

# Female Immigration Then and Now: Willa Cather's *Ántonia* and Hédi Bouraoui's *Laura* as Talespinners

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Willa Cather's *Ántonia* Shimerda, in *My Ántonia* (1918) and Hédi Bouraoui's *Laura Ben Omer* (née Principato), in *Les Aléas d'une Odyssée* (2010), are fictional heroines created almost a century apart, yet both reflect significant realities of immigration over the last century. *Ántonia* is a Bohemian (Czech) girl who is taken by her family from eastern Europe to the plains of Nebraska in the 1880s. *Laura* is a young Sicilian woman who marries a modern immigrant, Hannibal Ben Omer (literally, son of Homer), a native of Tunisia like the ancient Carthaginian general for whom he is named, who retraces the wanderings of another ancient hero, Homer's Ulysses, among the Mediterranean islands. This modern Ulysses, an eternal migrant, seeks his familial identity on islands belonging to France, Italy, Spain, and Greece. His new Penelope, *Laura*, unlike her Homeric counterpart, is not content to remain home with her knitting, but chooses instead – modern, emancipated woman that she is – to follow her Ulysses both in a literal sense (to Crete), and a poetic. *Laura* is a poet and language teacher, and communicates with Hannibal by poems, letters, and cell phone.

As with many female immigrants, the choice of migration is not made by either young woman: *Ántonia* arrives with her family, *Laura* follows her husband. *Antonia*, as Walter Havighurst puts it, comes “from an old land with its stores of memory to a land without ruins or memorials, without traditions” (xi). *Laura*'s major excursion, on the other hand, is to Crete, legendary home of the Minotaur with its ancient mystery and attendant horrors, but also the source of her own Italian civilization.

Laura ultimately returns, with a more mature Hannibal, to her home in Sicily, while Ántonia creates a new home in a New World, shaping a garden out of the great American desert.

A major difference in the two novels is that Ántonia is not permitted to tell her own story, whereas Laura actually takes over the narration in Part Two of *Les Aléas d'une Odyssée*. The reasons for this reflect, on a fictional level, some major shifts in the situation of many immigrants between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Ántonia's story is told by a first-person male narrator, Jim Burden, scion of an old Virginia family who is transported west to his grandparents' farm on the Great Divide of the Nebraska frontier, when his parents die. The novel is entitled *My Ántonia*, because what is offered to the reader is largely, at least on the surface, Jim Burden's Ántonia. Jim creates a subjective, private mythology in which Ántonia becomes his Muse. He quotes Virgil, "for I shall be the first, if I live, to bring the Muse into my own country" (171), and Gaston Cleric, Jim's teacher at the University of Nebraska, says that Virgil was not speaking of Italy, or even Rome, the subject of his epic *The Aeneid*, but rather of the "*patria*" he depicted in *The Georgics*, his book about husbandry and agriculture: "Patria ... meant, not a nation or even a province, but the little rural neighborhood on the Mincio where the poet was born" (117). Here the "neighborhood" is Nebraska, and Ántonia becomes its Muse. In Jim's eyes, Ántonia embodies the land. With her brown eyes and dark hair, she appears earthy, in sharp contrast to another immigrant girl, the blonde, blue-eyed Norwegian Lena Lingard, who says simply, "It ain't my prairie" (113). But it *is* Ántonia's prairie.

What we learn of Ántonia, apart from the role Jim assigns her as Earth Mother, needs to be teased out. Our suspicions are aroused that a woman author like Cather would be unlikely to invest in a mythology of mindless fertility, though, as one student put it, "Isn't it possible to be an Earth Mother *with* a mind?" If so, Cather is creating a counter-mythology to the masculine, and is at times undermining her male narrator, close though he may seem to be to her own biography. She too moved from Virginia to Nebraska around the age of ten, experienced severe culture

shocks on the frontier, graduated from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and moved east to take up a career. But Jim becomes a lawyer for the railway, and marries a rich, older, idle patroness of the arts, while Cather became an editor and writer. Jim's reliability as a narrator is time and again called into question, and the reader is invited to look more closely at *Ántonia's* contribution to the text.

With Bouraoui's Laura, on the other hand, there is no ambiguity, for she narrates her own story. In Part Two of *Les Aléas d'une Odyssée*, "*Le Dit de Pénélope*," she takes events into her own hands. Moreover, she is also following in the path of another female writer, her husband Hannibal's mother Mounira. Laura, like Mounira, retraces the journey of a migrant husband, Mounira's eventually to France and Corsica, Laura's to Crete. Hannibal learns to his surprise that his mother was a writer, a lyric poet, who, unlike his father, never tried to publish, remaining within woman's private sphere. Her manuscripts are found, however, whereas the professional writer father's one manuscript seems to have disappeared off the face of the earth.

Hannibal's quest for the mother ultimately becomes a quest for a bride, Laura, aptly named for Petrarch's Muse, and for the laurel, classical reward for the poet. If both *Ántonia* and Laura are cast in the role of passive muse by men, Laura's rebellion is more overt than *Ántonia's*, for Laura is herself a poet. In the final analysis, Laura the wife and Mounira the mother merge. Both have gone in quest of their husbands, the father seeking glory he expects to attain only north of the Mediterranean, in the Occident, specifically in Western Europe, and the son following his father's footsteps in search of his own identity.

If Mounira's journey ended in poverty, disease, and death, Laura's, like *Ántonia's*, is ultimately triumphant. Bouraoui's novel is constructed as a diptych, in which the hero narrates Part One, "*Les Corsades d'Hannibal*," and his wife Laura Part Two, "*Le Dit de Pénélope*." If Hannibal is a kind of "Ulysses Unchained," more so than Prometheus, Laura is his "Penelope Unchained," or liberated soul mate. We have a variation on "He said," "She said," in this postmodernist version of the ancient

Homeric epic, whereas with *Ántonia* we have to do more detective work on what she is thinking, compared to what Jim Burden tells us.

