The Benda Illustrations to My Ántonia: Cather's "Silent" Supplement to Jim Burden's Narrative

Author(s): J'ean Schwind


Published by: Modern Language Association

Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/462200

Accessed: 11-07-2018 19:03 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://about.jstor.org/terms

*Modern Language Association* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *PMLA*
The Benda Illustrations to *My Ántonia*: Cather’s “Silent” Supplement to Jim Burden’s Narrative

I

As Jim Burden comes to the end of his story about the “central figure” of his childhood and “all that her name recalls,” he briefly describes the personal memoirs that Ántonia herself has kept for over twenty years (*Ántonia*, introd.). The most important difference between Ántonia’s account of the past and Jim’s is immediately apparent. Less comfortable with language than is her Harvard-educated friend, Ántonia preserves the “characters of her girlhood” in pictures rather than in words. Once fluent in English, Ántonia has “forgot” her adopted language since her marriage to Anton Cuzak and doesn’t “often talk it any more” (335). She has not forgotten her history, however, and the “succession of pictures” that Ántonia shares with Jim on the first night of his visit to the Cuzak farm wordlessly confirms the details of Jim’s long narrative. In images as sharply defined as “the old woodcuts of one’s first primer,” the “incommunicable past” of Jim’s story is preserved as a vital “family legend” in the Cuzak household:

Ántonia brought out a big boxful of photographs: she and Anton in their wedding clothes, holding hands; her brother Ambrosch and his very fat wife, who had a farm of her own, and who bossed her husband, I was delighted to hear; the three Bohemian Marys and their large families.

The most interesting pictures in Ántonia’s collection follow photographs of Lena Lingard and the Harlings, and Ántonia shows them as the climax to her account. In a “tintype of two men, uncomfortably seated, with an awkward-looking boy in baggy clothes standing between them” and in a photograph of “a tall youth in striped trousers and a straw hat, trying to look easy and jaunty,” Jim Burden, the narrative voice of *My Ántonia*, is embodied for the first time.

Cather’s original 1918 introduction to the novel emphasizes the importance of Ántonia’s pictures. Of critical importance to a proper understanding of *My Ántonia*, this introduction serves the same purpose as “The Custom House” preface to *The Scarlet Letter*: presenting the narrative that follows as an independent artifact, the authorial “I” speaks as the editor and publisher of another writer’s manuscript. At the opening of *My Ántonia*, “Cather” happens to meet Jim Burden—an old friend who now works as a lawyer for “one of the great Western railways”—on a train. Reminiscing about the people and places of their past as they cross the plains of Iowa, Cather and Jim continually return to a “central figure” who summarizes the “whole adventure of [their] childhood” in the West. When Jim suddenly wonders aloud why she has “never written anything about Ántonia,” Cather responds with a proposal:

I told him I had always felt that other people—he himself, for one—knew her much better than I. I was ready, however, to make an agreement with him; I would set down on paper all that I remembered of Ántonia if he would do the same. We might, in this way, get a picture of her.

(1918, xii-xiii)

Jim enthusiastically agrees to the plan, and “months afterward” he delivers his manuscript to Cather at her New York apartment. Recounting Jim’s proud delivery of his “thing about Ántonia,” Cather concludes with what appears to be an admission of personal failure. Forced to confess that her own account of Ántonia has “not gone beyond a few straggling notes,” Cather replies to Jim’s parting advice with a remarkably ambiguous disclaimer:

“Read it as soon as you can,” he said, rising, “but don’t let it influence your own story.”

My own story was never written, but the following narrative is Jim’s manuscript, substantially as he brought it to me.

(1918, xiv)
The meaning of Cather's crucial editorial qualification—My Ántonia is only "substantially" Jim Burden's manuscript—is clarified by the most important suppressed passage of the 1918 introduction. While Jim's memories of Ántonia ultimately take a narrative form ("I simply wrote down pretty much all that her name recalls to me"
[1918, xiv]; "I simply wrote down what of herself and myself and other people Ántonia's name recalls to me"
[1926]), for Cather Ántonia's name immediately evokes pictures rather than words: "To speak her name was to call up pictures of people and places, to set a quiet drama going in one's brain" (1918, xii). Cather stresses her pictorial memories of Ántonia in the proposal that constitutes the central fiction of the 1918 preface. The goal of their joint account, Cather tells Jim, will be to "get a picture" of Ántonia.

The "pictures of people and places" that shape Cather's memory of Ántonia anticipate Ántonia's tintypes and photographs in a way that directs our attention to a critically neglected aspect of My Ántonia: the novel's illustrations. That the printed text of Jim's manuscript incorporates a series of pictures strikingly like the "old woodcuts" recalled by Ántonia's photographs explains Cather's cryptic description of My Ántonia as only "substantially" Jim Burden's story. The pictorial imagery that identifies Jim's "editor" with Ántonia and distinguishes the "editor" from the author she introduces suggests that the novel's illustrations are Cather's most important editorial addition to the "substance" of Jim's narrative. Not only does Cather overtly insist on her pictorial imagination in the 1918 introduction ("To speak [Ántonia's] name was to call up pictures . . . to set a quiet drama going in one's brain"), but Jim's literary friend also never promises to write about Ántonia when she proposes the joint account, further emphasizing the importance of the novel's illustrations. Agreeing only to "set down on paper" all her memories of Ántonia, Cather leaves the matter of her artistic medium open in a way that invites us to take the pictures of My Ántonia as fulfilling her promise to provide a separate account of Jim's heroine.

The implicit assertion of Cather's 1918 introduction and of the closing scene dominated by Ántonia's "boxful of pictures"—that My Ántonia's pictures are not expendable decorations but an essential part of the novel—is made explicit in Cather's correspondence with Ferris Greenslet, her editor at Houghton Mifflin. The publishing history that can be reconstructed from Houghton Mifflin records of My Ántonia clearly reveals that Cather not only commissioned W. T. Benda's illustrations for her fourth novel but did so in the face of considerable opposition from Greenslet and others. For over twenty years, from the time she started planning the drawings with Benda in 1917 until 1938, when Greenslet finally promised in writing that all future editions of My Ántonia would contain the original illustrations, Cather waged a constant battle with her editor and Houghton Mifflin's publicity and art departments over the issue of illustrating My Ántonia.

