

## Cather's *The Professor's House* and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: a Comparative Study

Francesco Mulas

In *The Professor's House*, Willa Cather makes us readers painfully aware of the sterility of modern civilization much as Eliot does in *The Waste Land*. Further more, she implies that the best and noblest acts of the human spirit are never processes of innocence, but come rather in opposition to innocence. It could well be that Cather's fundamental opinion is that the best of men and women have developed where work, patience, and human suffering have been a significance part of life.

Cather's best fiction, *The Professor's House* amongst it, contemplates the possibility of a life of feeling and productivity in the most unlucky of cultural situations. If Eliot desires a world where art can flourish, Cather would create a world where not only art, but an artistic ordered life is also possible.

Willa Cather was always attracted by the deserts of the American southwest, although it would have never occurred to her to use the term 'waste land' to refer to them, and this is clearly reflected in her two books *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and in *The Professor's House*. This use of a desert landscape in her fiction has often led many critics to overlook Cather's reservations about the 'limits' of the world.

In *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, for example, Bishop Latour describes the isolated and primitive Indian village of Acoma as "Shocking and disconcerting":

Through all the centuries that his own part of the world had been changing like the sky at daybreak, this people had been fixed, increasing neither in numbers nor desires, like rod-turtle on the rock. Something that had endured by immobility, a kind of life out of reach, like the crustaceans in their armour (Cather 1971: 103).

Cather never seems to open herself up to the celebration of the primitive, as other authors had done before her, and there is seldom any sympathy for these "ante-diluvian creatures ... so old, so hardened, so shut within their shells" (Cather 1971: 100). Cather is able to admit that the desert, the southwest that she loved so much is capable even to bring up a "reptilian" civilization; her affinity is for the rarer culture of Cliff City, not

for the dominant raiding Navajos or the durable but antediluvian people of Acoma. Similarly she is able to see the modern 'waste land' and its typical inhabitants as a dangerous culture.

While "Tom Outland's Story" certainly stands in judgment of the professor's family and the provincialism of his college and town, Cliff City does not really represent a shelter away from civilization it is itself an advanced civilization that is threatened by the savage tribes and physical waste land surrounding. For this Cather as for the Eliot of *The Waste Land*, the world presents itself mainly as a desert, a waste land that is at all times and in all places dangerous and immediate; she too is aware of the presence of dissolution and of the fragility of civilization. In a rather provocative article by the title "Willa Cather's Waste Land," Bernard Baum in fact associates Cather's best work with that of Eliot,

D.H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, Evelyn Waugh, the elder F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Crowe, and those poets, including MacLeish, Tate and Bishop, who largely under Eliot's influence inhibited for a time what Edmund Wilson describes as "Exclusively barren beaches, cactus-grown deserts, and dusty attics over-run with rats" (Baum 1949: 590).

Baum indicates that Cather shares with these writers "a profoundly disturbing sense of modern civilization as bankrupt morally and intellectually -- a desert of the spirit inhabited by hollow men," a sense "not only of desolation but of complete loss of meaningful living through secularization of the primary areas of human experience: love, art, and all the shared values that make for an integrated society" (Baum 1949: 590).

From now on we shall try to support the thesis that Cather is in some ways a 'Waste Lander' by briefly examining some of the specific similarities between *The Professor's House* and Eliot's poem. The city of Washington, D.C. described by Tom Outland, for instance, closely resembles Eliot's London and the other "Unreal" capitals of Europe, where:

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
(*The Waste Land*, I, 61-62)

The people pouring over London Bridge, representing "death in life" in *The Waste Land*, resemble the thousands who stream out of the Treasury, the War and the Navy buildings in Washington. "How did it use to depress me," Tom says, "to see all the hundreds of clerks pouring out of that big building at sunset! Their lives seemed to me so petty, so slavish" (Cather 1973: 232, 234). In *The Waste Land*, the sunset is "the violet hour, when the

eyes and back! Turn upward from the desk" (II, 215-216). Tom, like the protagonist who confronts Stetson, "had not thought death had undone so many" (Cather 1973: 63). Furthermore, the picture that Cather gives of married life in Washington resembles the sterility of Eliot's "lady of situations" who, with an excessive concern with cosmetics and appearances, wonders:

"What shall I do now? What shall I do?"  
"I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street  
With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?  
What shall we ever do?"