Laura exhibits what Ellen Moers calls “heroinism,” the courage of a female hero, in following her husband to Crete, and rescuing him, although she is eight months pregnant at the time. *Ántonia*, by the same token, is a survivor. First seduced and abandoned by Larry Donovan, a railway conductor, she takes pride in her illegitimate child and even has the girl’s photograph displayed in the photographer’s window. She goes on to marry Anton Cuzak and produce ten more children, of which the eldest, illegitimate, has pride of place.

Laura’s verbal gifts are displayed in “*Le Dit de Pénélope*” where she moves from brief lyric poems Hannibal incorporates in the first part, to her own narrative in the second. In other words, she makes the transition from poetry to prose narrative, or the novel (her own characterization of her text). *Les Aléas d’une Odyssée* is a self-reflexive novel, and Laura is particularly given to reflections on the genre. She recognizes that she has made a “*détour vers la fiction . . . le jour même où je suis tombée amoureuse d’Annibal*” (197). In articulating their story, she makes Hannibal into both her lover and her protagonist, “*l’homme de mon cœur et un personnage de roman plus réel que le surréel!*” (197). It is she who assumes the Joycean role of master craftsman or artisan, and feminizes it. She thus moves from passive muse to agent.

*Les Aléas d’une Odyssée* is not so much a reworking of *The Odyssey*, as an inversion of it. The poet is Laura, not Homer, and she rejects the role of muse or inspiration. Moreover, the protagonist of this postmodern epic is not a king, a prince, or the founder of a city-state, but a common man, a Maghrebian immigrant, “*la dernière roue de la charrette européenne*” (372) – more Whitmanian than Homeric. Laura, in fact, calls him her “anti-hero,” and sees in his Mediterranean immigration “the primordial adventure of our time” (198).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the “primordial adventure” was immigration to the New World, and the immigrants, like *Ántonia* and her family, lived the Homeric-Virgilian epic of helping to create a new nation, a version

of the ancient city-state. The classic epic was all about immigration, by any other name, about heroes wandering about the Mediterranean basin to found new city-states. Classical scholar that she was, Cather seized upon the Virgilian model to describe the creation of a new land by the diverse contributions of immigrants. Both Cather and Bouraoui recognize that the epic was the most ancient form of narrative, and Cather rewrites it in modernist, Bouraoui in postmodernist terms – though both modestly focus on the local – the “*patria*” – of the Great Divide, or of the Mediterranean islands. Both focus as well not only on the attempts, however flawed, to create an ideal nation, but on the inevitable displacements, conflicts that result – the “shock of civilizations,” as it is called today – intermarriage, assimilation or integration. Our culture and civilization are the products of successive waves of invasions, wars, empire-building, from the Greeks, Phoenicians, Romans to the Holy Roman Empire to Napoleon to the United States dominance today.

*My Ántonia* is most often read as a frontier novel, but it is also a novel about immigration. The frontier was the locus for the American experiment of “the melting pot.” Cather’s Shimerda family arrives on the frontier at a crucial period, the 1880s, for they come to America just before the closing of the frontier, which the historian Frederick Jackson Turner marked in the 1890s, in a speech given to the American Historical Association in 1893. Under the Homestead Act of 1862, one hundred sixty acres of free land was given in the territories, initially to Union soldiers, but also to immigrants. By the 1890s the free land was gone, and speculators like Cather’s Krajiek were taking over, and cheating their own people. Turner underlined the positives and negatives of the American frontier. It became a melting pot of composite nationalities because it was new, “uncivilized.” On the other hand, it provided a “safety valve” for lawless elements. Probably to compensate for its newness, it turned its back on Europe, but promoted conformity, and gave birth to an enforced religiosity which later earned the name “Bible Belt” from H.L. Mencken.

In America the frontier was mythologized, by Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, later Hemingway, as the province of male adventurers and frontier scouts – in Fenimore Cooper’s case, celibate males, though the real

Daniel Boone, prototype for the fictional heroes, was a married man who moved westward with his family. It was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with writers like Ellen Glasgow and especially Willa Cather, that the role of women on the frontier was celebrated. Cather chose to mythologize what Turner called the “yeoman” stage, when families moved in to settle and farm.

When the Shimerdas come to Nebraska, historian Carl Degler points out, Germans and Austrians (like Cather’s Otto Fuchs) constituted three-quarters of the population in many Nebraska counties. So the Shimerdas, as Czechs, are “outsiders,” even among an immigrant population. Not only do they not speak English, German and Austrian are also unknown tongues to them. Cather thus highlights the issue of blocked communication that Bouraoui’s immigrants of today also face.

Moreover, the Shimerdas are displaced not only by language, but by occupation and geography. Mr. Shimerda is a city man forced by economic circumstances to move to the open land. There is an interesting contrast to another novel about immigrants, Henry Roth’s *Call It Sleep*, in which the Schearls, also from Eastern Europe but Jewish, emigrate around the turn of the century, when there is no more free land, and are never able to move beyond New York City. Mr. Schearl, a former dairy farmer, cannot come closer to his old occupation than becoming a milkman in a teeming, hostile city. He would have thrived in Mr. Shimerda’s environment, Mr. Shimerda in his. Such is the lot of the immigrant, who cannot choose his conditions of survival (a notion whereby Cather joins, very briefly and reluctantly, the literary Naturalists).

