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Godfrey St. Peter's "Picturesque Shipwreck"

Early in *The Professor's House*, the protagonist, Godfrey St. Peter, gazes out his window at Lake Michigan, that "inland sea":

Whenever he was tired and dull, when the white pages before him remained blank or were full of scratched-out sentences, then he left his desk, took the train to a little station twelve miles away, and spent a day on the lake with his sail-boat; jumping out to swim, floating on his back alongside. . . . [T]he great fact in life, the only possible escape from dullness, was the lake. The sun rose out of it, the day began there; it was like an open door that nobody could shut. The land and all its dreariness could never close in on you. You had only to look at the lake, and you knew you would soon be free.¹

The passage should remind us of another water-rhapsody, which opens one of the greatest tales of mobility American literature has to offer:

Whenever I find myself growing grim about my mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people's hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can.²

The similarity is so striking that Cather was surely tipping her hat to Melville, and to Ishmael—whose "whenever" (he finds himself coffin-browsing or hearse-chasing) must have informed St. Peter's. St. Peter is landlocked in the Midwest, but "whenever he [is] tired and dull," he heads straightaway for the American lake most oceanlike in its immensity.

But the novels' trajectories soon diverge. The professor's depiction feels especially, well, professorial: Godfrey St. Peter's water-cravings do not appear to have been kindled by some inner darkness, by urges to harm his fellow man or himself, but rather by the banal circumstance of writer's block: "when the white pages before him remained blank or were full of scratched-out sentences." And while *Moby-Dick* epitomizes the American migratory impulse and the vastness of possibility it suggests, the bulk of *The Professor's House* feels static, despite its early promise that, after gazing at Lake Michigan, its protagonist "would soon be free." While Ishmael sets out upon his beloved sea and spends the entirety of the novel there, feeling continuously that "mystical vibration" of being "out of sight of land,"³ Godfrey St. Peter merely swims, dries himself on the sand, and returns to his comfortable middle-class home, in which he is ensconced for the majority of the novel. *Moby-Dick*, put most simply, is the story of a voyage; *The Professor's House*, put most simply, is the story of a man who has foregone voyaging. Indeed, its first sentence is "The moving was over and done" (3).⁴

Here "moving" first suggests relocation—the St. Peters have bought a new house, the occupation of which provides one of the novel's central problems—but our reading of the word should also be expanded outward, since St. Peter will come to resist not just "the new house into which he did not want to move," but the entire range of human motion that indicates human life: he will wish that he could simply "be transported" between places without having to use his limbs to propel him (23, 25).⁵ Gaston Bachelard has written that the right to immobility is "one of the things we prize most highly," and that humans naturally seek out "sure places" to protect this right; still, St. Peter's immobility is troubling in its totality—our protagonist can appear as frozen as a work of art.⁶ His crown is "hard as bronze," "more like a statue's head than a man's," and even at his most active—swimming in Lake Michigan—he is likened to "a Parthenon frieze" (25, 57). A statue is no Ishmael (nor, for that matter, an Ahab). Thus it is difficult to deem a novel of such immobility an adventure par *Moby-Dick*—though we know Cather wished more women would take up such projects (indeed, she asserted that "when a woman writes a story of adventure, a stout sea tale, a manly battle yarn, anything without wine, women, and love, then I will begin to hope for something great from them, not before").⁷ While *The Professor's House* is not "a stout sea tale" or "a manly battle yarn," it is a novel, at least in some ways, "without wine, women, and love"; and while its prospects of "adventure" may at first seem slim, I will suggest that the text *does* offer, in some unexpected ways, a highly American "story of adventure"—despite the problem of its immobile protagonist.

But what precisely *is* St. Peter's problem? We learn in the novel's first pages that he is "just now . . . feeling a diminution of ardour" (5); this "diminution" is presented, and continuously reaffirmed, as the text's primary crisis. Especially when compared to the various crises of Cather's frontier fiction (drought, debt, adultery, murder, suicide), St. Peter's "diminution" could seem silly and self-indulgent: the reader might sniff that only one entrenched in the ivory tower of the academy would wring his hands over some erstwhile "ardour." A closer examination of the novel reveals that the threat to St. Peter's well-being is a real one; Fryer remarks on the novel's feeling of "precarious vulnerability."⁸ I attribute this "vulnerability" largely to St. Peter's immobility, and his immobility largely to his habitude. And this habitude is not merely the professor's house (though it is true that, as Laura Winters observes, "the man and the structure cannot be separated"), but also *The Professor's House*, the novel.⁹

The text seems almost to be closing in on its protagonist. Like the home to which St. Peter so clings (which is described as "too narrow for comfort," "too steep," "too cramped," with "scratchy" floors and doors that "don't fit"; and a study so low-ceilinged that the furnace renders its air "unfit to breathe"), the novel seems somehow hostile to his presence (3, 4). Indeed, while so many realist novels strive to present characters that seem as authentically human, as three-dimensional, as possible, *The Professor's House*, in its focus on "diminution," emphasizes the possibility of flattening, of reduction to *two* dimensions. Early in the novel, St. Peter concludes plainly that "My forbearance is overstrained, it's gone flat. That's what's the matter with me" (25). What a strange self-diagnosis! that one's "forbearance"—one's tolerance for, and ability to stand against, the vicissitudes of world in which one lives—has "gone flat," as if it were a bicycle tire. And later on, the setting of the novel seems to have undergone the same transformation: St. Peter looks about to see a "lake-shore country flat and heavy, Hamilton small and tight and airless" (131). The entire textual world is compressed almost out of existence; Hamilton, "small and tight and airless," must remind us of the professor's cramped study, with its "unfit" air. The novel refuses to provide the sort of spatial immensity we find in Cather's frontier fiction (in which "the mere absence of rocks gave the soil a kind of amiability and generosity, and the absence of natural boundaries gave the spirit a wider range"); the effect instead is one of claustrophobia.¹⁰ And ultimately St. Peter himself, not just his "forbearance" and not just the textual spaces around him, will endure the same fate: he is described as "absolutely flattened out," his very person reduced to two-dimensionality (133).¹¹

