. Like Blind d’Arnault, “the glistening African god of pleasure, full of strong savage blood” (p. 105), he embodies the primitive forces which, in the pastoral, are pitted against those of civilization.

However, even though they stand in opposition to a constraining civilization, it would be a mistake to think that Jim presents these characters as exemplary, as free men we should envy, precisely because the pastoral ideal entails an equilibrium between the savage and the civilized. Exciting though they may be, neither Blind d’Arnault nor Leo Cuzak appear as first-rate musicians. They lack the “finish” and discipline of the truly admirable artist—the Apollonian. Blind d’Arnault “wore his teachers out” (p. 104) while Leo Cuzak seems to lack proper training, Jim qualifying his statement that “he played very well” by adding “for a self-taught boy” (p. 183). For Cather as for Jim, art needs stylization and technique; it cannot simply consist of pure emotion. The pastoral is not a glorification of the primitive; its ideal is “semi-primitive” and as such it favors the pasture over the wilderness, the garden over the open land. Analyzing the situation of the shepherds in Virgil’s first eclogue, Leo Marx notes that “this ideal pasture has two vulnerable borders:

one separates it from Rome, the other from the encroaching marshland".⁵³ In other words, the pastoral retreat is not only threatened by the political and economic forces emanating from the city, but also by the insalubrious wilderness. Thus, the characters of Blind d'Arnault and Marek condense the two threats that hang over the pastoral retreat. Firstly, they represent the danger of unrepressed sensuality. Blind d'Arnault plays "barbarously" and the "strong savage blood" instilled in his music threatens the social order of Black Hawk when it leads the hired girls to dance with the men.⁵⁴ Marek's gestures and noises are perceived by people who do not know him as "uncouth" and make him feel alienated, even with his own family. Secondly, their existences are not detached from the socio-economic realities of their time. Marek is "sent away to an institution" (p. 167) and, despite his talent, Blind d'Arnault's disability and blackness destine him to be an object of curiosity, condemning him to a peripatetic lifestyle in which he is a virtual slave to his manager, who decides when he should start and stop playing.⁵⁵

When studying the similarities between the figures of Blind d'Arnault, Marek, Leo Cuzak and the actress of *La Dame aux camélias*, one cannot fail to recognize the hand of Cather controlling Jim's narrative. Superimposed on his artless account—an account written by a business man, not a professional writer—there is Cather's reflection on what makes good art and on the reliability of memories. In *My Antonia*, art is defined as an attempt to find a difficult balance between truthfulness to one's emotions and memories and a capacity to create eternal figures and motifs. As such, the narrative beckons both to its expressive possibilities and to its artificiality. *My Antonia* is both a very realistic depiction of life in the Midwest at the end of the nineteenth century—as shown by the contemporary reception of the novel⁵⁶—and a poetic object following conventions which are cen-

53. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

54. Blind d'Arnault is the one who signals the presence of the girls to the men ("I hear little feet—girls, I 'spect") and although the girls laugh, Tiny is "alarmed" and Antonia is "frightened"—probably because of a mixture of fear for Mrs. Gardener's reaction if she came to hear about it and apprehension about what the men could do to them (p. 105-106).

55. "D'Arnault played until his manager came and shut the piano" (p. 106). "He was born in the Far South, on the d'Arnault plantation, where the spirit if not the fact of slavery persisted" (p. 102). Elizabeth Ammons reports that Blind Tom, one of the prototypes for d'Arnault, was first a slave and still gave ninety per cent of his earnings to his former master after the Civil War ("*My Antonia* and African American Art", *op. cit.*, p. 68).

56. Among many others, Randolph Bourne and H. L. Mencken, two of the most influential New York critics at the time, marveled at how real the novel's characters were. Mencken, in particular, wrote that "Its people are unquestionably real. Its background is brilliantly vivid" (Margaret Anne O'Connor, ed., *Willia Cather: The Contemporary Reviews*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 89.) Many ordinary readers also identified with the characters, as can be noted from a sample of fan mail which is reproduced in the Norton

turies old. Structured by the cycle of the seasons,⁵⁷ the novel appears as a finished work of art that reaches an artificial resolution at the end. In the final pages Jim finds a way of reliving his childhood vicariously through *Ántonia's* "boys" and operates a return to the beginning of the novel, closing the "little circle" of "man's experience".⁵⁸ What the disabled characters help uncover is the constructed nature of nostalgia and the art that feeds on it. A highly subjective account, the novel is both true—being firmly rooted in real emotions—and false, because those same emotions lead Jim to lay the emphasis on what suits the elegiac mood of remembrance and tone down what contradicts it. The grim realities hinted at by the disabled characters—the shameful segregation and exploitation that structured American society—resist Jim's romanticizing. Whether Cather consciously put them there for that purpose will remain undecidable. What is certain is that through them she also developed the same kind of reflection initiated in *O Pioneers!* (1913) and *The Song of the Lark*. Through them she pondered the articulation of emotions and knowledge, nature and culture—or talent and technique—in one's life, first, and, as a consequence, in artistic creation.

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57. Books I and II start and end in summer. The passing of the seasons is underlined by notations at the opening of chapters such as (for Book I) "there was a shiver of coming winter in the air" in Chapter 6 (p. 27), "the autumn colour was growing pale on the grass and cornfields" in Chapter 8 (p. 33), "the first snowfall came early in December" in Chapter 9 (p. 39), "spring came" in Chapter 17 (p. 69), etc.

58. "This was the road over which *Ántonia* and I came on that night when we got off the train at Black Hawk and were bedded down in the straw, wondering children, being taken we knew not whither. I had only to close my eyes to hear the rumbling of the wagons in the dark, and to be again overcome by that obliterating strangeness" (p. 195-196).

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