Henry Nash Smith, in *Virgin Land*, elaborates on and refines Turner’s frontier hypothesis. He contrasts the myth of the desert to that of the garden, and sees the great American experiment as that of transforming the desert into a garden. Cather, despite some negatives, thinks of the West as potentially a garden, for those, like *Ántonia*, who cooperate with it. The novel begins with the abject poverty of the Shimerdas’ existence, but at the end we see *Ántonia* with her hand on an apple tree, a vivid image of strength and fertility. The reader is left to ask,

however, is her “agency” merely intuitive, or intelligent, like Laura’s?

The arrivals of both young women in a strange country foreshadow the difficulties they are to face, their trials, but also their triumphs. *Ántonia* arrives in a land waiting to be created: “There was nothing but land; not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made” (8). In other words, the prairie is the raw material for a budding artist, Jim, and for a budding farmer, *Ántonia*. The red prairie sea of grass is “the colour of wine-stains,” compared to the wine-dark sea of Homer. On the dry prairie, there is always the human need for the presence of the sea, even if metaphorical, while Bouraoui’s characters live surrounded by the real Mediterranean Sea. The prairie seems alive: “And there was so much motion in it; the whole country seemed somehow to be running” (13). It is compared to a “loose hide” underneath which herds of buffalo were galloping (14).

Young Jim feels ambivalent about the immensity and challenge: “I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be would be” (9). He experiences a kind of fatalism on the edge of the world, whereas *Ántonia* is anything but a fatalist. Like Laura, she is a survivor, in tune with the life force. For *Ántonia*, activity comes naturally. From humble beginnings she creates a dynasty in the female line, a continuum.

When *Ántonia* first arrives on the train, however, as a fourteen-year-old (Jim is ten), she encounters the racism and discrimination of the native-born. Jim notices the pretty little girl, like himself moving to the west from the east, but in her case farther east, from Europe. The railway conductor, however, flaunting his medals like an obelisk, warns Jim that the immigrants are diseased. Later, it is another railway conductor, Larry Donovan, who seduces and abandons her. Cather is signaling symbolically the role of the railway in American life: it opened up the west, but also destroyed an old way of life. Annette Kolodny, in *The Lay of the Land*, a kind of expansion and corrective of Nash Smith’s *Virgin Land*, sees the railway as a phallic symbol cutting through the virgin land.

When Laura Ben Omer arrives in Crete, she finds herself, unlike *Ántonia*, in

an old land, the birthplace of her own civilization, but is also greeted ominously by a searing wind from Libya, a gift from Africa, suggesting the descent into hell usually experienced by the epic hero, not the heroine. This wind foreshadows plot, for her husband Hannibal is in prison, accused of murdering Nikos Kitsikis, a Greek captain of industry. Laura's detective work eventually unearths a Libyan connection as the real hit man. (Coincidentally, Bouraoui seems to be prophesying the ill wind blowing from Libya, starting in February, 2011).

Like *Ántonia*, Laura is disoriented, does not speak the language. But she is taken in hand by a sympathetic male mentor, symbolically named Christos, who serves a similar function to Virgil, Dante's guide through the circles of the *Inferno*. Christos is also a father figure, replacing the father she has just lost. *Ántonia*, too, is to lose her father early, since he fails to survive in the harsh new land, and she is subsequently taken in hand by some old settlers, notably Jim's grandparents. Grandmother Burden and later Mrs. Gardiner, her employer in the town of Black Hawk, teach her "nice ways," including correct English, and how to navigate in a strange land.

Among other things, Laura needs a guide because she does not speak the language. As it turns out, the main clue to Nikos's murder is linguistic, the note left in garbled French, "*je tué nik*" (286). She knows immediately that the killer would be neither of the literate francophones, Hannibal or his sometime friend Olivier. Almost the first object she sees in Heraklion, the ugliest city of the Mediterranean, is also literary, the tomb of their greatest writer Nikos Kazantzakis, and the motto inscribed on the tomb becomes her own: "*Je n'espère rien, je n'ai peur de rien, je suis libre*" (286). Laura herself is to conquer all fears, and to find true freedom, which is that of the spirit, by making peace with an old land. It is, moreover, a land already linked very specifically with her own, for she is a native of Syracuse, in Sicily, the old Greek capital of her island, which still boasts a famous, well preserved Greek theatre.

Before she even gets to Greece, however, Laura has her suspicions about the Kitzikises, from the increasingly sporadic communications she receives from Hannibal. At the beginning of "*Le Dit de Pénélope*,"

she is Penelope waiting, and at the end she is once more in the waiting position. She explains why she accepts this status: “*Il m’aime et cela suffit*” (204). But she waits only to take charge and come to the rescue when her eternal male wanderer loses himself.

Part Two begins with a marriage and ends with childbirth, and a new beginning. Hannibal and Laura actually celebrate their marriage twice, once in Catholic Sicily, and later in Muslim Tunisia. Ironically, neither partner subscribes to any fixed religion. But we are reminded that Catholic priests were the first to translate the Koran into Latin, so the cross-cultural dimension is being celebrated by the marriage bond. The similarity of the rituals reflects a wedding of Orient and Occident. Both partners agree that after this return to their respective origins, it is time to move on, and the protagonists set sail, separately, for Greece, birthplace of both their civilizations. Nor do they ever abandon their native lands: “*Le pays natal est une tare que chacun de nous doit porter*” (207) – for better or worse, is the implication.