Jo Ann Middleton has written that *The Professor's House* "may well be [Cather's] most perplexing" novel.¹² Critics have often discussed the text in terms

of its difference to Cather's other work: its unexpected "darkness . . . related to aging and disaffection," observes Janis Stout, "strikingly differs in tone" from the novels that precede it; and, further, as Deborah Carlin notes, it lacks the "mythic and historical resonance" that makes Cather's early novels so popular on high school and college syllabuses.¹³ In 1924, while she was still writing *The Professor's House*, Cather promised in an interview with the *New York Times* that her new novel would "be a story about people in a prosperous provincial city in the Middle West. Nothing new or strange, you see."¹⁴ But in fact the novel was quite "new and strange," most notably in its "absolutely flattened" protagonist, its opening gambit that "the moving was over and done." Cather's *œuvre*, both early and late, teems with human movement, with goers, relocaters, and passengers of train, buggy, boat, and mule; it contains pioneers (*O Pioneers!*, *My Antonia*), expatriates (*One of Ours*, *Shadow on the Rock*), and even missionary expatriate pioneers (*Death Comes for the Archbishop*).¹⁵ For all these characters, the act of migration promises the possibility of beginning anew, of self-reinvention; it is the model endorsed by Philip Fisher, in which "mobility includes the right to go somewhere else and be someone else, the right to start over, the option that the young above all have to make what is called 'a fresh start.'"¹⁶ (We may think of the King's executioner in *Shadows on the Rock*, who flees France for Canada with the belief that he will be forgiven and healed if only "he could get away to a new country.")¹⁷

Joseph Urgo has written persuasively on the role of travel and movement in Cather, claiming that "the vision of American culture projected in the novels of Willa Cather is one of continuous movement, of spatial and temporal migrations, of intellectual transmission and physical movement."¹⁸ It is the same vision that marked the life of the author: Cather's friend and biographer Elizabeth Sergeant recalled that "rapid motion was essential" for Cather's happiness; and Cather herself spoke of keeping her suitcases always within arm's reach.¹⁹ Urgo concludes that Cather "marked intellectual bounty by her own spatial mobility" and insists that, as a result, "in Cather's America the New World is not so much a historical environment (a cosmos, a home) as it is a motion through space (a transformation, a journey)."²⁰

In tracing these "motions through space," Cather infuses some characters with her own urge for "rapidity"—such as Lucy Gayheart, whose proclivity for movement is established on the very first page of that novel through a detailed description of her "darting" gait.²¹ Lucy is automatically associated with, and identified by, "the way she move[s]."²² The reader first encounters her gliding over a frozen pond, having skated far past her peers; later, before she boards an eastbound train, we learn that "she had never wanted so much to be moving"—and the narrative scratches her itch, allows her

to “give herself up to the vibration of the train,—a rhythm that had to do with escape, change, chance, with life hurrying forward.”²³ Lucy’s is movement for its own sake: it is the fact of travel, not the question of where, that generates her sense of “escape, change, chance.” Destination is immaterial; no matter where she is headed, Lucy “never [takes] it slow.”²⁴ But no Catherian creation embodies the ethos of “rapid motion” more completely than Mexican Johnny in *The Song of the Lark*:

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 burrow. 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. At last, when he was put out of the saloon at closing time, and could get nobody to listen to him, he would run away—along the railroad track, straight across to the desert. He always managed to get aboard a freight somewhere. Once beyond Denver, he played his way southward from saloon to saloon until he got across the border. He never wrote to his wife; but she would soon begin to get newspapers from La Junta, Albuquerque, Chihuahua, with marked paragraphs announcing that Juan Tellamantez and his wonderful mandolin could be heard at the Jack Rabbit Grill or the Pearl and Cadiz Saloon. Mrs. Tellamantez waited and wept and combed her hair. When he was completely wrung out and burned up—all but destroyed—her Juan always came back to her to be taken care of.²⁵

There is no stopping him. When Doctor Archie asks Mrs. Tellamantez, “Can’t you tie him up someway?” she replies simply that her husband cannot resist “the excitement.”²⁶ But what exactly is this excitement? We understand as little of the origins of Mexican Johnny’s desire for movement as we do of Lucy Gayheart’s; the desire is simply presented as an endemic part of his being, and the narrative seems stumped to come up with anything more explanatory than that “periodically he went crazy.” The very idea of “movement for its own sake” may be aligned with the adopted Modernist creed of “art for art’s sake,” since, in Cather’s world human movement—of almost any sort—becomes a kind of artistic act.

It is, notably, an act in which Godfrey St. Peter has participated. Despite the paralytic stillness with which the novel opens, we should recall that he has been a traveler for almost all his adult life. I mean this literally—his academic research for the exhaustive eight-volume *Spanish Adventurers in North America* has sent him on “delightful excursions and digressions; the two Sabbatical years when he was in Spain studying records, two summers in the South-west on the trail of his adventurers, another in Old Mexico”—as well as metaphorically: in order to mentally trace the “trails” of those

long-gone “adventurers,” he must rearrange his imagination not only geographically but temporally (16).