The grounds of Houghton Mifflin's opposition to Benda's simple pen-and-ink line drawings varied from year to year. In 1917 the publicity department argued that company money would be better spent on a single substantial wash drawing that could be used as a frontispiece and on promotional posters (TS. 62). When Richard Scaife—a director on Houghton's publicity staff—finally (and rather condescendingly) agreed to print Benda's "little sketches," he refused to pay more than $150 for them, which was the going rate for a single conventional frontispiece (TS. 84). The stingy Houghton Mifflin art budget forced Cather to scale down her original scheme for twelve drawings to the present eight (TSS. 48, 62). Twenty years after Cather's initial battle with Houghton Mifflin over her "little" pictures, a new threat arose. In 1937 Ferris Greenslet proposed to tap the market for more expensive gift books with a deluxe edition of My Ántonia illustrated with color plates by Grant Wood. Cather's response was an emphatic letter insisting that plain Ántonia must be saved from flashy color illustrations in general and from Wood's illustrations in particular (TSS. 230, 354). She concluded with a plea for the permanent retention of the Benda plates. Throughout her wrangles with Greenslet, Scaife, and others, Cather consistently defended the Benda illustrations as an indispensable part of her text. When Houghton Mifflin dropped the Benda illustrations in a cheap 1930 reprint of My Ántonia (forgetting, however, to delete "with illustrations by W. T. Benda" from the novel's title page), Cather considered the book an unauthorized edition (TS. 199).

The publishing history of My Ántonia is important because it reinforces the central fiction of the novel itself. Just as the fiction of My Ántonia
makes “Cather” responsible for illustrating the manuscript that she introduces and edits, so the actual history of the illustrated text testifies to Cather’s exercising authority over the novel’s carefully planned pictorial supplement. Cather’s letters reveal that she not only independently commissioned the Benda pictures but acted as artistic director of the project. At the same time that she was writing her introduction to My Ántonia in late 1917, Cather was closely supervising Benda’s illustrations to the novel. From approving Benda’s preliminary sketches to making final decisions about where to place the pictures within her printed text, Cather governed the process of illustrating My Ántonia quite autocratically. She determined both the old-fashioned “woodcut” style and the separate subjects of the eight-plate series and reserved the right to reject any work that displeased her.

The difference between Benda’s typical magazine work and his Ántonia drawings indicates Cather’s authority over the novel’s illustrations. Primarily a decorative painter and an illustrator for magazines like Cosmopolitan, Century, Vanity Fair, and Scribner’s, W. T. (Władysław Theodor) Benda probably first met Cather while she was working at McClure’s. Unlike the plain pen-and-ink sketches of My Ántonia, Benda’s usual pictures in Vanity Fair and other popular magazines are fashionable charcoal drawings. Intricately detailed and reproduced in halftones, these illustrations have a three-dimensional depth and a mimetic sophistication that are conspicuously lacking in the stark black-on-white sketches—with the bold linearity of “old woodcuts”—in My Ántonia.4 Significantly, Cather’s interest in Benda was provoked not by his conventionally stylish and highly finished magazine pieces but by what were seemingly his most unimportant and minor works. In a letter to Richard Scaife, Cather explains that her plan to illustrate My Ántonia was inspired by Benda’s work in a novel by Jacob Riis, The Old Town (TS, 63). Benda did two sorts of drawings for Riis: framed, full-page illustrations executed in charcoal (Benda’s favorite medium) and reproduced in halftones on glossy paper and much smaller pen drawings (“head-and-tail pieces”) interspersed between the lines and in the margins of Riis’s text (Riis 21, 104). In the relative artlessness of Benda’s plain head-and-tail pieces, Cather saw the perfect, minimal art for depicting her artless Nebraska plains.

Yet if Houghton Mifflin records clearly establish Cather’s authority over the illustrations to My Ántonia and stress the importance of her pictorial supplement to Jim Burden’s text, they also raise a troublesome question about Cather’s written supplement to Jim’s memoir in the novel’s introduction. When Cather revised the introduction to My Ántonia in 1926, she dropped the sections of the 1918 version that most pointedly insist on the importance of the novel’s pictorial imagery. Both Cather’s description of the “pictures of people and places” evoked by her memories of Ántonia and her final editorial hedge (that the following narrative is only “substantially” Jim’s manuscript as he delivered it to Cather) are deleted in 1926. More significantly, “Cather” does not this time propose an artistic partnership to “get a picture” of Ántonia. A major figure in the 1918 introduction, Cather-the-author virtually disappears in the revised introduction. Instead of the professional writer who inspires Jim to write an account of Ántonia and promises to “set down” one of her own, “Cather” is now merely an editor explaining how the manuscript of an old friend came into her possession. When in the 1926 introduction Cather and Jim accidentally meet on a western train, Jim has already been writing about Ántonia for some time to amuse himself on “long trips across the country.” Cather tells Jim she’d like to read his account, and Jim agrees to show it to her “if it were ever finished.” The 1926 introduction concludes roughly as the 1918 version does, with Jim delivering his manuscript to Cather “months afterward.”

If, as I propose to argue, Benda’s illustrations provide an important subtext that illuminates Jim Burden’s words, why does Cather in her revised introduction eliminate all references to pictures and to her pictorial imagination and effectively mute her editorial contribution to the “substance” of Jim’s text? The Houghton Mifflin records are once again revealing. While Cather herself was never satisfied with the introduction to My Ántonia (she admitted on several occasions that the introduction was the only part of the novel she found tedious to write and acknowledged that her prose sounded forced), the impetus for the 1926 revision came from Ferris Greenslet.5 Greenslet pressed Cather to revise the first edition of Ántonia for both economic and aesthetic reasons. Houghton Mifflin was planning a more elaborately bound and expensive edition.

Jean Schwind

53
for 1926, and Greenslet convinced Cather that the moment was ripe for making some long-discussed changes in her text. If Houghton Mifflin could promote the 1926 reissue as a definitive new edition, Greenslet argued, immediate and long-range sales would be much greater than for a simple reprinting (TSS. 270, 273). If Greenslet had one eye on his corporate ledgers, he also had an eye critically focused on My Ántonia. He had long felt that the introduction to the novel destroyed the “classic outline” of Jim Burden’s first-person narrative (TS. 273). Essentially, he objected that Cather’s introduction was superfluous: the detailed accounts of Jim’s loveless marriage to “Genevieve Whitney” and his escapist “Western dreams” of boyhood freedom and adventure make Jim’s unsuccessful adult life unnecessarily explicit. Insisting that the unhappiness of Jim’s later life is implicit throughout the last book of the novel, Greenslet advised Cather to dispense with the introduction (TS. 273).

Although she disagreed with Greenslet about dropping the introduction entirely, Cather agreed with his primary reservations about it—it lacked subtlety and especially made the failure of Jim’s personal life far too explicit. That Cather took her editor’s advice seriously is evident in the major excisions of the 1926 Ántonia. Recognizing Cather’s reluctance to eliminate the introduction, Greenslet recommended two sizable cuts. The paragraph describing Jim’s wife and her eastern chic should be dropped (“I do not like his wife” is sufficient editorial comment, Greenslet noted; the rest should be left to the reader’s imagination). Greenslet further advised that the following paragraph about Jim’s persistent romanticism be extensively blue-penciled (TS. 273). Cather not only agreed to the pruning that Greenslet suggested but made additional cuts of her own; together they eliminated more than a third of the original preface.