At this point the novel assumes the dimensions of Greek epic (“*Odysée toute*”) as we meet a variety of characters and potential traps drawn from *The Odyssey*, which can be characterized as Muses, Mothers, Mentors, Monsters, and Gods. The Cretan setting represents another return to origins, to pre-classical Greece, to the Cretans from whom the ancient Greeks learned everything, and hence to the beginnings of both Italian and Tunisian cultures. Laura, like Ántonia, is both muse (though anything but passive) and mother. Both have their mentors – Christos for Laura, Grandmother Burden and Mrs. Gardiner for Ántonia. Both encounter Monsters – Athéna Kitzikis for Laura, Wick Cutter for Ántonia. And in Greek mythology and tragedy Gods and Monsters are sometimes one and the same.

Bouraoui insists on the role of the Phoenicians in the birth of Western civilization, and traces in some detail the legend of Europa, cousin of the Phoenician Queen of Carthage, Dido. Zeus, in the form of a bull, raped Europa, the daughter of Libya (that name again!), and fathered Minos, Sarpedon, and Rhadamanthus. Minos asked his uncle Poseidon

to create a monster, which was finally not sacrificed. Minos's wife Pasiphae fell in love with the bull-monster, and Dedalus, the archetypal artist, constructed the labyrinth for it. Pasiphae hid in a wooden cow to consort with the bull, and the result was the birth of the Minotaur, part monster, part man. Laura affirms that the Minotaur shows the latent evil in all of us, which must be exorcised. All the seeds of Greek tragedy are contained in this legend.

Bouraoui has recast the Joycean appropriation of myth in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) and *Ulysses* (1922), those key modernist texts, for our noisy postmodernist age where "*Le monde est devenu le labyrinthe global des communications de masse. Nous sommes revenus à la tour de Babel*" (234). We are all trying, latter-day detectives, to find our Ariadne's thread through the labyrinth. If Joyce's Dedalus is the master craftsman, builder of the labyrinth of life, he was also guilty of overreach in making wings for his son Icarus so he could fly close to the sun; unfortunately the wax wings melted and Icarus fell to earth dead. Hannibal does not successfully navigate the Cretan labyrinth until Laura comes to his aid. As a result, his wings are merely singed!

Hannibal's and Laura's labyrinthine journey is made perilous by the modern equivalent of the House of Atreus, the House of Kitzikis, and they only narrowly escape tragedy. The House of Kitzikis is a financial empire, arrogant and corrupt, among those responsible for the financial crisis of modern Greece, of today's Europe, and ultimately of the global economy.

Madame Kitzikis is the formidable modern Athéna, whose relationship with Hannibal Laura instantly suspects – "*une relation qui m'inquiète encore aujourd'hui*" (239). Her suspicions are aroused before she actually meets Athéna, for she is already weaving a web from Hannibal's telephone communications. Laura arrives in Greece to find her husband in a Greek prison, immobilized, deactivated, leaving it to Laura to piece together the often conflicting evidence. Athéna presents a false front to the world of an amiable relationship with her ex-husband Nikos, who had constantly cheated on her. Hannibal landed in the middle of a troubled marriage, when he sought only a

new business relationship. The goddess Athena disputed the Acropolis with Poseidon. As a goddess of nature, not the tribe, she was jealous and unpredictable. Hannibal and Laura are to be bitterly disappointed if they expect her namesake to offer an Ariadne's thread through the labyrinth.

Even before meeting Athéna (Nikos is already dead), Laura notices in this "bizarre couple" "*les digressions paranoïaques de l'un et la cruauté programmée de l'autre*" (248). Hannibal, on the other hand, more naively sees in Athéna at the outset only a mentor who can teach him the art of perfumery, a major Kitzikis enterprise. But Athéna's perfumes only mask the stench of the Waste Land that is Heraklion, a city whose ugliness is rooted in industrialization and capitalism. Nikos is a Greek tycoon, a synthesis of Aristotle Onassis and others. A bully, he is extremely strong, a hunter and a womanizer, totally uninterested in culture. Yet he controls culture, for he owns a major publishing house, which gives him power over production and distribution. He is a collector, like many of Henry James's villains: of money, of art objects, of women. He compromised several women, and treated his workers arrogantly. He dies as he has lived, gun in hand after hunting, under a eucalyptus tree, with a woman's hanky concealed nearby. He becomes mythic in his death. Suspicion for his murder could fall on a woman, or on one of his workers – but it falls instead on Hannibal, because he is "other," foreign, a migrant, only tolerated as a transient.

After at last meeting Athéna, Laura begins to read another language, the language of flowers, source of Athéna's perfumes. She uncovers the truth one petal at a time: "*Pénélope déplie les pétales interdits*" (297). Heraklion appears to her a Homeric, Virgilian, Dantesque Inferno: when she visits Hannibal in prison, the jailer is likened to Cerberus guarding the entrance. Almost immediately after, their son Télémaque is born. And born Greek, which opens to them "*la porte orientale de la Méditerranée*" (198). In Télémaque the three Mediterranean islands, south, west, and east, are fused: Kerkennah, Sicily, and Crete. Laura, like Ántonia, becomes a creator in the biological as well as artistic sense, and receives a crown of laurels for childbirth.

Télémaque's birth does little to slow Laura's activities – if anything, they accelerate. Both mother and detective, she discovers the hanky of the mysterious Eleni, a modern-day Helen of Troy, with Hannibal's charm, the *hirz*, contained within it, inside the trunk of the tree where Nikos's body was found. Athéna moves in on Laura, arousing the latter's suspicions. She hints that while Hannibal was never her lover, she could not be sure of Eleni. By planting suspicion, Athéna is playing her own game. Laura finally unveils Athéna's duplicity, when she is forced, as a transient migrant with no other means of support, to move into the latter's house which, beneath the affluence, becomes a kind of Gothic dwelling, a site of secrets and violence.