St. Peter’s migratory history is longer still: in his childhood, his family moves from a “lakeside farm” to “the wheat lands of central Kansas” (a relocation so traumatic St. Peter “nearly died of” it [21]);²⁷ and as a young man he leaves the United States to study for his doctorate in France—an act of expatriatism that severs him decisively from his past, and from “the boy the Professor had long ago left behind him in Kansas”:

This boy and he had meant, back in those far-away days, to live some sort of life together and to share good and bad fortune. They had not shared together, for the reason that they were unevenly matched. The young St. Peter who went to France to try his luck had a more active mind than the twin he left behind in the Solomon Valley. After his adoption into the Thierault household, he remembered that other boy very rarely, in moments of home-sickness. After he met Lillian Ornsley, St. Peter forgot that boy had ever lived. (239–40).

By the time Cather wrote *The Professor’s House*, she had already wrestled with the idea of characters becoming intellectually ill-suited for places: Thea Kronborg is said to be “wasting herself here” in Moonstone, Nebraska; neighbors wonder why Claude Wheeler, despite having “an education and all that fine land . . . don’t seem to fit in right” on the prairie.²⁸ All the same, though Thea and Claude leave the homes where they “don’t seem to fit in right,” they continue, at least in part, to self-identify as pioneers; St. Peter travels so far he abandons even the memory of the “original, unmodified . . . primitive” version—the Kansas version—of his own being (239).²⁹ This is at once the power and the darkness of the “fresh start” model—that the act of relocation can sever the mover from his origins so entirely that the act of self-invention concurs with an act of self-erasure. Has St. Peter’s immobility created a sort of traffic jam in his mind, in which all the extant versions of himself are bumping up against one another?

Thus the problem of St. Peter’s habitude cannot be read only literally: his habitude is not merely the new house he so dreads occupying; nor is it the campus on which he teaches or the town in which he resides. Rather the problem of St. Peter’s habitude is that it has come to engulf all these places, and that it expands farther still—into the reaches of his own mind.

“In great misfortunes,” he told himself, “people want to be alone. They have a right to be. And the misfortunes that occur within one are the greatest. Surely the saddest thing in the world is falling out of love—if once one has ever fallen in.”

Falling out, for him, seemed to mean falling out of all domestic and social relations, out of his place in the human family, indeed.

St. Peter did not go out of the house that afternoon. He did not leave his study. (250–51).

The passage provides the novel's clearest discussion of "dimunition": it is not merely that St. Peter has fallen out of love, but rather than he has fallen out of "his place in the human family"—that he has seceded from the human nation.³⁰ It may seem appropriate that his declaration of "falling out" is immediately followed by another declaration of immobility ("St. Peter did not go out of the house that afternoon. He did not leave his study"); if one has fallen out of "all domestic and social relations," what good could it do to change one's coordinates? Everywhere must prove equally uninhabitable. But upon closer study, the passage quietly resists the idea of a total immobility. After all, in the act of "falling out" (the energy, and activity, of which phrase cannot be ignored) St. Peter *has* traveled: he has moved, or fallen, away from his family, away from the emotional ties of "human relations." In this novel, the alienation of human affection is distinctly migratory in nature: even when people continue to share physical spaces, they can travel so far from one another emotionally that access is impossible.³¹

The act of "falling out" leaves Godfrey St. Peter in an apparent void. His beloved Tom Outland has died, leaving behind only his diary and a patent for the Outland Vacuum; his daughters have grown into women with whom he is at best reserved and at worst critical; and, though he was for years "intensely in love" with his wife, his feelings for her have faded since the two were "young people with good qualities" (38, 233):

While the Professor was eating his soup, he studied his wife's face in the candle-light. It had changed so much since he found her laughing with Louie. . . . It had become, he thought, too hard for the orchid velvet in her hair. Her upper lip had grown longer, and stiffened as it always did when she encountered opposition. (66)

Whether Lillian St. Peter's face is actually "changed" or whether a shift in her husband's perspective creates its apparent difference, the "hardness" he ascribes to her visage is especially suggestive: Lillian seems in this moment to have calcified—not unlike the Parthenon-frieze version of her husband, and not unlike the Blue Mesa's Mother Eve, who "had dried into a mummy in that water-drinking air" (191). But the primary problem with Lillian's "hardness" is not that it does battle against her orchid velvet, but rather that she, and the marriage more generally, failed to "stiffen"—not unlike papier-mâché—at a more fortuitous juncture:

"My dear," he sighed when the lights were turned on and they both looked older, "it's been a mistake, our having a family and writing histories and get-

ting middle-aged. We should have been picturesquely shipwrecked together when we were young." (78)

The idea of a "picturesque" shipwreck, one which protects castaways from the menaces of time (or one on an island in which linear time does not exist), is a familiar one. Prospero and Miranda are marooned—more or less comfortably—for twelve years, buoyed both by Prospero's magic and the island's apparent promise of immutability; Odysseus's shipwreck at Scherie provides him the opportunity to rewind and relive his previous twenty years' adventure through storytelling.