The difference between the opening lines of the 1918 and 1926 editions suggests the principal effect of Cather’s revisions. In 1918 Cather introduces her narrator as “James Quayle Burden”: “Last summer I happened to be crossing the plains of Iowa in a season of intense heat, and it was my good fortune to have for a traveling companion James Quayle Burden—Jim Burden, as we still call him in the West” (1918, ix). Evidently feeling her original opening too heavy-handed in anticipating the immaturity (“James” is still “Jim”) and suppressed anxieties (Quayle=quail) that color Jim’s narrative, Cather wisely allows Jim’s name to speak for itself in 1926: “Last summer, in a season of intense heat, Jim Burden and I happened to be crossing Iowa on the same train.” The same urge to make Jim’s burdensome adulthood more subtly implicit at the outset of My Ántonia explains Cather’s reconsideration of the introduction’s central fiction. In 1926 responsibility for the genesis of My Ántonia significantly shifts from Cather to Jim. While originally Cather and her proposal for a collaborative “picture” of Ántonia inspire Jim’s memoir, in the revised text Jim has long been taking refuge from his adult life in the history of his childhood past. The account of Ántonia that Jim has been writing “from time to time” on long train trips delicately compensates for the passages about Jim’s “brilliant marriage” and unrealized “Western dreams” that Cather cut at Greenslet’s suggestion. Unlike the manuscript described in the first introduction—produced by Jim in a burst of enthusiasm between his meeting with Cather on the train and his arrival at her apartment several months later—the manuscript of the 1926 Ántonia—written “from time to time” over the years—testifies to a need for living in the past that betrays Jim’s present unhappiness.

If Cather’s 1926 revisions give the introduction a subtlety and psychological penetration that do justice to the novel proper, they also de-emphasize the importance of the Benda illustrations in My Ántonia. Since “Cather” no longer promises to “set down” her own memories of Ántonia, the 1926 edition does not explicitly invite us to consider the novel’s illustrations as Cather’s editorial supplement to Jim’s manuscript. Yet in dropping the fiction of a coauthored Ántonia, Cather strengthens the fiction of her editorial authority over Jim’s work. Cather speaks exclusively as Jim’s editor in 1926; she is no longer both Jim’s editor and the literary muse who inspires him to write. By stressing her editorial authority, Cather simultaneously suggests that Jim’s narrative is inadequate (hinting that Jim’s “romantic” vision of the past is extremely partial and in need of correction) and identifies herself as the editor and friend who will compensate for Jim Burden’s deficiencies.

The importance of “Cather’s” editorial role in My Ántonia—and the extension of her editorial voice beyond the introduction—is immediately
Jean Schwind emphasized on the opening page of Jim’s story, where “Cather” speaks in a footnote. Cather’s note about the pronunciation of Antonia’s name not only asserts her editorial presence in the novel proper, but it also suggests the nature of her continued additions to the “substance” of Jim’s story. The detailed instructions that Cather sent to Houghton Mifflin regarding the layout of the opening pages of My Antonia indicate the importance of her editorial intrusion on the first page of book 1. Jim’s story must directly follow her introduction, Cather told Greenslet, and white pages for “My Antonia” and “Book I: The Shimerdas” should be omitted (TS. 77). Cather’s opening layout in the 1918 edition dramatically juxtaposes Jim’s final act of authority or authorship—he amends the title of his manuscript by adding the prefix “My” to “Antonia”—and Cather’s first editorial annotation. On the one hand, Jim’s possessive prefix insists on the idiosyncrasy and conventionality of his account. “My Antonia” implies the cultural framework of Jim’s Virginia homeland—where women are denied independence by the chivalric codes of male proprietors. Cather’s footnote, on the other hand, is inspired by a concern for “getting a picture” of the unique cultural identity and (by Old Dominion standards) the “masculine” authority that distinguishes Antonia from the transplanted southern belles in the West: “The Bohemian name Antonia is strongly accented on the first syllable, like the English Anthony...” (1918, 1; 1926, 3).

Emphasizing Antonia’s individual autonomy as it does, Cather’s note to the opening line of My Antonia responds to the subordinating effect of Jim’s possessive “my” with a directness that preserves the fictional intertextuality of the 1918 Antonia cooperatively “set down” by Jim and Cather. Like the 1918 introduction, Cather’s single footnote invites us to read My Antonia as the collaborative effort of Jim Burden and his “editor.” Reading My Antonia as Cather presents it—as a critically edited or “supplemented” text—thus necessarily entails a serious consideration of the novel’s visual textual supplements. To read Cather’s story, we must read “Cather’s” story. We must go beyond Jim Burden’s narrative and examine the “quiet drama” that Jim’s editor provides to “get a picture” of Antonia.

II

The illustrations of My Ántonia describe an artistic development that sharply counterpoints the “little circle” of Jim’s narrative (illus. 1–9). Benda’s “quiet drama” in pictures is in one crucial respect like Jim Burden’s narrative: it is prefaced by the editor of My Antonia. Just as Jim’s text is introduced by “editor” Cather, Benda’s series of eight plates has an important pictorial prelude or preface in the editorial logotype on the title page of My Antonia. That the pictorial drama of My Ántonia begins on Houghton Mifflin’s title page rather than with Benda’s first plate is suggested by Jim’s study of the book Cather quotes in her epigraph, Vergil’s Georgics. Stargazing on a warm spring night in Lincoln, Jim is rather unromantically recalled to his studies by Venus:

My window was open, and the earthy wind blowing through made me indolent. . . . in the utter clarity of the western slope, the evening star hung like a lamp suspended by silver chains—like the lamp engraved upon
Illus. 2. Plate 1 of *My Ántonia*. Group portrait of the Shimerda family.

Illus. 3. Plate 2 of *My Ántonia*. Mr. Shimerda with gun.

Illus. 4. Plate 3 of *My Ántonia*. Bohemian woman gathering mushrooms.

Illus. 5. Plate 4 of *My Ántonia*. Jake Marpole carrying a Christmas tree on horseback.
Illus. 6. Plate 5 of *My Ántonia*. Ántonia plowing.

Illus. 7. Plate 6 of *My Ántonia*. Ántonia and Jim watching the sunrise.


Illus. 9. Plate 8 of *My Ántonia*. Ántonia driving cattle in a blizzard.

The title-page engravings of Jim's Latin textbooks direct our attention to the classical logotype on the title page of *My Ántonia*, a miniature portrait of Arcadian Pan (an image that, though "given" by the publisher, is exploited by Cather, who adds a classical motto to the title page to emphasize the importance of its engraved Pan [illus. 1]). The pictures of *My Ántonia*—progressing from the title-page Pan, who plays his pipe within the shelter of an Arcadian bower, to the final portrait of Antonia bent against the high winds of a prairie blizzard—vividly dramatize the evolution of the new, antipastoral art demanded by the stark Nebraska flatlands. A land not yet "a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made," the new world that Antonia Shimerda and Jim Burden enter on the same train requires a radical revision of old-world conventions and cultural traditions. The repudiation of Arcadian Pan in the graphic art of *My Ántonia* points to the wider implications of Jim's note about Nebraska's "down in the kitchen" revision of what had always been "out in the kitchen' at home" in Virginia: a world with "no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields" subverts not only pastoral landscape conventions but conventions of language, architecture, and human relations as well. Compelling owls to live a "degraded" subterranean existence because of the lack of trees and promoting Bohemia's most "highly esteemed" hunting target—badgers—to a safer status of friendship ("I won't let the men harm him," Jim's grandmother says of the badger who raids her chicken coops. "In a new country a body feels friendly to the animals" [17]), Nebraska thoroughly confounds the "due order and decorum" of both Virginia and Europe.

If the illustrations to *My Ántonia* depart from the classical conventions of its title-page Arcadia in order to depict unbucolic Nebraska, the text of the novel announces Jim's failure to respond creatively to his "new world" (3). Throughout *My Ántonia* it is evident that Jim suffers from the same poverty of imagination that makes Mr. Shimerda deny the possibility of civilized life outside "the old world he had left so far behind" (86). Like Antonia's father, Jim cannot participate in shaping a new world because he remains "fix[ed] . . . to the last" in old-world ideals (96).

Although Jim condemns the "tyranny" of custom as the most deadly sin of Black Hawk, he implicitly admits his own contribution to it by the virulence of his indictment of the "conventional" town and its "guarded mode of existence" (201-19). While he recognizes that the imported southern standards of "respectability" and "refinement" upheld by Black Hawk's transplanted Virginians are as incongruous as the appeals to noblesse oblige and chivalry made in Lincoln by Ordinsky, the Polish violin teacher in love with Lena Lingard, Jim's rebellion against these outdated codes of gentility never moves beyond self-indulgent brooding. He is finally governed by the same feeling—a "respect for respectability stronger than any desire"—that he contemptuously describes as the chief characteristic of Black Hawk's "young man of position," and Jim's complicity in the town's "wasteful, consuming process of life" is nowhere more apparent than in his relationship with Antonia. Jim's failure to challenge the "stupid" cultural prejudices of his town is summarized by his last word as an author. Amending the title of his manuscript to "My Ántonia," Jim simultaneously reaffirms the patriarchal authority of "gentee!" Mr. Shimerda ("Who could say so little, yet managed to say so much when he exclaimed, 'My Ántonia!' ") and confirms the ethnic hierarchies of "refined" Black Hawk. (In the "good old plantation" tradition, Jim speaks of the "hired girls" of the town as if they were the property of their employers. His references to "the Harlings' Tony," "the Marshalls' Anna," and "the Gardeners' Tiny" preserve "the spirit if not the fact" of the d'Arnault "Big House" served by a "buxom young Negro wench" [185].)

The social conventions that Jim honors by prefixing the possessive adjective to his title determine the entire course of his romance with Antonia. Jim not only respects the limits that deny Black Hawk's "young man of position" more than a "jolly frolic" with the country girls but continually tries to remake Antonia in the image of the anemic "daughters of the well-to-do," who embody the town's ideal of pure womanhood (198). Threatened by Antonia's pride in her "manly" strength and taste for outdoor work, Jim joins forces with his grandmother to "save" Antonia from "chores a girl ought not to
do” (126). Jim's brutal description of Ántonia at the plow informs his objections to her “rough ways”:

. . . Ántonia came up the big south draw with her team. How much older she had grown in eight months! . . . She kept her sleeves rolled up all day, and her arms and throat were burned as brown as a sailor's. Her neck came up strongly out of her shoulders, like the bole of a tree out of the turf. One sees that draught-horse neck among the peasant women in all old countries. (122)

As Jim sees it, Ántonia's claim to a “man's” work is more than a violation of Black Hawk's sense of propriety: it is a violation of human nature. Repeatedly warning Ántonia that she is being “spoiled” by heavy field work, Jim attempts to subdue the “strong independent nature” that distinguishes Ántonia from the town's disembodied “cherubs” (199). Fastidiously disturbed by the beads of perspiration that gather on Ántonia's upper lip “like a little mustache” as she picks vegetables with him in the garden (138) and by the way she eats with noisy relish “like a man” rather than with nibbling female delicacy, Jim is repulsed by the unladylike independence that attracts him to Ántonia in the first place. Although he ridicules the notions of “refined” femininity that require the young women of Black Hawk to live like cripples (because “physical exercise was thought rather inelegant for the daughters of well-to-do families,” they travel even the shortest distances by horse and buggy), Jim nonetheless worries that Ántonia is losing the “nice ways” that distinguish ladies from laborers (125).

In her introduction to My Ántonia, “Cather” hints that Benda's “pictures of people and places” provide a needed corrective to the “romantic” bias of Jim's story. To understand the effect of this pictorial corrective, it is necessary to understand the faulty literary vision that the illustrations are expressly designed to offset. The romantic excesses of Jim's narrative constitute an artistic failure that mirrors Jim's personal failure to accept Ántonia's challenge to Old South notions of “a lady's privilege” (136). In the same way that Jim's life is tyrannized by “refined” social conventions, the art of his story is dominated by the stale literary conventions of popular and pastoral romances.

Traditional estimates of My Ántonia as a “large-minded” celebration of the American West marked by the “yea-saying vision of Whitman” ignore the descriptive clichés, stock characters, and exaggerated Vergilian posturings that pervade Jim Burden's debut as an author (Brown 156; Woodress 179).6 Contrary to Jim's modest claim that his “thing about Ántonia . . . hasn't any form,” My Ántonia is shaped by the forms of two extremely convention-bound literary genres, the pastoral elegy and the dime-novel western. As Robert Taft has noted, cheap dime novels played an important part in the western migrations of the late nineteenth century. By 1884 (roughly the year Jim Burden journeys to Nebraska reading “a 'Life of Jesse James' ”), dime novels were being criticized in New York newspapers for breeding eastern discontent and for inspiring young men “to go west and be cowboys” (Taft 358). While the novel that Jim recalls as “the most satisfying book [he] ever read” may not have inspired his actual trip westward, since he is already en route west when Jake Marpole buys “Jesse James” for him from a railway vendor, it is undoubtedly a principal muse of his recreation of that journey in My Ántonia. The influence of Jim's favorite adventure stories is evident throughout his narrative, both in the specific details of his descriptions (Otto Fuchs, for instance, the hired hand on the Burden's farm, is presented by Jim as a “lively and ferocious” cowboy who “might have stepped out of the pages of 'Jesse James' ” [6]) and in the broader vision of “Bad Lands” untamed by civilized manners and laws that forms the backdrop of Jim's nostalgic “Western dreams” (370).

The classical studies that Lena Lingard interrupts when she visits Jim in Lincoln would seem to suggest that his “Jesse James” days are over. The particular chapter of Vergil that Jim is pondering when Lena enters his room, however, supports Lena's pointed greeting: “You seem the same . . . except you're a young man, now, of course” (266). The Jim studying Vergil in Lincoln is essentially “the same” boy who first traveled to Nebraska under the influence of Jesse James. That Lena finds Jim absorbed in book 3 of the Georgics points to the second muse of My Ántonia: Jesse James is assisted by Arcadian Pan. On the whole, Vergil's Georgics departs from the idyllic pastoral themes of his earlier works to provide practical advice to native Italian farmers. The four books of the Georgics separately treat four major rural enterprises: agriculture, viniculture, animal husbandry, and beekeeping. The book Jim
The Benda Illustrations to My Ántonia

considers the poet's "perfect utterance" is ironically the one where Vergil detours from the "new path" he blazes in the Georgics to carry his Muse from ideal Arcadia to real Mantua (Vergil 69). Discussing the care of flocks and herds, Vergil notably lapses into the pastoral mode of the Eclogues in Georgic 3. Bucolic shepherds momentarily supplant rustic farmers as an elegiac tone overwhelms Vergil's pragmatic advice about cattle breeding:

O streams and forests of Arcadian Pan!
All other subjects which could charm a mind
At leisure for a song, are they not staled
Even to vulgar ears?

Delay not long
The mating of your cattle, but supply
An oft succeeding offspring to the herd.
Life's first, best season soon takes flight away
From hapless, mortal creatures. (69, 72)

As Jim passes from the tutelage of Jake Marpole (the reader of "too many of them detective stories" who buys "Jesse James" for Jim) to that of Gaston Cleric (the classics scholar who directs Jim's college studies in Lincoln), the golden West of the dime novel is replaced by Vergil's golden Arcadia in Jim's romantic vision. Just as The Lives, Adventures, and Exploits of Frank and Jesse James celebrates the frontier outlaw unhindered by the restraints of society, so the classic pastoral laments the loss of precivilized Arcadian bliss. The natural antagonist of Arcadia's "first, best days" is the unnamed villain of the James boys' West: the responsibility and maturity of adult life.8

The strange combination of pastoral and dime-novel conventions that informs My Ántonia is thus not as eclectic as it first seems. "El Dorado"—the western lure that prompts Jesse's father to abandon his family on the first page of "Jesse James"—is a cattle-country Arcadia. Jim's art, unlike the art of W. T. Benda's "quiet drama" in pictures, never moves beyond the Arcadian Pan of Houghton Mifflin's title page and the opening line of Vergil's third Georgic. Throughout My Ántonia, Jim misrepresents his "new world!" because his narrative art is archaic, unrealistic, and unmodern. While the differences between Vergil's pastoral shepherds and America's dime-novel desperadoes are many, in the context of My Ántonia Vergil and Jesse James similarly explain Jim Burden's failure as a storyteller. Jim never manages to "get a picture" of Ántonia and her prairie life because his narrative art depends on irrelevant romantic conventions. The footloose lone rangers and "Wild West" outlawry of popular fiction like Jim's dime novel are as psychologically and sociologically remote from Antonia's world as Vergil's Arcadia is historically and culturally remote. Further reflecting a failure to invent the new forms demanded by a new world, Jim's narrative uses Homeric epithets (the "wine-coloured" sea of grass), epic similes (prairie winds recede like "defeated armies, retreating"); a sunset has the "exultation of victory, of triumphant ending, like a hero's death—heroes who died young and gloriously" [53, 40]), and stock pastoral laments about the "incommunicable past" (372). Critics who have objected to the racism of the novel's "pickaninny" portrait of Blind d'Arnault have failed to see that Jim's "docile and happy" black musician (192) is of a piece with Otto Fuchs (a western cowboy straight "out of the pages of 'Jesse James' ")

Faithful to the tradition of "satisfying" dime westerns, Jim's female types are limited to "Snow-White in the fairy tale" and the "reckless" heroine of Camille (215, 272). That both types endanger male autonomy—one through domestication, the other through seduction—is the school marm—chorus girl theme of Jim's many narrative digressions. The "revelation" that Jim experiences when he returns to the Georgics after Lena's visit makes the same point as the tale of the "two men who fed the bride to the wolves," Otto Fuchs's story about the "sorry trick" played on him by a mother of triplets, and the history of "Crazy Mary" Benson. Georgic 3, the immediate context of Jim's "precious" recognition of "the relation between girls like those [Lena, the Bohemian Marys, and the Danish laundresses] and the poetry of Virgil," digresses at length to warn readers of the need to curb "mad lust." Cautioning breeders that the "fair heifer," like the
Jean Schwind

"maiden fond and fair," saps male strength, Vergil's poetry "relates" to women like Lena as Jim's narrative does: negatively. Blanche Gelfant's wonderful summary of the moral lesson behind Jim's episodic stories—"the woman must go" (75)—applies equally well to his classical source:

... naught of discipline so fortifies
A powerful beast as that he be restrained
From joy of Venus and blind passion's goad,
Whether bull or stallion be thy care.
Therefore the bull is exiled and confined
In lonely fields. . .
Sight of his female wastes his strength away
By slow degrees, and bids him seek no more
Green pastures or cool woodlands; for her charm
Sweetly entices, and her wooers proud
In horn-locked duel the wild suit decide. (79)

The conventions that circumscribe Jim Burden and his narrative dramatically illuminate the invention of the novel's illustrations. The significance of My Antonia's pictorial supplement is most overtly suggested by the pictorial imagery within the "substance" of Jim's text. At both the beginning and the ending of My Antonia Jim Burden inadvertently identifies himself with Black Hawk's most avid collector of "desired forms and faces," the telegrapher who "nearly smoked himself to death" for the pictures of actresses and dancers on cigarette coupons (218). On his first Christmas in Nebraska, Jim compiles ads, holy cards, and colored lithographs cut from "good old family magazines" to make a picture book for Antonia's sister, Yulka. A frontispiece lithograph of "Napoleon Announcing the Divorce to Josephine" (yet another version of "the woman must go") introduces a collection of smaller "Sunday-school cards and advertising cards" from Jim's "old country" of Virginia (81). To the final scene in the Cuzak's parlor, Jim contributes pictures from an "old country" more distant than the East Coast. Pictures of Prague and Vienna hang in the background of the scene where Antonia shows Jim her family photograph collection. Both cityscapes are gifts from Jim, sent home to Antonia during his travels abroad.

"Napoleon Announcing the Divorce to Josephine" and the framed pictures in the Cuzak parlor effectively distinguish Jim from both Antonia and Benda, his central subject and his illustrator. While the authors of the novel's two "dramas" in pictures are artists of a new world, Jim Burden remains an "old world" art collector. Like the chain-smoking telegrapher, Jim is devoted to ideal "forms" that have nothing to do with Black Hawk realities.

A collection of outmoded forms and conventions, Jim's narrative is most aptly summarized by the metaphor Cather used to describe her own first novel, Alexander's Bridge: it is "very like what painters call a studio picture," a work marked by lessons of a master and by rigid adherence to established rules of composition ("My First Novels" 91). The art of Benda's pictorial drama essentially responds to Jim's studio piece with the assertion Cather would later articulate in "The Novel Déméublé" (1922): to describe a radically new world and the woman who embodies the "whole adventure" of growing up in it, the accumulated "furniture" of art—"all the meaningless reiterations . . . all the tired old patterns"—must be thrown out the window (51).

The "furniture" that Jim's editor-illustrator discards to "get a picture" of Antonia is defined most vividly by the opening and closing scenes of Benda's eight-plate series. The movement from Benda's opening family portrait of the Shimerdas to his final portrait of Antonia is marked by parallel developments in form and content. "Huddled together on the platform" of the Black Hawk railway station, the Shimerdas occupy the artistically constructed, measured space that is western art's principal piece of Renaissance "furniture" (illus. 2). Emphasizing the illusory depth of his framed space by his oblique angle of vision, Benda composes the figures in his nichelike enclosure in the classic triangular form of traditional holy family groups. The central figure of the composition is appropriately the moving force of the Shimerda family, Mrs. Shimerda. Hugging a tin box against her breast "as if it were a baby," Mrs. Shimerda is an old-world Madonna poised on the brink of a new virgin land that promises "much money [and] much land" for her sons and "much husband" for her daughters (90).

Mrs. Shimerda's tin-box "baby" ironically underscores the difference between the sacred tradition that Benda evokes in his triangular grouping and the secular worldliness of Mrs. Shimerda's maternal ambitions. Substituting the fiercely mundane Mamenka Shimerda for the heavenly mother of conventional Madonna and Child paintings, Benda prefigures the more radical revision of traditional iconography that distinguishes his fi-
Benda's final portrait of Antonia "driving her cattle homeward" in a December blizzard fundamentally redefines the conventional holy family evoked in plate 1. Dressed in "a man's long overcoat and boots, and a man's felt hat with a wide brim," her steps heavy with the weight of her advanced (and illegitimate) pregnancy, Antonia is a "lonesome" revision of the Shimerda group. Benda's final scene unites mother, father, and child in a single commanding figure. The "quiet drama" of My Ántonia thus achieves the redefinition of maternity that Lena Lingard insists on in guiding her brother's selection of monogrammed handkerchiefs. Like Lena's recommendation of "B for Berthe" rather than "M for Mother," Benda's final portrait of Antonia asserts the individual identity that Jim dilutes in the possessive prefix of his title.

The landscape surrounding Benda's new Madonna redefines by indefiniteness the pictorial space of plate 1. If the artistically controlled and mathematically "possessed" space of the railroad platform reflects Jim's appropriative title, the best text for the barely articulated landscape of Benda's last scene is Lena's response to critics of her relationship with Ole Benson: "It ain't my prairie" (169). The mensurational perspective of plate 1 asserts a mastery of space that is further emphasized by the railroad setting of the composition. As Barbara Novak observes in her study of nineteenth-century railway photography, the "linear imperialism" of the railroad provides a vivid metaphor for the artist's attempts to order and control the vast American wilderness within a limited picture space (180).

In Benda's final scene, the "linear imperialism" of space brought under human control gives way to the unconquered natural anarchy of a prairie blizzard. Limited only by the physical dimensions of the page, Benda's unframed winter landscape extends infinitely in all directions. Distinctions between land and sky obliterated by flying snow, the featureless expanse of the prairie defies artistic definition. In contrast to the constructed pictorial space that shelters the Shimerda family in plate 1, the open setting of Antonia's portrait is notably artless: the landscape of Benda's final scene—the natural whiteness of the book page—both antecedes and overwhelms his art. In this evolution, Benda's art demonstrates its superiority to Jim's. While Jim's narrative ends as it begins, with an assertion that art is a means of fixing or "possessing" reality (Jim's final words return us to the curious possessiveness of his title: "My Ántonia," allows its author to "possess . . . the precious, the incommunicable past" [emphasis added]), Benda's art evolves in recognition of a world "outside man's jurisdiction" (7).

The importance of the artless "white waste" of Antonia's winter landscape is suggested by Cather's first published art review. The white space that represents a December snowstorm in plate 8 alternatively evokes the white heat and "burning sun" of a Nebraska summer in Benda's penultimate plate, the full-length portrait of Lena (illus. 5). In the 1895 review, Cather describes the crucial difference between the overhead sun to which Lena is constantly exposed and the moments of "magical light" at dawn and dusk that Jim celebrates in his text. When Cather wrote about the annual exhibit of Lincoln's Haydon Art Club in her "As You Like It" column, art was still rare enough in Nebraska to inspire reviews that were more reverential than judgmental. Cather's criticism of a painting on loan from the Chicago Art Institute is remarkable, then, both because it dares to be sharply irreverent and because it contrasts so strikingly with her opening statement about the "privilege and blessing" of seeing portraits by Carl Newman and Weston Benson in the gallery's "inner sanctum":

Richard Lorenz's "In the West" is at once strong and disappointing. The worst thing about it is its title. It is a western subject and a western man placed it in an unwesern atmosphere. . . . the picture is not western. The impressionists say it is "keyed too low." Whatever that may mean the lights are certainly at fault and the color is too tame. The sunlight is gentle, not the fierce, white, hot sunlight of the West. Sunlight on the plains is almost like sunlight of the northern seas; it is a glaring, irritating, shelterless light that makes the atmosphere thrrob and pulsate with heat. (125)

The "fierce, white, hot sunlight" that Cather stresses in her review informs both Benda's portrait of Lena and Cather's instructions to Houghton Mifflin about its placement in the text: it is to appear low enough on the page to give the effect of a vast open space baking under a highnoon sun (MS. 75).11

The light of Lena's overhead sun illuminates Jim Burden's lyrical descriptions of the "horizontal light" that Benda depicts in plates 2 and 6
The golden moments that Jim translates into "picture-writing on the sun"—Mr. Shimerda against a sunset "like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed" and the "heroic" plow in the center of the red disk on the horizon—point to Claude Lorraine as emphatically as Jim's red "fingers of the sun" point to Homer's "rosy-fingered" dawns (244). The oblique rays of Jim's literary landscapes are an essential feature—or, to use Cather's terms, a standard piece of furniture—of ideal landscapes derived from Claudian pastorals. The magical "sudden transfiguration" of the day that Jim describes in such detail is the traditional "picturesque moment" of dawn or dusk when sunlight joins heaven and earth in an enveloping atmospheric radiance. The fierce white light of Lena's portrait responds to Benda's graphic rendition of Jim's roseate heavenly "fingers" (pls. 2 and 6) with the charge Cather levels at "In the West": limited to the most atypically gentle moments of a scene characterized by "glaring, irritating, shelterless light," Jim's "picture-writing" is skillful but essentially "unwestern."

The vertical orientation of Benda's two final scenes not only controverts Black Hawk's simplistic Snow White–Camille dichotomies by linking visually Antonia and Lena but also recalls Jules Breton's Song of the Lark (illus. 10), the painting that provides the title for Cather's last novel before My Ántonia, and clearly anticipates the climactic final plates of Benda's pictorial "drama."12 In Breton's painting, a centrally positioned French peasant girl stands arrested in her work (she is presumably—and rather stagily—harkening to the song of an unseen lark). The girl's alert, upright pose is emphasized by the horizontal expanse of the stark fields surrounding her, and her commanding stance is further stressed by the curved reaping hook that she holds in suspension. The reaping hook of Breton's girl, Lena's knitting needles (pl. 7), and Ántonia's cattle whip (pl. 8) serve the same pictorial function as the batons, swords, and firearms featured in the "old portraits" of Virginia gentry that Jim recalls: they are iconographic symbols of command, independence, and authority.

In the "quiet drama" of My Ántonia, Benda's Breton-like figures respond not to the song of an offstage lark but to the outmoded conventions of two earlier female portraits, the sheltered Madonna of plate 1 and the mushroom gatherer of plate 3 (illus. 4). In the latter drawing a natural shelter replaces the artificial shelter of the railway station in plate 1. The bowed branches of a tree follow the same curve as the bent form of the woman picking mushrooms beneath it, forming an arbor like Arcadian Pan's (illus. 1). The harmonious forms of the woman and the tree express the accord between human life and nature in the old Bohemian world Mrs. Shimerda describes as she gives a bag of dried mushrooms to Jim's grandmother: in the world of the mushroom gatherer, "things for eat" can be collected like manna (78). In Benda's final scenes, however, the sharp contrast between the shelterless flat expanse of the prairie and the erect figures of Lena and Ántonia suggests natural opposition rather than harmony. The featureless landscape of Benda's final plates provides its inhabitants with neither food nor shelter gratis. The plates that immediately follow Benda's mushroom gatherer insist on the realities of a world where "all things for eat" must be wrested from the soil by brute force (pl. 5, illus. 6: two immense horses strain to pull Ántonia's
Illus. 11. Frederick Church, *Twilight in the Wilderness* (1860). Cleveland Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. William H. Marlatt Fund.

plow through the tough prairie sod) and where arboreal shelters are the products of human art rather than natural munificence (pl. 4, illus. 5: the young pine Jake carries home across his saddle is the first fruit of the Burdens' efforts to "civilize" treeless Nebraska).

Antonia and Lena thus respond to Benda's stooped peasant woman by asserting the "masculine" authority—signaled by their unsupported upright stance and their staffs of command—demanded by a new world where nature is not maternally providential. Benda's full-length prairie portraits repudiate the Wild West illustrations of Jim's "most satisfying book" in the same way that they challenge the idyllic landscape of the mushroom gatherer. The cover illustration of *Jim's Lives, Adventures, and Exploits of Frank and Jesse James*, crude though it is, summarizes the frontier aesthetic of traditional depictions of the West in American art. Straining to push past a log barrier that the James boys have erected on the tracks, the train that dominates the cover vividly dramatizes the desire to "escape restraints" that Jim Burden describes as the impetus of "every frontier settlement" (209). The impulse to flee the constraints of "smothery" civilization (as Huck Finn put it) and the constant westward movement that the impulse propelled inform popular landscapes of the American West from Frederick Church's 1860 *Twilight in the Wilderness* (illus. 11) to Frederic Remington's 1889 *Dash for Timber* (illus. 12).

In both horizontal extension and compositional emphasis on movement through space, the scenes of Church and Remington represent the western landscape traditions that Benda revises in his portraits of Antonia and Lena. In Benda's full-length portraits, the horizontal spatial movement that distinguishes Remington's line of cowboys and the "linear imperialism" of parallel planes that leads us through Church's wilderness is replaced by vertical stasis. Unlike Remington's space-conquering cowboys, Benda's still, two-dimensional figures barely displace the space they occupy. While the West represented by Church and Remington is essentially Whitman's "Open Road"—a national thoroughfare for "traveling souls" perpetually en route to El Dorado—Benda's West is not a public highway but a place of precarious personal settlement. Both Antonia and Lena are portrayed with their feet firmly planted on the ground as they engage in the civilized arts that make life possible in the "most unlikely place in the world." Benda's women quietly inhabit the vast space that the James boys are forever "just passin' through" with a maximum of noisy bravado. (And the reader who brushes past these illustrations without dwelling on them as Antonia and Lena dwell within them is guilty of James-boy insensitivity to the "quiet" story they tell.)

Jim Burden's name is finally the best summary of the difference between Remington's art and Benda's and the corresponding difference between the narrative and the "succession of pictures" of *My Antonia*. Constrained or "burdened" by the James-boy ideals of "devilish" manhood that Remington stereotypically represents, Jim incorporates the fiction of the "Life of Jesse James" into his own life and art. A lawyer "for one of the great Western railways," Jim Burden carries on his namesake's train business (albeit on the other side of the law) as he perpetuates Jesse's "golden West" in *My Antonia*. The artistic evolution that is the "quiet drama" of *My Antonia*′s pictures simultaneously underscores Jim's failure of imagination and provides a "new world" picture of Antonia, a picture uncluttered by the inherited furniture of Jim Burden's narrative.13

---

**Notes**

1 Significantly, no page reference is possible here because Cather's 1926 revised edition of *My Antonia* did not paginate the introduction. As I later explain in greater detail, Cather changed the introduction in 1926 to emphasize her central narrative fiction: the claim that she is only editing and introducing Jim Burden's manuscript. Technical changes in the printed text further stress the difference between "editor" Cather and "author" Burden. Not only are the page numbers dropped, but the entire introduction is italicized to separate "Cather's" text from Jim's typographically. Unless otherwise specified, all my references to *My Antonia* are to the Sentry edition of the revised 1926 text. References to the first edition of the novel specify 1918 before the page citation.

2 I am indebted to Mark Savin, professor of English
formerly at the University of Minnesota, for bringing to my attention the materials that document the publishing history of *My Antonia*. The pertinent letters between Cather and Houghton Mifflin personnel involved with *My Antonia* (Greenslet, Richard Scaife of the publicity staff, and “Miss Bishop” of the art department) are all at the Houghton Library, Harvard University. In the Greenslet file, see especially TS. 84, 26 Nov. 1917; TS. 270, 6 Jan. 1926; TS. 272, 17 Feb. 1926; TS. 273, 9 April 1926; TS. 354, 3 Jan. 1938. In Cather’s letters, see TS. 48, 7 March [1918]; MS. 58, 18 Oct. [1917]; TS. 62, 24 Nov. 1917; TS. 63, 1 Dec. [1917]; TS. 65, 9 [Dec. 1917]; MS. 69, 26 Dec. 1917; TS. 74, Friday [Feb. 1918]; MS. 75, Saturday [Feb. 1918]; TS. 77, 20 June [1918]; MS. 81, 17 July [1918]; TS. 174, 15 Feb. 1926; TS. 176 [April 1926]; TS. 177 [May 1926]; TS. 199, 4 Dec. 1930; MS. 212, 2 Nov. 1932; TS. 230, 29 [Dec.] 1937. Because Cather’s will forbids the publication of her letters, they remain uncollected and rather inaccessible, scattered in libraries from Harvard to the San Marino Huntington. The proscriptions against publishing the letters have obliged me to paraphrase rather than quote them directly.

3 In the face of Cather’s strong opposition, Greenslet seems to have changed his mind about the “deluxe” *Antonia* illustrated by Wood. He readily concurred with her veto of Wood’s pictures (suggesting that he, too, had doubts about the wisdom of dressing up simple and plain *Antonia*) but acknowledged that enterprising young men in Houghton Mifflin’s advertising department would be disappointed by the decision (TS. 354).

4 A good example of Benda’s characteristic magazine work is the *Vogue* illustration (July 1920) reprinted in Byrnes (248–49). While many of Benda’s illustrations depict fashionable society, at the time Cather commissioned the “head-and-tail pieces” for *My Antonia* Benda was also widely known for painting western subjects (especially for a pictorial series titled “Cowboy Life on the Western Plains,” 1910). In a letter to Ferris Greenslet, Cather explains that her choice of an illustrator for *My Antonia* was influenced by an important affinity between Benda and Antonia: like Antonia, Benda not only had lived in the American West but had roots in Bohemia (TS. 62). The son of a Polish pianist and composer, Benda immigrated to the United States in 1899. Cather considered him ideally suited to the task of providing a pictorial counterpart to Jim’s narrative because—like Antonia and unlike Jim and Mr. Shimerda—Benda successfully developed the new forms and conventions demanded by his strange new world. For a brief biographical sketch of Benda, see Samuels and Samuels.

5 Cather comments on her difficulties in writing the original and revised versions of the introduction to *My Antonia* in a series of letters to Greenslet (TSS. 74, 174, 176). Greenslet presents a strong argument about the weakness of the 1918 introduction in two important letters of early 1926 (TSS. 270, 273).

6 E. K. Brown approvingly cites W. C. Brownell’s “penetrating” praise of *My Antonia* as a “large-minded” and “unmeretricious” work distinguished by its “continuous and sustained respect” for its central subject (156). According to Brown, *My Antonia* “marks a new phase in the long process of Willa Cather’s reconciliation with Nebraska”: in *Antonia* Nebraska is no longer the “place to leave” that it was in *Song of the Lark* but is instead “a place to live in” (158–59). Like Brown, James Woodress tends to discount the narrow-mindedness of Jim’s “thing about Antonia.” Woodress calls *My Antonia* a “sunny novel” that combines Whitmanesque “yea-saying” and Jamesian artistry (179–80).

7 Because the lines in the Harvard Georgics are unnumbered, my citations refer to the page numbers of this standard edition of Vergil’s poem.

8 The most famous dime novel “Life of Jesse James,” *The James Boys Weekly* published by the House of Beadle and Adams, did not begin to appear until 1900, well after Jim’s journey to Nebraska. It seems likely that Jim Burden’s “most satisfying book” was an earlier dime western published soon after Jesse James’s death, *The Lives, Adventures, and Exploits of Frank and Jesse James, with an Account of the Tragic Death of Jesse James, April 3d, 1882*. The University of Minnesota’s excellent Kerlan Collection of children’s literature includes two slightly different (but identically titled) versions of this novel, both unsigned and undated. I have profited from reading both; Jim’s favorite book includes *My Antonia* like a palimpsest.

9 The most famous—and outrageous—examination of Cather’s WASP bigotries and resultant fictional stereotypes is James Schroeder’s. While Schroeder focuses on the “anti-Semitism” of Cather’s portrait of Louie Marsellus in *The Professor’s House*, he makes much broader claims about Cather’s ethnic and racial prejudices (overlooking, unfortunately, the fact that the “bias” in so many of Cather’s novels is not Cather’s but the point of view of her first-person narrators—Jim Burden in *Antonia*—and her third-person centers of consciousness—Niel Herbert in *A Lost Lady* and Godfrey St. Peter in *Professor’s House*).

10 As Cather notes elsewhere, the “master” that she follows rather too devotedly in her “studio-piece” novel (*Alexander’s Bridge*) and, to a lesser extent, in her first collection of short stories (*The Troll Garden*) is Henry James (Carroll 214).

11 In a letter to Ferris Greenslet, Cather even went so far as to suggest printing *My Antonia* on yellow paper to evoke the western sun (TS. 48).

12 Houghton Mifflin used Breton’s painting on the jacket of *Song of the Lark* until 1931. That Cather liked the general conception of the painting (its central female figure surrounded by a landscape like the Nebraska prairie) more than Breton’s melodramatic details is suggested not only by Benda’s unsentimental adaptations of the painting in *Antonia* (in pl. 7, for instance, Lena fairly bursts from her scanty dress; the carefully delineated nipple pressing against her bodice is the most conspicuous—and, for romantics like Jim, the most disturbing—detail of Benda’s portrait) but also by Cather’s correspondence with Houghton Mifflin. Cather’s campaign to get Breton’s picture dropped from the cover of *Song of the Lark* was almost as long as her battle to keep Benda’s drawings in *Antonia*. (See Cather to Greenslet, TS. 18, 30 June 1915, and TS. 206, 26 Nov. [1931], for Cather’s first and final pleas that Breton be evicted from her dust jacket.)

13 I am grateful to Kent Bales, Jonathan Hill, and Karal Ann Marling for help in refining my argument.
Jean Schwind

Works Cited


—. “My First Novels (There Were Two).” In Willa Cather on Writing. New York: Knopf, 1949, 91-97.


The Lives, Adventures, and Exploits of Frank and Jesse James, with an Account of the Tragic Death of Jesse James, April 3d, 1882. N.p.: n.p., n.d.