Athéna becomes in turn mentor, mother surrogate, and monster, but she also underestimates Laura's own forceful character. Laura soon perceives her as a Medusa/ Gorgon figure, turning all to stone, as well as the ancient goddess of nature: she notes "*son ambiguïté*," "*ses contrastes*," "*ses contradictions*" (315). As false mother, Athéna's hatred is likened to boiling milk, or mother's milk turned poisonous. Maintaining a false façade of amicable divorce before the world, she would have gladly destroyed Nikos – but did she? wonders Laura. Addicted to cigarettes and alcohol, Athéna is presented as a chameleon (if not the devil's tail, from which legend tells us woman was born, not from Adam's rib). Laura learns that "*Athéna était fâchée à mort contre son époux!*" (326).

Both *My Antonia* and « *Le Dit de Pénélope* » present another female character perhaps best described as the "Siren" or "Temptress" for, in the former, the male narrator, and in the latter, the hero (or anti-hero) husband. Coincidentally, the names of these foils to the heroines sound alike. Antonia's opposite is the blonde, beautiful Norwegian Lena Lingard, Laura's the mysterious Eleni. Lena's full name is doubtless Magdalena, derived from the Biblical fallen woman (albeit repentant, and perhaps a female disciple), and Eleni is Helen, or Helen of Troy, whose face "launched a thousand ships." In both instances, the "Other Woman" is an ambiguous figure.

Lena is viewed with suspicion by the local farmers and townspeople because of her beauty, which has obsessed one local farmer, Ole Benson,

and resulted in an attempted attack on her by his wife, Crazy Mary. But her reputation raises the age-old question: is a beautiful woman to be held accountable for her effect on males, even if she has no intention of seducing them? Just about the only instance where the reader may be shocked by Lena's behavior occurs when she interrupts what is almost a love scene between *Ántonia* and Jim Burden just after his high school graduation: "... she leaned over the edge of the bank and began to demolish our flowery pagoda. I had never seen her so energetic; she was panting with zeal, and the perspiration stood in drops on her short, yielding upper lip. I sprang to my feet and ran up the bank" (155). There is an ambivalence towards Lena on the part of many characters, and perhaps the author: is she a threat in Eden? Yet we prefer her to Mrs. Burden, the idle patroness of the arts Jim eventually marries. There are two paths for the immigrant girls: to remain with the traditional family and build the country, like *Ántonia*, or leave the land and build a career, like Lena. For all Lena's overt sexual appeal, she is the one who chooses not to marry, becomes a seamstress, and eventually runs her own very successful business, while continuing to send money back to her family on the farm.

Lena is described as bland and neat, plump, fond of sweets, with sleepy eyes (bedroom eyes?). Jim remarks that "To dance 'Home, Sweet Home' with Lena was like coming in with the tide ... it was always the same waltz – the waltz of coming home to something, of inevitable, fated return" (145). Jim compares Lena's dancing to *Ántonia*'s, on the other hand: "When you spun out into the floor with Tony, you didn't return to anything. You set out every time upon a new adventure" (146). Jim is able to dream about Lena, but not about Tony. And in Lincoln, he has an affair with Lena, who is working as a dressmaker. With her he is introduced to the world of theater, whereas *Ántonia* leads him into the world of myth. Lena makes no attempt to attach Jim, however, and sends him away without guilt, knowing he has other ambitions. She does have a head for business, and is not easily seduced (unlike *Ántonia*). She does, in fact, "seduce" a number of male critics, including E.K. Brown and Maxwell Geismar, who comments that *Ántonia* is

“the epitome of the frontier spirit,” while Lena “represents merely the frontier flesh,” but “almost runs away with the show.” It is difficult to tell if Cather shares the negative views of Grandmother Burden, Gaston Cleric, or the Pioneer Woman, about Lena, when her deeds are scarcely deplorable – and in point of fact, her choice of a career – with an artistic aspect – over marriage is essentially Cather’s own.

We learn a good deal less of Bouraoui’s Eleni, who remains silent and distant – narrated only by others – until the court trial at the end. Men seem to think of Eleni as an object to be collected, possessed. Laura, on the other hand, is no passive object, and she is angry at men (including Hannibal) who lie by omission (like Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre with Rochester, who neglects to mention a prior marriage). Eleni does, however, deny any guilt or malice on her part, and her symbolic ancestor, Helen of Troy, we remember, may have been a seductress, but she may also have been kidnapped, an innocent victim, by a lustful man.

In any event, the role of the supposed seductress in migrant fiction is revealing. On the one hand, the immigrant woman, to the male gaze, is “other,” exotic, the unknown, and therefore sexually tempting. The immigrant girls, working as servants in Black Hawk homes, are viewed by the townspeople as “dangerous as high explosives” (134). Jim notes, however, that the domestic work to which they are confined, because of lack of English language skills, and which puts them in the way of the young men of the town, is but a temporary expedient. When their children learn the language, like Ántonia’s, they will become teachers, doctors, lawyers: as Jim comments, “...their children are better off than the children of the town women they used to serve” (132). Moreover, many of the hired girls are working beneath their former class in Europe: Lena Lingard’s grandfather was a clergyman in Norway. Jim defends the hired girls: “I knew where the real women were ..., and I would not be afraid of them, either” (147). Yet he marries a sterile Eastern dilettante, who patronizes artists “of advanced ideas and mediocre ability.” Jim is scornful of Sylvester Lovett, the banker’s son, who courts and deserts Lena, but then we wonder about Jim’s own later marital choice. As a boy in Black Hawk, he is viewed by

the townspeople as “queer” for preferring older women, the hired girls, to the town girls “of his own age.”

Jim worships Ántonia from afar, puts her on a pedestal. He has an affair with Lena, but marriage is out of the question. Some critics feel he cannot cross the social barrier between his old Virginia roots and the new population of immigrants in the West. But it is probable that the real issue is his tendency to worship or idealize women he could have loved. If Ántonia represents the epic heroine, Lena is the romantic one: “If there were no girls like them in the world, there would be no poetry” (175). It is in *this* connection that he quotes the epigraph of the novel, from Virgil’s *Georgics*, “*Optima dies ... prima fugit*.” Yet the reality is that Lena is a hardheaded businesswoman for whom sex seems incidental.

Eleni’s attraction for Hannibal is the other side of the coin. In each novel of the trilogy, the constant migrant Hannibal tends to fall in love, or become infatuated, with a woman representative of the nation or island he visits. But perhaps Hannibal and Jim Burden share this male trait: a desire to be seduced by otherness, by exoticism, represented by the immigrant girls for the long-settled Jim, the native beauties for the migrant Hannibal.

Above all, both novels highlight the verbal creativity, both oral and written, of the immigrants. In the case of Ántonia, Jim writes the document. But on closer reading and rereading, it becomes clear that Ántonia is not just the muse, but also the source for much of his material. So a male narrator records and interprets what is told him, as well as what he witnesses directly. In the case of Laura, it is she who writes down and interprets what a migrant male, her husband, is telling her (or not telling her).

It is Mr. Shimerda, an educated man, who first suggests to Jim what will become the title of his manuscript. Her father asks Jim to “Te-e-ach, t-e-ach my Àn-tonia!” (21). But Jim doesn’t, not really. If anything, Ántonia teaches him. If Jim creates a subjective, private mythology, Ántonia finds her own voice in it. Jim creates verbal art with Ántonia and the land; she creates with the land and biology. It has long been

recognized that Cather stresses an analogy between the artistic spirit and the pioneer spirit. Her first major novel, *O Pioneers!* (1915), took its title from Walt Whitman's poem which prophesies the "vast rondure of the globe." Cather felt that the Western pioneers, mostly immigrants, created the country out of the raw material provided by Nature. *Ántonia's* achievement is celebrated in the cave scene which ends the novel, contrasting sharply with the prairie dog-like existence of the Shimerdas at the beginning. *Ántonia's* children emerge from the cellar before Jim's eyes, as from Plato's cave, "a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight" (220). It makes Jim dizzy, which tells us something about him. *Ántonia*, he says, "was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races" (229), positioning her explicitly as an epic heroine. He is an artist with her, as *Ántonia* is with the country. But is his vision distorted? We need to read between the lines to guess *her* point of view.

When Jim comes back after many years and sees *Ántonia*, he thinks, "I felt the old pull of the earth, the solemn magic that comes out of those fields at nightfall. I wished I could be a little boy again, and that my way could end here" (209). *Ántonia*, on the other hand, chooses the future: she has no time for nostalgia. Jim tends to identify with *Ántonia's* father, defeated by the challenges of the new land. When the young Jim composes his high school valedictory speech, he tells *Ántonia*, "I thought about your papa when I wrote my speech, Tony. I dedicated it to him" (150). *Ántonia* was Mr. Shimerda's favorite child, a bright girl deprived by circumstances of an education. As children, *Ántonia* relays a promise to Jim: "My *tatineke* say when you are big boy, he give you his gun" (30). The irony of this promise is only perceived later, for this is the gun with which Mr. Shimerda allegedly kills himself. Does this suggest something anti-life about Jim? *Is* he dead, in a sense? He resembles in many ways Salinger's Holden Caulfield, in *Catcher in the Rye*, who would like life kept under glass, frozen forever, as in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Blanche Gelfant has pointed out, in a landmark essay, that Jim's motto, and the epigraph of the novel, "*Optima dies, prima fugit*," which Jim

interprets nostalgically, actually comes from a section of *The Georgics* about animal husbandry and the breeding of cattle:

So, while the herd rejoices in its youth  
Release the males and breed the cattle early,  
Supply one generation from another  
For mortal kind, the best day passes first. (Book III)

Cather, a classical scholar, could not have failed to know the context, and may be further ironizing Jim's ties to the past, and rejection of ongoing life, of sexuality.

Jim's pastoral celebration of the open land, as contrasted to his later experiences in Black Hawk, Lincoln, and "offstage" New York and Boston, is often filtered through *Ántonia's* eyes. She tells tales and folk stories in a European oral tradition. The story of Pavel and Peter who fed the bride to the wolves in Russia is hers, as told to Jim and written down by him, as Huck Finn supposedly told his adventures to "Mr. Mark Twain," who wrote them down, and "mostly told the truth." She also recounts the violent episode she witnessed, of the man who throws himself into the threshing machine, in a suicidal protest against the immigrants, who are taking over "Americy" (119). *Ántonia's* reaction reveals once more her strong vitality, but also her comprehension of her father's desperate suicide, frozen in a pool of blood in winter: "What would anyone want to kill themselves in summer for? In threshing time, too! It's nice everywhere then." At the end we learn that *Ántonia* is careful to inculcate in her children the Czech language, and is telling them the same folk tales from the Old Country she had told to her little brothers and sisters. Thus, she is a vital transmitter of oral culture, a source of continuity in Cather's paradigm for American immigration, which anticipates more the Canadian mosaic as ideal than the American melting pot. If there is a sadness in *My Ántonia*, it lies in Cather's sense of what can be lost through the pressure to conform and assimilate. But *Ántonia's* contribution is not diminished.

Perhaps the most important phrase in the novel is the praise of Virgil's *Georgics*, "where the pen was fitted to the matter as the plough is to the furrow" (171). If Jim creates with the pen, *Ántonia* does with the

plough, but Cather makes explicit the connections between the two achievements. *Antonia* may not create with the pen, but she creates with speech, and inspires those who set her tales down in print. Many feminist critics link the pen to the penis, protesting that the pen has been in men's hands. Certainly *Antonia's* inability to create with the pen is partly gender-based. When she is taken out of school after her father dies, and exploited by her brother Ambrosch, she boasts, "School is all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm," but immediately after she bursts into tears and says to Jim (echoing her father's wish): "Sometime you will tell me all those nice things you learn at the school, won't you, Jimmy?" (81). Life is hard for her, but actually she is happier than Jim at the end.

In "*Le Dit de Pénélope*, » there is no doubt who is the storyteller. Laura describes her art as that of weaving: "*le culte de faire et du défaire*, » exactly what the mythical Penelope does. Henry James once described Jane Austen composing intuitively, in the intervals of dropped stitches, in the drawing room. In point of fact, Austen, like the fictional Laura, was anything but intuitive, and completely conscious of what she was doing.<sup>1</sup>

But the art "*du défaire*" is also that of the detective story: to decode or decrypt a mystery, à la Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin or Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. It could be argued that the origins of the detective story go back to the Greeks, whose classic formulation is the riddle of the Sphinx posed to Oedipus. In any event, Laura is also breaking new ground here, for she, a female detective like Agatha Christie's

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<sup>1</sup> James was probably recalling the description by Sir Walter Scott, Austen's great male contemporary in the Regency period, of his manner of composition: "Like the digressive poet Ariosto, I find myself under the necessity of connecting the branches of my story, by taking up the adventures of another of the characters.... It is not, perhaps, the most artificial way of telling a story, but it has the advantage of sparing the necessity of resuming what a knitter ... might call our 'dropped stitches,' a labour in which the author generally toils much, without getting credit for his pains" (158).

Miss Marple, is the one to solve the riddle. Laura writes instead of knitting; Miss Marple does both.

At least part of Hannibal's appeal for Laura is that they share the desire to solve the riddle of the Sphinx. Part of the answer to the riddle is that we are all, man and woman, born to mortality, and wish to leave something behind, whether an heir or art. Nikos, on the other hand, the murder victim, becomes the mythic monster, the Minotaur, or the seven-headed hydra, who leaves behind a legacy of hatred, violence, jealousy.

Hannibal and Laura share the desire to leave a positive legacy, the revival of Mediterranean civilization, to counter-balance the "shock of civilizations." To that end, Laura, first with child and later as a young mother, must sometimes stay behind to tell the tale. But she and Hannibal are absolutely attuned, "on the same wavelength."

Hannibal never conceives of himself as a writer, but as an "*autodidacte*." Laura clarifies that this means he belongs to another ancient tradition, that of the Amazighen, or Berbers, and the oral tradition of storytelling, comparable to António's European folk tales. It is Hannibal's Berber side that makes him want to wed other identities. Laura evokes the career of Jean Amrouche, the great Amazigh author who gave written form to the oral tradition. But *The Odyssey* too was a series of apparently disconnected tales in a folkloric tradition until it was written down, probably by multiple hands. So were the Books of the three monotheistic religions which all grew out of the Mediterranean basin. Bouraoui implicitly compares the death of a storyteller to the burning of the great library of Alexandria: "... *quand un vieux meurt, c'est une bibliothèque entière qui brûle*" (222).

Hannibal has an artistic temperament, and does keep notes, but he is happy to leave the writing to his beloved Laura. So she is both muse and author for him, as he is muse and source of oral inspiration for her. They are, in an important sense, the yin and yang, male and female alter egos.

Hannibal is doubled with Laura, his good angel and soul mate, but

also with the failed artist, Olivier Rolleur, “*un clown qui se prend au sérieux*” (216). Having had one successful novel early in his career, Olivier peregrinates through a series of failures, which turns him into a “literary kamikaze” who wants to destroy Western literature in revenge. Laura asks sardonically, “*Faut-il la mort d’une civilisation pour en raviver une autre?*” (214). If Olivier’s name is that of the hero’s boon companion from *La Chanson de Roland*, his function as friend is exploded.

We have a similar pairing of female muses, the true Laura and the supposedly false Eleni, a contemporary version of Helen of Troy whose sexuality supposedly destroyed civilization, as it was then known, only to give birth to a new world. Thanks to Laura, to quote Jean Giraudoux, this time “*La Guerre de Troie n’aura pas lieu*” -- rather, the way of peace and solidarity will triumph, from the microcosm of the Mediterranean to the macrocosm of the global universe we inhabit today.

Both novels employ a single powerful metaphor to encapsulate their themes and world vision. In *My Ántonia* it is the image of the plough against the sun, which has become the logo of the Willa Cather Educational Foundation. This central heroic symbol concludes what could have been a love scene between Jim and Ántonia, after his high school graduation:

On some upland farm, a plough had been left standing in the field. The sun was sinking just behind it. Magnified across the distance by the horizontal light, it stood out against the sun, was exactly contained within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share – black against the molten red. There it was, heroic in size, a picture *writing* on the sun. (158; emphasis mine)

The plough that broke the plains is wielded by Ántonia, and Cather underlines the fact that it is a form of writing, as in *The Georgics*, “where the pen is fitted to the matter as the plough is to the furrow.” But we should note that this heroic size is also transitory, for when the sun sets, the image shrinks to even less than its natural size. But Cather’s writing, like Virgil’s, captures it forever.

In “*Le Dit de Pénélope*” the key image of Nestor’s cup appears in Chapter XIV, “*Athéna et la Coupe de Nestor*,” which embodies much of the mystery of the text. Nestor’s cup becomes a metaphor that reveals

to Laura Athéna's and Nikos's diseased marriage, and particularly Athéna's duplicity. Part of Nikos's collection of art objects, it became the subject of dispute during their divorce proceedings. Athéna decodes its meanings for Laura: it rests on a pedestal like the world, and has two handles in the shape of doves which seem ready to drink. But they cannot move without spilling the water and breaking into a quarrel. Does this mean that we simultaneously want to keep the cup in equilibrium, but also thirst to drink from it? The cup was originally a gift from Athéna to Nikos. It seems that she tried to burn Nikos's books after an argument – a classic case of literary murder – but was stopped by the shadow of the Minotaur. Nikos then revealed the sexual games he had been playing by proposing a toast from the cup, not to “the man who loves his wife,” but to “the man who loves someone else's wife.” Athéna had been about to prepare him a special treat, a *horta*, but, furious, did not do it for fear of adding arsenic as an ingredient. It is this episode that reveals to Laura “the hideous side of Athéna” (325).

Nestor's cup becomes a very complex metaphor for the Cretan section of “*Le Dit de Pénélope*.” As Athéna says, it is mentioned in *The Odyssey*, but she reveals no more about its provenance. However, we know that Nestor was the oldest of the Greek leaders, was from Pylos, and was known to be a wise counselor and peacemaker. At the end of the Trojan War, unlike Ulysses, he returned promptly home to Pylos. He was later to greet Telemachus and tell him something of his father Ulysses' story. So Nestor encompasses three generations, led the Argonauts against the Centaurs, and made a happy postwar return after helping to effect concord in Greece. The cup triggers Laura's epiphany about the Kitzikises and their machinations, and leads her as decoder/detective as close to the truth as she will get.<sup>2</sup> Through

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<sup>2</sup> I was strongly reminded of another bowl, that in Henry James's last completed novel, *The Golden Bowl* (1904). I kept expecting, in fact, to see either Laura or Athéna seize Nestor's cup and dash it to the ground, the fate of James's golden bowl, which is also associated with adultery and psychological cruelty. If James uses his golden bowl to suggest the “gilt-guilt” of the post-Civil War “Gilded Age,” the Kitzikises turn Nestor's cup into a symbol of the capitalism, greed, and corruption of modern Greece.

the symbol, Bouraoui suggests that the Kitzikises are instrumental in the loss of the classical values of beauty, glory, democracy, and freedom, leading to the financial and moral chaos of modern Greece.

Both the plough against the sun and Nestor's cup are symbols of an old creative past, but both have a dark side as well; they offer only an ambiguous vision of what is real, and what is illusion, as well as a possibly ominous future. There is no ambiguity, however, about the heroism manifested by both Ántonia and Laura. Ántonia not only survives transplantation, the death of her beloved father, exploitation both as worker and lover, the birth of an illegitimate child, she (in Faulkner's terms) prevails.

By the same token, Laura proves a formidable adversary for Athéna, and an astute female detective. Her relationship with Athéna ends in, literally, a cat fight. Athéna has given the baby Télémaque a cat, supposedly a kind gesture, but the cat turns out to be a witch's familiar, an extension of the Poe-esque Gothic imagery. Warned by a dream, Laura finds her trying to suffocate the baby, and then blame the cat. Laura immediately identifies her as feline, wanting Laura, childless, to return to Sicily, leaving Annibale "*dans tes pattes*" (348). In this astonishing climax to the novel, it is no longer Ulysses who is "*déchaîné*," but Penelope. Laura is the *jeune fille* of the Gothic tradition, who goes out into drafty corridors at night, armed only with a candle, which of course blows out immediately. But this Gothic heroine will triumph – and mentor her errant husband, who has evidently strayed in more ways than one!

When the murder mystery is finally solved, the actual perpetrator turns out to be a fundamentalist Libyan workman motivated by anger against Nikos, as well as by jealousy, for the Libyan too has aspired to Eleni. The hot wind from Libya Laura experienced on her arrival in Crete serves as a precursor of this dénouement (as does the legend of Europa, daughter of Libya). But the Libyan has also been manipulated by the violently jealous Athéna, who gave him the *hirz* found in the hanky at the scene of the crime.

Laura concludes the tale with an affirmation of her own strengths as a writer. Her assessment of male authors is biting and sardonic: they write “*Pour qu’ils puissent fabuler et construire des univers à leur image*” (353). It is also borne out by the comic undermining of Olivier, whose ambition was to destroy *The Odyssey*, and achieve fame on the small screen. Women, more realistically, accept and describe. Laura creates “Her/ story” in starting to write “His/ story”: “*En l’occurrence la mienne. Femme méditative et contemplative. Enseignante de surcroît*” (353). Anchored to procreation and creation, she may be less a dreamer, more a realist – no mean gift for the novelist she has become. Annibale is now “*mon antibéros,*” says Laura (372), and the further adventures may be those of their son. Thus the novel ends with an ellipsis – or “*à continuer.*” But the female quest will also continue, at least on the visceral and affective level, until Laura is once more called to the rescue of her men.

Both novels offer a model of cooperation between old settlers and new immigrants, as well as between the sexes: Cuzak and Ántonia, Hannibal and Laura show complicity, a family relationship based on elective affinities. On a global level this model expands to a vision of tolerance, freedom, harmony among all the diverse cultures inhabiting Planet Earth, our own island in space.

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