The Professor's House likewise hinges on ideas of preservation. The Blue Mesa's Cliff City is lovingly compared to "a fly in amber," an image that pairs nicely with that of the "picturesque shipwreck": each suggests a suspension of time, a surprisingly beautiful image of immobility.³² St. Peter apparently desires that all aspects of his life—not just his marriage—present flies in amber: consider, for instance, his insistence that his study, small and drafty though it is, remain untouched; when Augusta attempts to remove her sewing busts, he protests, "I can't have this room changed if I'm going to work here!" (12). And when his mind ranges over his daughters' childhoods, St. Peter wishes he could have "kept" them as they were:

Oh, there had been fine times in this old house then: family festivals and hospitalities, little girls dancing in and out, Augusta coming and going, gay dresses hanging in his study at night, Christmas shopping and secrets and smothered laughter on the stairs. When a man had lovely children in his house, fragrant and happy, full of pretty fancies and generous impulses, why couldn't he keep them? Was there no way but Medea's, he wondered? (107)

The passage begins sentimentally, with a retrospective, and probably romanticized, sweep over a series of happy memories—mini-tableaus in quickfire. Given the novel's interest in preservation, it is no wonder that St. Peter wishes to "keep" his daughters as they were, "full of pretty fancies and generous impulses"; though here we sense a new darkness. His "picturesque shipwreck" with Lillian would leave them both alive. For St. Peter to even "wonder" over Medea's "way"—that is, filicide—as a means of "keeping" his daughters reveals the degree to which the romance of immobility, of the "fly in amber," has pervaded his consciousness—and at what cost.

It is important to note the range of St. Peter's interest in the "picturesque shipwreck"—that it is not just social but intellectual. St. Peter has reached an unfortunate stage in his career as a professor: he has finished his fifteen years' opus, and its final two volumes have "brought him a certain international reputation and what were called rewards—among them, the Oxford prize for history, with its five thousand pounds, which had built him the

new house into which he did not want to move" (23).³³ But he finds no sense of triumph in the project's completion, nor in its acclaim:

"Godfrey," his wife had said gravely one day, when she detected an ironical turn in some remark he made about the new house, "is there something you would rather have done with the money than to have built a house with it?"

"Nothing, my dear, nothing. If with that cheque I could have bought back the fun I had writing my history, you'd never have got your house. But one couldn't get that for twenty thousand dollars. There is nothing else, thank you."

Here we find another expression of the desire for a "picturesque shipwreck"; we sense St. Peter would have enjoyed being marooned with his scholarship, so that he might have continued into perpetuity its "delightful excursions and digressions" without ever having to complete its final sentences. But his study, like his marriage, has hardened fast; the workings of his mind have solidified to a degree that they merit, and facilitate, material exchange: ideas for money, money for house. St. Peter's barbed reply—"There is nothing else, thank you"—is not merely a repudiation of materialism ("There is nothing else *I would care to buy with the prize money*"); it is a stark assessment of his entire being ("There is nothing else *at all to do*"). When a scholar like Godfrey St. Peter has so entirely completed his intellectual project—and he has; apparently *Spanish Adventurers in North America* will tell the reader all there is to know on the subject of Spanish adventuring (and indeed, St. Peter has absorbed his subject so deeply that he "was commonly said to look like a Spaniard")—there simply "is nothing else, thank you" (4). St. Peter's intellectual expansion has reached its Pacific Ocean; the frontier of his mind is closed.

One might say, then, that the real problem of St. Peter's life, and thus of the novel (as opposed to the ancillary problems around which I have been circling), is a problem of asymmetry: a problem created when the trajectories of the various phases of one's life—social, intellectual, and especially biological—fail to coordinate with one another. If St. Peter's romance is extinguished, and his academic labor completed, why must his body—his physical circumstance—continue? Could not his biological existence synchronize more fully with his spiritual existence? We sense that St. Peter would much prefer to follow the symmetrical model of Tom Outland, who creates the Outland Vacuum, putting "something new in the world," and then "escape[s]," leaving the "meaningless conventional gestures . . . to others" (237).³⁴ And St. Peter attempts to force this paradigm, despite the insistence of his family doctor (who counsels him simply to "enjoy doing nothing") that "there's nothing the matter with you":

He did not mention to Dr. Dudley the real reason for asking for a medical examination. One doesn't mention such things. The feeling that he was near

the conclusion of his life was an instinctive conviction, such as we have when we waken in the dark and know at once that it is near morning; or when we are walking across the country and suddenly know that we are near the sea. (245)

But St. Peter's "instinctive conviction" is fallacious; there is, in fact, "nothing the matter" with him. He is still alive at the close of the novel, if not precisely kicking. We may read the second-to-last chapter—in which St. Peter falls asleep in his study, which is "pitch-black and full of gas" and fails to rise to open the window when he wakes, "cold and numb . . . and rather dazed"—as an effort to willfully graft the desired effect of synchronicity onto his life (251).³⁵ Nonetheless, it is an effort that fails: Augusta pulls her employer out of the gas and into the hall. In John Keats' final letter, he revealed his "habitual feeling of my real life having past . . . that I am leading a posthumous existence."³⁶ So has Godfrey St. Peter's "real life"—the life of the mind, the life of human intercourse—finished; and whatever remains may be considered a "posthumous existence," despite his body's continuing operations.