(*The Waste Land*, II, 131-34)

The Bixbys, a childless couple, have the typically modern great concerns: keeping up appearances, manipulating within the petty bureaucracy of the Department of War, and struggling to get invitations "to dinner or a reception, or even to a tea-party".

"When once they got the invitation, they had been scheming for," Tom says, "then came the terrible question of what Mrs. Bixby would wear" (Cather 1973: 232). After borrowing twenty-five dollars from Tom, who is boarding in their house, the Bixbys purchase a new dress for a big reception in Washington, only to have claret-cup spilled on Mrs. Bixby's skirt "before the evening was half over". Tom hears her "weeping and reproaching him for having been so upset about it, and looking at nothing but her ruined dress all evening. She said he cried out when it happened" (Cather 1973: 233).

The 'personal tragedy' observed about Mother Eve has here been transformed to a stained skirt; the great sins of lust and jealousy have been reduced in Washington to the competition between clerks regarding "how many new dresses their wives had" (Cather 1973: 232). Even the Director of the Smithsonian Institute and the anthropologist Dr. Ripley are interested only in increasing the material rewards of their offices. In order to see the Director of the Secretary of State, Tom must offer him a free lunch at the Shoreham Hotel. Tom learns from a friendly but half blind stenographer that "if you want to get attention from anybody in Washin'ton, ... ask them to lunch. People here will do almost anything for a good lunch" (Cather 1973: 229); thus Tom, in order to survive in this 'peculiar' city, must imitate Mr. Eugenides, who "Asked me in demotic French / To luncheon at the Cannon Street Hotel" (Cather 1973: 212-13). The suggestion of prostitution at a luxury hotel is artfully presented in Eliot, and not openly presented in Cather's novels. Yet, the modern "way of doing business" in Washington is clearly shown as base and mercenary.

Tom is “amazed and ashamed that a man of fifty, a man of the world, a scholar with ever so many degrees, should find it worth his while to show off before a boy, and a boy of such humble pretensions, who didn’t know how to eat the *bors d’oures* any more than if an assortment of cocoanuts had been set before him with no hammer” (Cather 1973: 231). But these are the superficial men interested more in “the Shoreham pottery,” on which their lunches are served, than in the pottery from Cliff City remains, representative of a greater civilization than their own, a way of life involving both beauty and danger. The most important relic from Cliff City is Mother Eve, whose story and fate, as we shall see, is more like that of Cleopatra than the story of the insignificant “staining” of Mrs. Bixby’s dress.

Tom leaves Washington, as he says, “wiser than I came”. The servility he has seen in the capital is not servility to sin, not the corruption of Sodom, but the childish enslavement to clothes and tea parties and, for men, “getting another ribbon on their coats” (Cather 1973: 235). Unable to see in the artifacts the representation of tradition, one clerk wants Tom’s best bowl to use as ashtray for, as he says, “it had no market value” (Cather 1973: 226). All value is characteristically reduced to market value so that the labour in this unreal city is as lifeless as its leisure. The one thing that people seemed to do regularly, Tom says, is go out to lunch. We get actually no suggestion whatsoever about the kind of work the clerks do -- “They were not very busy,” Tom tells us -- and the tedious uniformity of the city, whether one calls it boredom or alienation, is like that found in *The Waste Land*. Tom wants “never again to see hundreds of little black-coated men pouring out of white buildings. Queer,” he says, “how much more depressing they are than workmen coming out of a factory” (Cather 1973: 236). Eliot too, similarly, exempts the honest, lower-class workmen from full complicity in the modern secular world:

O City, city, I can sometimes hear  
 Besides a public bar in Lower Thames Street,  
 The pleasant whining of a mandolin  
 And a clatter and a chatter from within  
 Where fish men lounge at noon: where the walls  
 Of Magnus Martyr hold  
 Inexplicable splendor of Ionian white and gold.  
 (*The Waste Land*, II, 259-265)

These lines seem to suggest that there is still a world of true values, where people work and enjoy life. Of course, this is a quick glance to a world almost gone, which “Tom Outland’s Story” similarly presents, and perhaps even in a more effective way.

The pessimistic vision of *The Professor's House* has, in fact, led more than one critic to write that in the world of the professor and of Tom Outland there is a great deal of deceptive appearance, or better, as Josephine Jessup puts it, "There is no reality worth either living or dying for; there is only illusion" (Jessup 1965: 67). Cliff City is dead, just as her discoverer, Tom Outland, is dead, and neither, according to Jessup, have the power to "restore to life and potency" either our disillusioned civilization or the professor himself. In fact, few critics have missed Cather's recognition of modernity as a spiritual waste land. Like many other sensitive people of her time and of ours, she lamented the conformity of the age, its manifest materialism, its advancing technology; and she believed that the modern world was as unlucky a place for the construction of a civilized communal life as it was for the making of art.

Therefore we do not want to oppose those critics who suggest that *The Professor's House* is Cather's novel of the 'Eliot type'. She is certainly representing the temporalisation of culture with its impotence and loss of meaning. And we agree with Leon Edel that *The Professor's House* functioned for Cather herself as a psychological "letting go" of her intimate friend, Isabel McClung<sup>1</sup>.

In this psychological sense, too, this novel suggests comparison with *The Waste Land*, which can be read as a working out of the feelings that Eliot had for his wife, who was becoming mad, and for his male friend, when he felt he was losing both<sup>2</sup>.

In a copy of *The Professor's House* that Willa Cather sent to Robert Frost, she wrote that the novel was about "letting for with her heart"; *The Waste Land*, too, is about letting something go, which can be better defined as the release and emotional renunciation of human attachments. With his title Eliot gave our century a name for what Ezra Pound once called "an old civilization gone in the teeth," and the infertility of the modern world was hardly lost on Cather, who chose the desert, we would like to believe, to suggest a certain amount of spirituality, a way of living much below human standards. Yet, Cliff City, with its promise of meaningful existence and its evidence of the presence of sin, stands in clear contrast to the "living city" of Tom's story, Washington, D.C.

To conclude, then, we can say that Cather differs from Eliot in that she is able to imagine a civilization of humanity and grace in the middle of the 'waste land,' and that she practices an art which makes a good use of cultural traditions, which to Eliot while writing *The Waste Land*, seemed only a reminder of lost possibilities.

*Notes*

- <sup>1</sup> In a very interesting article on the psychological aspects of the novel, Edel has established a sort of connection between Cather's 'loss' of her dearest friend, who married Jan Hambourg (to whom the novel is dedicated), and the professor's grief over Tom Outland. Cf. Edel 1957: 56-80.
- <sup>2</sup> An analysis of the poem from the psychological perspective was conducted by James E. Miller Jr., *T. S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land: Exorcism of the Demons*.

*Bibliography*

- Baum, B., 1949 "Willa Cather's Waste Land", in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, XLVIII;
- Cather, W., 1971 [1927] *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, Vintage Books, New York;
- Cather, W., 1973 [1925] *The Professor's House*, Vintage Books, New York;
- Edel, L., 1957 *Literary Biography*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto;
- Jessup, J. L., 1965 [1950] *The Faith of Our Feminists*, Biblo and Tannen, New York;
- Miller Jr., J. E., 1977 *T. S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land: Exorcism of the Demons*, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA.