

Joseph Urgo, Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration

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Willa Cather and the Myth of American Migration combines the gradual contextualization of Willa Cather's works with the fact of migration in America. In his book, Joseph Urgo centers upon the intrinsic link between culture and literature, and he focuses his analysis on what he terms «the culture of migration.» It explains the way in which a writer's imagination—as it is the case with Willa Cather—is constantly reshaped by its psychic mobility. Against the critics who think of Cather's imaginative world as the reproduction of one particular region and one particular era—the unforgettable past, with its waves of pioneers and settlers, homeseekers looking for a place or a region—Cather's works, says Urgo, talk primarily about the psychic movement that the fact of migration implies. For those who think of migration as settlement, Urgo explores the other side of it, that is, transit, shifting consciousness and transient modes of thought.

Urgo's introduction to his book, «In Transit,» puts forward the misunderstandings about the origins of American culture based on just one aspect of migration: settlement. He demonstrates that for the mind of a writer like Willa Cather, migration is not only settlement but above all, it is transit, mobility, restlessness, what he has skilfully termed «a migratory consciousness.» Migration then, understood not as a physical fact—as it is the search for a new home, or a place to start anew—but as the result of subsequent beginnings which take place first in mind, then in body. In this sense, the concept of «relocation» in Urgo's study goes beyond its own definition: «movement» and «the necessary adaptation to a place» are only possible as the result of a mental process.

In the following chapters of his work, Joseph Urgo brilliantly presents a thorough exploration of Willa Cather's works in terms of culture. In fact, he evidences the realities of American culture through the lenses of Willa Cather's fiction, and his insightful arguments question the over-simplified image of Cather as a regionalist writer. Joseph

Urgo deals with the myth of American migration by placing the term «culture» at the very core of his analysis: culture defined as transience, constant mutability and crossings through physical and mental spaces. In Chapter One, entitled «Packing Up.» Joseph Urgo chooses *The Professor's House* in order to locate the reader at the very origins of migration: the constant questioning between the urge to move and the need to settle. The first conflict that comes out of this process of migration is with space. In *The Professor's House* space questions the duality between physical and psychic migration. Space has raised another common question on Cather's art of fiction: Realism. According to Cather, the aim of European Realism was the mere representation of accurate reality, but she states that realism must measure attitude rather than accuracy, and it deals not with reproduction, but with the effort to interpret and to comprehend images. The implications of Cather's notions on space and image are illustrated in *The Professor's House* in two main characters: Professor St. Peter and Tom Outland. Space implies a mental movement, a crossing from one place to another tracing a continuum that goes beyond spatial and temporal boundaries. It is precisely this continuum what makes Urgo redefine «nationalism» as the mixture of both historic rootedness and the need for movement. Space, like images, is created within conscious memories, therefore, the past, according to Urgo, becomes the context for the creation of significance, as is the case with Professor St. Peter's contextualization of Tom Outland's story. Time and its universal division into Past, Present and Future is strongly questioned under Cather's spatial perspective: they create a historical continuum that clearly explains the massive movement of immigrants in America up to now. Nobody «comes from» but «moves with,» and the same happens with time, which moves freely within spatial consciousness. In this sense, Joseph Urgo states that American history records spatialized phenomena rather than static movements bound by time.

Chapter Two thoroughly explores some of the aspects that reinforce Cather's notion of history and American identity through the cultural process of migration in her most acclaimed novels: *O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia* and *A Lost Lady*. Cather's pioneer novels set in an unforgotten past are definitely a projection into the future. They do not show nostalgic reminiscences of an era, but a peculiar significance in the future. Furthermore, the characters move freely between the time frame Past-Future in the same way as do their homes: in this space, immigrants become homeless and uprooted and their homes move with them and become part of their mental process of cultural transposition. From this point of view, borders and frontiers metamorphose into a mind concept. Cather was aware of the importance of future in the shaping of pioneer life on the frontier, because pioneers could outline history by renewing their mental perceptions of the world in every new cultural crossing. Characters who are unable to complete this crossing are failures, since migratory consciousness always compels people to move and to share what Joseph Urgo calls «a common heritage.» Emigration, according to Urgo, is made from one mode of consciousness as well as from one place, therefore, Cather's

fiction turns the pictures of static history into a historical consciousness that breaks ties with the past and moves freely without any intellectual restraint.

When the future is so clearly defined under Cather's intellectual reflections, the question of place becomes clear: place is the image depicted by our minds through images coming from personal experiences, it is a depiction of a mental space which is subject to change according to one's own will. In Chapter Three, the sense of place related to the notion of «spatial future» is thoroughly studied in three novels: *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, *Shadows on the Rock* and *Lucy Gayheart*. In the first novel, Joseph Urgo studies the character of Sapphira under the whole perspective of transmission: moving in space, time and in terms of intellectual bearing. Cather's movement into the past is, once more, the «essential movement» into the future, since future is the keystone for «cultural survival.» Joseph Urgo sees Cather's characters in these novels as the confrontation of two different modes of thought: one of them, static, blocked, anachronistic, and the other one, dynamic, vital, mobile, trying to keep loyal to transmission and following the paths of cultural crossroads. Joseph Urgo is an expert diver into deeper levels of interpretation, and his study on *Shadows on the Rock* proves to be a subtle and illuminating analysis on Cather's keen use of symbols. The «rock» and the «shadows» share the same level of meaning in the sense that they comprehend the whole body of Cather's modernist view of fiction: characters do not embody people in closed spaces or specific spans of time. On the contrary, they show the necessity to move and to change, to be «contextualized.»

Chapter Four is the last step in Joseph Urgo's gradual contextualization of Cather's work in the process of migration. According to him, migration ends up in the formation of a transnational, American empire which is best illustrated in Cather's novels *The Song of the Lark*, *One of Ours* and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*. Cather's view of empire links the essentials of migration –motion, expansion, restlessness– to the personal conviction of one idea. The main characters of these three novels, Thea Kronberg, Claude Wheeler and Jean Latour embody one idea that compels them to move. They share a common view of themselves in the American context: the ideals that keep them moving conform the nation's redefinition as a world power that must be projected into the future. American imperial expansion goes beyond frontiers and is the result of intellectual shiftings: Urgo states that the transfer of consciousness is responsible for the transmission of power to America through migration. For Cather, the great fact, in its different forms, is always movement. Joseph Urgo closes his book with a singular Epilogue, connecting Cather's empire of migration to another manifestation of popular culture: the movies. The film *The Wizard of Oz* supports the American empire of migration by questioning how one can be at home in transit and how home becomes a point in destination, not in origins. Cather's legacy reinforces «the essential mobility of American historical consciousness across temporal and spatial frontiers.» In fact, the mind of a writer like herself and like Joseph Urgo proves to be always «ready to leave.»