"If St. Peter is going to live," Uργο insists, "he will have to accept migration, both physical and intellectual."³⁷ In Uργο's formulation, "physical" migration indicates relocation to the new house and "intellectual" the acceptance of Tom Outland's death. But whether St. Peter does "accept migration" in these terms is ambiguous since, as Uργο notes, "we never know whether St. Peter makes the transition to the new study"—or, for that matter, precisely how, or if, his mind has been moved.³⁸ The situation seems bleak. Indeed the novel taken as a whole can seem bleak: James Woodress compares it to a "psychic annihilation."³⁹ But we have not yet considered what is arguably the text's most unusual aspect: its nested narrative, "Tom Outland's Story," which Cather originally composed as a stand-alone short story. It appears in *The Professor's House* as a flashback of sorts, though not to any event in Godfrey St. Peter's own history; rather, it offers, seemingly in real time, the first-person relation of another's history. Cather compared the structure of the novel to the ABA sonata form; Uργο claims the "B"—that is, "Tom Outland's Story"—is "at best" a vacuole, "a space apart from the narrative itself."⁴⁰ It is true that the move into—and, subsequently, the move out of—this section feels so stark that we might claim clumsiness on Cather's part. But I would insist that to read "Tom Outland's Story" as "a space apart from the narrative itself"—which necessitates the presumption that the *actual* narrative is strictly limited to that which delineates professor and house—is a mistake. The novel's epigraph—"A turquoise set in silver, wasn't it? . . . Yes, a turquoise set in dull silver"—instructs us to approach the text as a unified whole: its "turquoise" (Tom Outland's story) is inseparably "set" in its "dull silver" (St. Peter's story).

Cather claimed that she began *The Professor's House* just after having seen a Parisian exhibit of Dutch paintings and was struck by the fact that "in most of the interiors, whether drawing-room or kitchen, there was a square window, open, through which one saw the masts of ships, or a stretch of gray sea. The feeling of the sea that one got through these square windows was remarkable."⁴¹ The professor's study has its own window, which St. Peter opens "so that the night wind might carry away the smell of his pipe as much as possible"; and, too, so that it might "carry away" his imagination (8). We immediately recall the view of Lake Michigan (indeed that view—of the lake as a "long, blue, hazy smear" is described as the "one fine thing about the room"):

Afterward, when St. Peter was looking for a professorship, because he was very much in love and must marry at once, out of the several positions offered him he took the one at Hamilton, not because it was the best, but because it seemed to him that any place near the lake was a place where one could live. The sight of it from his study window these many years had been of more assistance than all the convenient things he had done without would have been. (22)

The idea of water providing "assistance" to a thinker is recognizable to readers of American letters: Melville insisted that the most "absent-minded . . . metaphysical professor" would invariably be drawn to water during his "deepest reveries" (since, "as everyone knows, meditation and water are wedded for ever"); Thoreau was "thankful" Walden "was made deep and pure for a symbol," so that it could present "the earth's eye, looking to which the beholder measures his own nature."⁴² As St. Peter ruminates on the "smear" of the lake, he may be catapulted back onto his own "little brig," *L'Espoir*, which carried him on the voyage during which "everything seemed to feed the plan of the work that was forming in St. Peter's mind," during which "the sea itself" creates the "sound," "inevitable" design of his first book (89). But Cather also creates a less literalized window, one that looks out to the Cliff City; "Tom Outland's Story," like Lake Michigan, is a distant sight at which St. Peter and the reader may gaze from their respective places without. In offering this strange section, Cather said she "wanted to open the square window and let in the fresh air that blew off the Blue Mesa"; and ultimately its presence—both formally (as the center of the text) and thematically (as the center of St. Peter's thinking)—undercuts the novel's bleakness.⁴³ The proximate company of Tom Outland and of his story produces in St. Peter the "instinctive conviction" that he is perpetually "near the sea"; it offers the dwindling professor a new *L'Espoir* on which he, and his imagination, may again voyage.

If there is an adventure tale in Cather's *œuvre*, "Tom Outland's Story," with

its railroad, its poker games, its road-building, its mountain expeditions, is it.⁴⁴ And Tom is the prototypical adventurer: born to “mover people,” with a vagabond’s “free-lance” personality, he is the ideal candidate for a southwestern quest (and as such, a character who may be compared fairly to Ishmael). But Tom’s adventures are not St. Peter’s, any more than Odysseus’ travels are Nausicaa’s. Indeed, since “Tom Outland’s Story” appears in first person, ostensibly just as it was told by Tom, readers may feel an equal claim to its content; ultimately, for us as well as for Godfrey St. Peter, it is something akin to myth.

Still, in St. Peter’s case it seems the mere knowledge of something so exciting having happened in the world, even if it has happened to someone other than himself, years before and states away, is in itself powerful and even redemptive. Winters writes that “no geographical location in all of Cather’s fiction contains more unalloyed pleasure than Tom Outland’s Cliff City.”⁴⁵ I agree with her assessment of the mesa as a space of “consciousness and comfort” for Tom, but would extend the claim to include St. Peter as well, who in my view also receives “consciousness and comfort” from the Cliff City, from the realization of its existence as “the sort of place a man would like to stay in forever” (168).⁴⁶ We should recall *O Pioneers!*’s Carrie Jensen, the sister of one of Alexandra’s hired men:

She had never been out of the cornfields, and a few years ago she got despondent and said life was just the same thing over and over, and she didn’t see the use of it. After she had tried to kill herself once or twice, her folks got worried and sent her over to Iowa to visit some relations. Ever since she’s come back she’s been perfectly cheerful, and she says she contented to live and work in a world that’s so big and interesting. She said that anything as big as the bridges over the Platte and the Missouri reconciled her. And it’s what goes on in the world that reconciles me.⁴⁷

Carrie, and Alexandra, too, is consoled by the knowledge of there being places and things outside her usual understanding; she trusts and finds comfort in their existence without always having to see them, as Jean La-tour is comforted by the idea of a Jerusalem he has never visited.⁴⁸ And “Tom Outland’s Story” provides a similar bright spot in Godfrey St. Peter’s “posthumous existence,” one that “let[s] in the fresh air” and gives his imagination a place to travel, even after his own intellectual journeys are finished.⁴⁹ The Cliff City is a study in perpetuity (recall that Tom describes it as a “city of stone, asleep . . . in immortal repose . . . a fly in amber”) and as such suggests the possibility of an infinite existence; likewise, Tom Outland is, at least in St. Peter’s mind, “shipwrecked picturesquely” and eternally on the mesa (180). Even if the body’s “moving is over and done”

the mind still has places to go: as such St. Peter can always return to the Blue Mesa, and can always find Tom Outland there, happily cataloguing water-jars and pieces of turquoise.

There is an odd moment near the end of the novel in which St. Peter ruminates on a poem that “he used to read long ago in one of his mother’s few books, a little two-volume Ticknor and Fields edition of Longfellow, in blue and gold, that used to lie upon the parlour table”:

For thee a house was built
Ere thou wast born;
For thee a mould was made
Ere thou of woman camest. (248)

The lines come from a Longfellow translation of the Anglo-Saxon poem “The Grave,” and suggest the determinism, really the fatalism, of human existence; so it seems fitting that they appear just before St. Peter’s passive suicide attempt. But Cather amended Longfellow’s translation, which actually reads “For thee a mould was *meant*,” not “made.” Urgo has written convincingly about this variation and claims that it “mutes the fatality of place” since “a thing made is a fiction; it can be undone or remade. A meant house, on the other hand, is subject to violation or transgression if one departs from what is intended or fated.”⁵⁰ I would push Urgo’s reading in a different direction. Though I agree that Cather’s alteration ultimately lifts the tone of the poem as it appears here, I locate its significance in the shift from the passive (“meant”) to the more active (“made”). “Made” pairs more logically with the “built” of the earlier line, since both suggest the presence of a creative agent, the builder of a house, the maker of a mould, even without this agent being explicitly credited. Another way to read the Longfellow lines, then, is to align Godfrey St. Peter—he who so cherishes the notion of creating “something new in the world”—not with the poem’s addressee but with its unnamed maker. In this understanding, the “thee” is Tom Outland, and the “house built” (and “mould made”) for him is the Blue Mesa that St. Peter has erected in the spaces of his own mind, in a strange and stirring resurrection of his ostensibly-foregone intellectual life.

The possibility of a thing existing infinitely, at least in the imagination, also appears in *O Pioneers!*, which insists that a pioneer “should be able to enjoy the idea of a thing more than the thing itself.”⁵¹ For Emil and Alexandra, the “idea of” a duck they see once (the duck being “the thing itself”) will persist into eternity:

In this little bay a single wild duck was swimming and diving and preening her feathers, disporting herself very happily in the flickering light and shade. They sat for a long time, watching the solitary bird take its pleasure. No living thing

had ever seemed to Alexandra as beautiful as that wild duck. . . . Alexandra remembered that day as one of the happiest in her life. Years afterward she thought of the duck as still there, swimming and diving all by herself in the sunlight, a kind of enchanted bird that did not know age or change.⁵²

The “enchanted” duck is “still there”; it does not “know age or change” and continues uninterrupted in the same poses in which it first appears, whether Alexandra sees it or not, whether the reader sees it or not. But significantly, the duck’s perpetuity depends on Alexandra’s actually having seen it “swimming and diving”; St. Peter’s understanding of Tom on the mesa comes solely from Tom’s narration of that episode, and from his rescued diary, in which Tom

had noted down the details of each day’s work among the ruins, along with the weather and anything unusual in that routine of their life. . . . To St. Peter this plain account was almost beautiful, because of the stupidities it avoided and the things it did not say. If words had cost money, Tom couldn’t have used them more sparingly. (238)

I would suggest that it is not merely the austerity of Tom’s prose that St. Peter admires (though we may locate a wink to Cather’s own narrative plain-spokenness here). Rather, the diary’s gaps—“the things it did not say”—allow for a projective reading experience; the account, a narrative hole (or vacuole), also *contains* holes: holes that demand filling, and, as such, require a resumption of St. Peter’s creative abilities.

Upon closer consideration, “Tom Outland’s Story,” with all its detail, is pockmarked with blanks, with indications of incompleteness or deficiency: more than once Tom regrets his inability to portray the mesa “just as I saw it” (279). But we sense St. Peter does not require or even desire such descriptive accuracy. Thomas Carlyle’s essay “Biography” insists that “half the effect” of biography

depends on the object; on its being real, on its being really seen. The other half will depend on the observer; and the question now is: on what quality of observing, or of style in describing, does this so intense pictorial power depend? Often a slight circumstance contributes curiously to the result: some little, and perhaps to appearance accidental, feature is presented; a light-gleam, which instantaneously excites the mind, and urges it to complete the picture, and evolve the meaning thereof for itself.⁵³

Carlyle’s formulation seems appropriate here: half the magic of “Tom Outland’s Story” depends on its veracity, on “its being real”; but the other half depends on St. Peter, its “observer,” who must “complete the picture” begun by Tom. Thus Tom becomes an art object over which the erstwhile scholar may ruminate, a “Parthenon frieze” in his own right, and works, as such, to free

St. Peter from the cul-de-sac of an asymmetrical existence.⁵⁴ So the darkness of the novel is not as it originally appeared: it is generated not by the dreary futility of St. Peter's asymmetrical existence but by the problematic realization that this asymmetry can be righted only through Tom Outland's death—through his conversion from human being to “glittering idea” (94).⁵⁵

But that is Tom Outland's “picturesque shipwreck”; what, finally, of St. Peter's? We recall from his initial proposal the suggestion that it would have been best for him and Lillian to have been shipwrecked together and thus captured at the height of their youthful love. But when St. Peter returns to the maritime fantasy later, it has undergone a substantial revision:

That night, after he was in bed, among unaccustomed surroundings and a little wakeful, St. Peter still played with the idea of a picturesque shipwreck, and he cast about for the particular occasion he would have chosen for such a finale. Before he went to sleep he found the very day, but his wife was not in it. Indeed, nobody was in it but himself, and a weather-dried little sea captain from the Hautes-Pyrenees, half a dozen spry seamen, and a line of gleaming snow peaks, agonizingly high and sharp, along the southern coast of Spain. (78–79)

The image is picturesque, all right, but the romance it presents is not the romance of two young lovers; rather, it is a romance of the sort Ishmael experiences—an all-male romance, a romance of maritime adventure. So the novel does contain a “stout sea tale” (or at least the miniaturized suggestion of one), if in the most unlikely of spaces: it is captured inside the still-roving mind of a quietly aging professor, and thus is that mind rehabilitated and made habitable.

Godfrey St. Peter will not write eight academic volumes on *Adventures on the Mediterranean*, but no matter. He has returned, in his imagination, to his beloved Spain. He has created a full cast of adventurers to join him, compatriots with whom his relations will never sour, from whom he will never “fall out”; his “weather-dried” sea captain recalls the ancient, everlasting Mother Eve. And the crew will sail forever: in this fantasy of a “picturesque shipwreck,” there is no shipwreck. Rather, St. Peter conjures the “very day” on which a shipwreck occurs and isolates the moment just before impact: his imagination teeters on the edge of the “agonizingly high and sharp” cliffs, but they do not collide. He has loosed the amber-bound fly, but still it hangs in midair; he has created in his mind another Cliff City, one which, like the original, is “isolated, cut off . . . working out [its] destiny,” but one which is improved upon by imagination, by the fantastic manipulation of time (198). Dr. Crane's work involves “delicate experiments that had to do with determining the extent of space”; St. Peter's “delicate experiments” actually *expand* the extent of space, by expanding the reaches of his mind to encompass places his body

cannot access (141). The professor's imaginative voyage, like his imaginative Tom Outland, is eternally picturesque, in spite of, or perhaps because of, its never being shipwrecked; here, in this apparent novel of immobility, is the migratory consciousness at its finest.

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Notes

1. Cather, *The Professor's House* (1925; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1990), p. 20. Subsequent citations to this edition of the novel are noted parenthetically.

2. Melville, *Moby-Dick* (1851; rpt. New York: Norton, 2001), p. 4.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

4. Though Cather's narrative plain-spokenness is often mistaken for "readerliness," her novels often resist narrative conventions and expectations. As Jo Ann Middleton has observed, her novels are peppered with "vacuoles," which "manipulate the reader through absences . . . that are nevertheless full of meaning" (*Willa Cather's Modernism: A Study of Style and Technique* [London: Associated Univ. Presses, 1990], p. 11).

5. Judith Fryer describes the trauma of St. Peter's move thusly: "The problem that [St. Peter] is faced with, as the novel opens on the day of moving from one house to another, is that of displacement, or disharmony, both in his world and in his own nature. A product of his time and place—America in the early 1920s—he is, like his contemporaries, expatriated intellectuals and imagined characters who people an increasingly alienating wasteland, out of touch with both" (*Felicitous Space: The Imaginative Structures of Edith Wharton and Willa Cather* [Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1986], p. 304).

6. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 137.

7. Cather, *The World and the Parish*, ed. William Curtin (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1970), p. 277.

8. Fryer, p. 302.

9. Laura Winters, *Willa Cather: Landscape and Exile* (London: Associated Univ. Presses, 1993), p. 44.

10. Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (1915; rpt. Boston: Mariner Books, 1983), p. 202. Bachelard equates "spatial immensity" with "a philosophical category of daydream" (p. 183). We may also think of Gertrude Stein, who insists that "only flat land a great deal of flat land is connected with the human mind" (*The Geographical History of America* [New York: Random House, 1936], p. 87).

11. We should recall E. M. Forster's famous distinction between "flat" and "round" characters. When the world of the novel is "flattened," it is, in the narrative sense, reduced to a lesser degree of reality; so too is the "flattened" Godfrey St. Peter.

12. Middleton, p. 103.

13. Janis Stout, *Through the Window, Out the Door: Women's Narratives of Departure* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 1998, p. 79; Deborah Carlin, *Cather, Canon, and the Politics of Reading* (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1992), p. 7.

14. *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters*, ed. L. Brent Lohke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), p. 72.

15. While contemporary understandings tend to conceive of Cather as a westward-ho sort of author, her novels also contain plenty of east-goers: Jim Burden and Niel Herbert head to Harvard, Thea Kronborg and Lucy Gayheart to Chicago. It is the fact of their going that is most significant, not the direction in which they go.

16. Philip Fisher, *Still the New World: American Literature in a Culture of Destruction* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), p. 171.

17. Cather, *Shadows on the Rock* (1931; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 130.
18. Joseph Urgo, *Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1995), p. 17.
19. Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1953), p. 48.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
21. Cather, *Lucy Gayheart* (1935; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 3.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 20.
24. *Ibid.*, 3. Indeed, the act of relocation may so dissociated from its own directionality that even the least appealing destinations are whitewashed: Claude Wheeler, having arrived at the brink of his own death on the battlefield, finds even in the trenches that his "journey down, reviewed from here, seemed beautiful." Cather, *One of Ours* (1922; rpt. New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 326.
25. Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, p. 40.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
27. Here we sense a hint of autobiography: in a 1913 interview with the *Philadelphia Record*, Cather said of her own childhood relocation (from Virginia to Nebraska), "I thought I should go under" (*Willa Cather in Person*, p. 10).
28. Cather, *The Song of the Lark*, p. 139; *One of Ours*, p. 116.
29. We may also think of Malcolm Cowley, who writes in *Exile's Return*, "It often seems to me that our years in school and after school, in college and later in the army, might be regarded as a long process of deracination. Looking backward, I feel that our whole training was involuntarily directed toward destroying whatever roots we had in the soil, toward eradicating our local and regional peculiarities, toward making us homeless citizens of the world" (*Exile's Return* [New York: Viking Press, 1951], p. 27).
30. The two do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. Lillian St. Peter has also fallen out of love (which somehow surprises her husband, who, upon realizing the mutuality of their estrangement, exclaims, "You, you too?" in "amazement"), but she has *not* fallen out of "all domestic and social relations" (78). On the contrary, she works to fill that relational void—and she does so, somewhat bizarrely, with her sons-in-law, for whom "she had begun the game of being a woman all over again. She dressed for them, planned for them, schemed in their interests" (64). St. Peter marvels that her strategy is "splendid," since Lillian will not "have to face a stretch of boredom between being a young woman and a young grandmother"; and yet, he cannot map his own social imagination onto his wife's (65). The professor's "falling out" is total.
31. The text is explicit in its spatialization of "human relations"; as St. Peter is seated next to Lillian, it occurs to him that "the heart of another is a dark forest, always, no matter how close it has been to one's own" (78).
32. In the narrative sense, both the "fly in amber" and the "picturesque shipwreck" suggest *tableau*, in which the moment of action is suspended in freeze-frame.
33. The earlier phases of St. Peter's work were less celebrated—indeed, "for all the interest the first three volumes awoke in the world, he might as well have dropped them into Lake Michigan"—but St. Peter's "ardour" for his project is admirably unattached to its critical reception: "St. Peter hadn't, he could honestly say, cared a whoop—not in those golden days. When the whole plan of his narrative was coming clearer and clearer all the time, when he could feel his hand rowing easier with his material, when all the foolish conventions about that kind of writing were falling away and his relation with his work was becoming every day more simple, natural, and happy,—he cared as little as the Spanish Adventurers themselves what Professor So-and-So thought about them" (22–23). St. Peter seems to be the ideal scholar, one whose work is governed not by the responses it receives but by the turns it produces in his own mind. We will find an equally independent scholar in Tom Outland, who plants himself "under a cedar" in the Cliff

City for intense and intensely solitary study, happily memorizing passages of Virgil to recite to himself (228).

34. We find a similar type of symmetry in the story of Pheidippides, the Athenian herald who, after running 150 miles in two days, returns to Marathon to deliver in one word the news of Greece's victory over Persia—and to die immediately after. Like Tom Outland's, his represents a symmetrical fulfillment of human purpose: Pheidippides completes his great work and lingers not one moment longer.

35. Of course this suicide attempt, if we think of it in these terms, is a passive one: "The thing to do was to get up and open the window. But suppose he did not get up? . . . He hadn't lifted his hand against himself—was he required to lift it for himself?" (252).

36. Keats, *Complete Poems* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 553.

37. Urgo, p. 31.

38. Urgo, p. 33.

39. Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 367.

40. Urgo, p. 35.

41. Cather, *On Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art* (1949; rpt. Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2006), p. 31.

42. Melville, p. 5; Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854; rpt. New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 335.

43. Cather, *On Writing*, 32.

44. Tellingly, Tom and Roddy read *Robinson Crusoe* and *Gulliver's Travels*, two archetypal adventure novels, which they "never tired of" (167).

45. Winters, p. 47.

46. Still, Winters is absolutely right to identify the Cliff City as Tom's. St. Peter does visit, but his experience there is touristic. He goes not to stake his own expedition, to have an original experience of the mesa, but rather to retread Tom's steps.

47. Cather, *O Pioneers!* (1913; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1992), p. 63.

48. "[Latour] yet heard every stroke of the Ave Maria bell, marveling to hear it rung correctly. . . . Full, clear, with something bland and suave, each note floated through the air like a globe of silver. Before the nine strokes were done Rome faded, and behind it he sensed something Eastern, with palm trees,—Jerusalem, perhaps, though he had never been there. Keeping his eyes closed, he cherished for a moment this sudden, pervasive sense of the East" (Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* [1927; rpt. New York: Vintage, 1990], p. 43).

49. We cannot ignore the suggestiveness of Tom's surname, then, since he and his story become for St. Peter an outlying space—an "outland"—which may be seen from a "square window" in his everyday life. It is no wonder that "the name seemed to suit the boy exactly" (97).

50. Urgo, p. 28.

51. Cather, *O Pioneers!*, p. 25.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 105–06.

53. Carlyle, "Biography," *Fraser's Magazine*, 5 (April 1832), 258.

54. The formulation seems appropriate; as Cather wrote, "What has art ever been but escape?" (*On Writing*, 18).

55. When Rosamond proposes a "little study" for her father at her new home, insisting, "I have such good ideas for it," St. Peter asks her to "keep it just an idea—it's better so. Lots of things are" (47). I would suggest that the "glittering idea" of Tom Outland is among those "lots of things."